

New Zealand: Five years after the Pike River mine disaster

Tom Peters

27 November 2015

November 19 marked five years since an explosion ripped through the underground Pike River Coal mine on the west coast of New Zealand's South Island, killing 29 men. On November 24, 2010, a second explosion ended any possibility of entering the mine to look for survivors.

The tragedy was entirely foreseeable and preventable. It was the result of flagrant safety breaches by Pike River Coal, abetted by successive governments and the trade union bureaucracy. All these groups knew about the dangerous conditions in the mine but took no action to prevent the disaster.

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in the mine, told Fairfax Media on November 18: "We've never had justice, we've never had accountability. Five years later, things have still not been done properly."

Speaking at a gathering of family members to mark the anniversary, Monk described the recent disaster in Brazil, in which a tailings dam collapsed at a BHP-Billiton and Vale joint venture project, killing at least 11 people, with 12 more missing, as "Pike all over again." As with Pike River, warnings of an impending disaster were ignored by the mine owners. Monk said this demonstrated that mines continued to take people's lives "worldwide, and we've got to keep the pressure on to make sure this doesn't happen again."

A royal commission in New Zealand determined that there was "a culture of production before safety" at Pike River mine and "numerous warnings of a potential catastrophe" were ignored. The mine did not meet basic safety standards; it had inadequate ventilation and methane gas monitoring, and had no emergency exit. The company was heavily in debt and did not want to stop production to carry out costly repairs.

Despite these findings, no one has been held responsible for the disaster. Pike River Coal was found

guilty in 2013 on nine charges of breaching safety standards, including failing to take all steps to prevent employees coming to harm. It was ordered to pay \$3.41 million in reparations to the families—but at the time the former directors refused to do this because the company was bankrupt.

Former CEO Peter Whittall was the only individual charged with health and safety violations, but the government dropped the charges as part of a sordid backroom deal with Whittall and the former directors. Monk told the *Australian* last week: "When it comes to corporate, nobody gets bloody prosecuted in New Zealand."

The government has refused to reenter the mine to retrieve the 29 bodies and determine the precise cause of the explosion, despite Prime Minister John Key initially promising to do so. Solid Energy, the state-owned company that bought the mine from Pike River Coal, has deemed it too dangerous to enter. However, independent experts engaged by the miners' families have disputed this conclusion.

In the documentary *The Women of Pike River*, shown on TV One last week, Anna Osborne, whose husband Milton died in the mine, said: "I believe Solid Energy is covering up for the government. We had the Department of Labour [the government regulator] who failed miserably at Pike ... Going up that drift and finding certain evidence can point fingers at people who were actually incompetent at doing their jobs ... So many people at so many levels failed our guys and the evidence will prove that."

Responsibility for the disaster rests not only with the company and the Department of Labour, but with successive governments led by the Labour and National parties, which dismantled the specialist mines inspectorate and allowed companies to self-regulate

safety. At the time of the explosion, there were only two specialist mine inspectors for the entire country.

In response to the royal commission's report, the National government hired more mines inspectors and passed new health and safety legislation in August. Several of the Pike River families travelled to Wellington to protest the new law being watered down to appease big business. Companies with fewer than 20 workers, in industries deemed "low risk," were exempted from a requirement to have worker-elected health and safety representatives. Dangerous industries such as dairy farming were classified as "low risk."

Workplace deaths have not declined. Each year since 2010 around 50 people have died in work-related incidents, according to government statistics.

Damien O'Connor, Labour MP for the West Coast, commented to Fairfax Media on November 18: "Could I have done more to raise these possibilities [of a mine disaster]? I had raised the issue of mine safety with governments only to be dismissed by officials who said they knew better."

In fact, O'Connor said in November 2012 that he felt "guilty" for not taking action during the 1999–2008 Labour government to improve conditions in mines. He admitted that he was warned in 1994 by a retired mine manager that deregulation carried out by the previous National government would "result in a massive mine disaster because deregulation has done that through the world time and time again."

O'Connor sought to shift the blame onto miners themselves for not "demanding of their own union that things should change." His statements only exposed the complicity of Labour and the trade union bureaucracy in the erosion of mine safety.

Council of Trade Unions president Richard Wagstaff told the *New Zealand Herald* on November 20: "If our health and safety laws had been stronger, in combination with better health and safety practices in the mine, the men wouldn't have been killed."

Wagstaff did not mention that the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which had 71 members at Pike River, did nothing to prevent the disaster. It organised no strikes in defence of workers' safety, even after a group of workers walked out of the mine to protest the lack of emergency gear. Acting as a loyal adjunct of the company, the EPMU ignored the warnings about unsafe conditions.

Immediately after the disaster, EPMU leader Andrew Little defended the company. He told the *Herald* that the union was actively involved in company's health and safety committee and there was "nothing unusual about Pike River or this mine that we've been particularly concerned about." Little was last year rewarded for his services to big business by being chosen to lead the Labour Party.

The chief political lesson of Pike River is that the trade union bureaucracy, Labour and their allies are deeply hostile to the working class. In every country, under the impact of the globalisation of production, these organisations have ditched any reformist pretences and transformed into the open instruments of the ruling elite. Their main role is to suppress the resistance of workers to redundancies and attacks on working conditions, including safety, to maximise profits for big business.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact