

# New Zealand forestry inquiry into workers' deaths

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An “industry-led” inquiry, set up to divert growing concern over the safety crisis in New Zealand’s forestry industry, released a 98-page consultation document on June 6.

Eleven workers have been killed in the past 13 months and hundreds inflicted with serious injuries. In the past decade, there have been 54 deaths and almost 2,000 serious harm incidents. Forestry workers are up to 70 times more likely to be killed on the job than the average NZ worker. The industry’s death rate is 34 times higher than the UK’s, and seven times that of Australia’s. Most deaths are caused by a tree falling on, or splinters spearing, the victim.

The government’s regulator, WorkSafe NZ, has conceded that poor safety is one of many “deeply ingrained systemic issues” in the forestry industry. Since last August, almost 300 enforcement actions have been taken, including 25 partial or full shutdowns, due to imminent dangers of serious injury or death, but until now only two prosecutions had been launched.

Last Wednesday, WorkSafe belatedly laid charges over the 2013 death of 20-year-old Lincoln Kidd, who was crushed by a pine tree while working on a forestry block owned by a Maori trust. WorkSafe alleges the contracting company knew serious harm was likely to be caused by its practices.

Safety standards have been eroded under successive governments, combined with a diminished number of field inspectors. In a case heard by a coroner last month, a young worker, Reece Reid, had minimal forestry training and was working unsupervised when he died. He was part of a small logging gang, all poorly trained and operating under the nose of authorities, forced to drastically cut corners in order to reach tonnage targets. Reid had only belatedly been supplied with safety equipment—with the costs deducted from his

wages.

The role of the “Independent Forestry Safety Review” is to whitewash the responsibility of the owners, contracting companies, governments and trade unions. The panel was set up by the employers—the Forest Owners, Forest Industry Contractors and Farm Forestry Association—along with WorkSafe, after the National government’s Labour Minister Simon Bridges rebuffed calls for an official inquiry.

The panel members are business leader George Adams, business safety specialist Mike Cosman and lawyer Hazel Armstrong, a former NZ Council of Trade Unions (CTU) official. Welcoming the release of the consultation document, Bridges commended the industry for taking “ownership” of the inquiry.

As with the Royal Commission into the 2010 Pike River mine disaster, which killed 29 miners, there will be no findings of culpability, no employers held to account and no legal consequences of any magnitude. The entire political establishment, which has enforced decades of pro-market “liberalisation” and destruction of working conditions, will be absolved.

The panel emphasises that it did not set out to attribute “blame” but to identify and promote “good practice.” The document recommends “a package of practical measures” to reduce, not eliminate, fatalities and serious injuries by 50 percent over the next five years. In other words, the very high toll of death and injury will continue.

The panel proposes measures to increase oversight and enforcement, all of which will need the consent of forestry employers and the government. The Contractors Association has already ruled out some of the proposals.

At the heart of the report is the requirement “to understand the business support needs of contract

harvesters to support safe work practices”—i.e., first and foremost, to protect profit margins.

A particular focus is on making workers aware of “their responsibilities and rights,” which suggests that workers are to blame for the unsafe conditions. The forestry sector and CTU are to examine ways to “implement worker participation and representation models across the sector.” This means officially empowering the unions to police workers in the industry.

The First Union, which covers workers in the industry, declared the document would provide “a solid foundation for forest owners, contractors and workers to collectively address some of the industry’s problems.” The union is convening a series of membership briefings to round up support for it.

The unions have been complicit in enforcing declining safety standards for decades. The CTU recently applied to launch a private prosecution over the death of 25-year forestry veteran Charles Findlay. This is a piece of cynical window dressing. The CTU and its constituent unions have suppressed industrial stoppages to an all-time low, including over health and safety.

The fundamental cause of the deaths and injuries is the capitalist profit system. NZ’s harvestable forests are owned by 20 companies, the largest of which is Carter Holt Harvey, controlled by the country’s richest man, Graeme Hart. The total value of forestry products has more than doubled in the past 20 years. Logging is NZ’s third biggest export, behind dairy products and meat. Last year, some \$3.8 billion worth of logs, wood and wood articles were exported overseas, primarily to China.

In 1987 a Labour government transformed the NZ Forest Service, which owned most of the plantation forests and directly employed workers, into a state-owned enterprise, preparing it for full privatisation. Between 1990 and 1992, a National government sold more than 350,000 hectares of planted forests to the private sector. An additional 188,000 hectares were sold off in 1996.

Nearly 20 years later, there are 15,000 owners, large and small. Management is contracted to companies that in turn contract harvesting to 400 logging companies, and other subcontractors. Cutthroat bidding wars, along with onerous individual employment contracts, have

been a disaster for workers. Twelve-hour days (not including travel) and six-day weeks are common, as is working in all weathers and conditions of fatigue and exhaustion.

New technology is available that would make forestry much safer, including machines with protective cabins, remote controls, closed circuit cameras and Global Positioning Systems. Due to relentless cost cutting pressures, however, only 5 percent of sites currently use mechanical felling techniques.

Forest owners and managers have pocketed enormous profits from the gross levels of exploitation. Workers’ wages as a share of industry profits have dropped from 70 percent in the 1980s to 19.6 percent today. One worker who died on the job was making only \$16 an hour after 27 years.



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