

# New Zealand: Families of disaster victims blockade road to Pike River mine

Tom Peters

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Family members of some of the 29 men who died in the 2010 Pike River mine disaster are protesting against moves to permanently seal the mine entrance. For the past month the families, along with numerous supporters, have barricaded the mine's access road on the West Coast of New Zealand's South Island. Hundreds of people have joined protests at the remote location.

The government and the state-owned company Solid Energy, which bought the mine in 2012 after Pike River Coal went bankrupt, have refused to re-enter the mine to search for bodies and physical evidence about the precise cause of the 2010 explosions. This is despite a promise made by then Prime Minister John Key before the 2011 election that the mine would be re-entered.

No one has been held accountable for the tragedy, even though a royal commission in 2012 found it was entirely preventable. There were gross breaches of safety by Pike River Coal, including inadequate methane gas monitoring and ventilation, and no suitable emergency exit. The company placed production and profit over the safety of its workers and ignored repeated warnings about dangerous conditions.

Charges initially laid against Pike River's CEO Peter Whittall were dropped by the government in 2013 as part of a backroom deal with Whittall's lawyers. The decision is being appealed by Sonya Rockhouse, who lost her son Ben in the disaster, and Anna Osborne, who lost her husband Milton (see: "Families of New Zealand mine disaster victims seek justice").

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Rockhouse and Osborne on Monday about the families' blockade.

Osborne said: "We have tried for six years now to get some sort of closure. The families who took action were sick of remaining dignified and quiet and going

along with what the government said. We thought this was a huge injustice for our guys and we needed to do something about it. If we allow them to put concrete over the entrance that would be permanently entombing our men."

She explained that families want to re-enter the drift, the 2.3-kilometre tunnel that leads into the main body of the mine. "We've had it on good authority from former miners that there is a very high possibility that some of our loved ones' remains are still up at the top end of the drift because it was a change of shift" (at the time of the first explosion on November 19, 2010).

Both women agreed with statements by Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in the explosion, that the mine should be treated as a crime scene.

Osborne commented: "We do not just want to bring our loved ones out. We've had no proof as to why this happened. This could provide the evidence we need. It could point the finger at a lot of people that didn't do their job properly. The government don't have the will and they don't want to go in there."

Rockhouse added: "I'm sure that they thought we would just get tired and curl up and die. They didn't count on us doing what we've done. I don't want my grandchildren to grow up in a world where there's lies and deceit and nothing is done about it. I want them to be able to question things. There's no justice and that's a very bitter pill to swallow."

Rockhouse said there was no logical reason for Solid Energy to permanently seal the mine. "I think that they are concerned about what possibly might be found. Who knows what evidence will be in the drift."

Solid Energy CEO Tony King met the families on November 30 and declared that the mine drift was too dangerous to enter. Rockhouse said he "was not willing at all to listen to what we have to say. They have an

agenda. He wasn't interested in entering into any discussion."

The families have presented a re-entry proposal to the company. The submission was drawn up by Dr David Creedy, vice chair of the United Nations Group of Experts on Coal Mine Methane, and Bob Stevenson, former UK Principal Mines Inspector.

Asked about the potential danger of re-entering Pike River, Stevenson told Radio NZ on December 13: "There's always a mining solution to these risks if you have the finances and the wish to do it." New Zealand's former chief mines inspector Tony Forster has endorsed the plan and said he would personally be willing to enter the tunnel.

The families' protest has gained widespread support. Earlier this month, a local farmer gifted the families control over part of the access road to Pike River mine, which runs through his property. Solid Energy challenged the deal and this week claimed it has the legal right to use the road.

The families said they would not break the law and will allow Solid Energy access to the mine, but will continue their protest. Monk pointed out on Radio NZ that local contractors and suppliers are refusing to assist with sealing the mine. Allied Concrete announced on November 23 that it was withdrawing from a supply contract with Solid Energy out of respect for the families.

"The families are not going to go away," Osborne told the WSWS. "We're sick of being bullied. We have the support of so many people and we've gained confidence. It's very encouraging and humbling for the families. I can't thank those people enough for supporting us and putting pressure on the government."

Asked about the opposition Labour Party, which has recently voiced support for the families, Osborne noted that Labour leader Andrew Little "was very clever with his words because he didn't actually make a commitment to going into the mine." Instead, Little called on the government to commission another "independent expert" to assess whether it is safe to re-enter.

Osborne and Rockhouse agreed with the WSWS that Labour shared responsibility for the disaster. The 1999–2008 Labour government contributed to the deregulation of safety and the downsizing of the country's specialist mines inspectorate.

In the days following the November 2010 explosion Little, then leader of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, defended Pike River Coal's safety record. He told the *New Zealand Herald* and Radio NZ that the union had no reason to be concerned about the mine's operations. This was despite the fact that mine workers had previously protested against the lack of basic safety equipment.



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