

Opposition parties feign support for New Zealand mine disaster families

Tom Peters
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A protest organised by family members of the 29 men who died in the 2010 Pike River Coal mine catastrophe has gained widespread public support throughout New Zealand. Since November, the families have picketed the access road to the mine to oppose the plan by Solid Energy, a government-owned company, to permanently seal the mine entrance.

The families are demanding that the government re-enter the drift tunnel to try to recover bodies and gather evidence on what caused the underground explosion. No one has been held accountable for the tragedy after the government regulators dropped charges of health and safety breaches against Pike River Coal CEO Peter Whittall. This sordid deal was justified on the pretext that there was no physical evidence, even though a 2012 Royal Commission found that the disaster was entirely preventable.

Sonya Rockhouse, who lost her son Ben in the explosion, told the WSWs the company had “put profit before safety,” adding: “The whole thing, everything we’ve been through, has all been about money.”

Jo Ufer, whose son Josh died, wrote in a Fairfax Media column on January 13: “Pike River Coal’s owners have taken tens of millions of dollars in insurance money and the New Zealand government has spent its time trying to brush the whole thing under the carpet.”

Following the outpouring of public support for the families’ stand, the Labour Party, the Greens and the right-wing nationalist New Zealand First have criticised the National Party government’s refusal to consider re-entering the mine.

The opposition parties’ statements are a cynical attempt to divert attention from their own role in creating the deregulated, pro-business environment that led to the disaster six years ago.

New Zealand First leader Winston Peters declared in December that he would not form a coalition government with the National Party or the Labour Party unless they promised to re-enter the mine. Labour leader Andrew Little responded on January 15, telling the *New Zealand Herald*, “the difference between me and Winston Peters is I wasn’t sitting in a Cabinet in the 1990s that undermined our health and safety regulations in mine regulations, specifically.” During the 1990s Peters was a member of the National Party government.

A notice posted on the Labour Party’s Facebook page on January 18 declared that its leader Little “supported the Pike River families from Day 1—and still does.”

In fact, the 1999–2008 Labour Party government, which was backed by the Greens, continued to dismantle the Labour Department’s specialist mines inspectorate and allowed mine owners to self-regulate. In November 2012, Labour MP Damien O’Connor admitted he was warned in the 1990s by a mining expert that deregulation “would result in a massive mine disaster.” He said he felt “guilty” that he had not pushed to improve safety.

Asked whether the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) had advised Labour to change the law, O’Connor avoided answering directly. Instead, he blamed “coal miners themselves” for not “demanding of their own union that things should change.” In reality, the union bureaucracy collaborated with mining companies to suppress workers’ safety concerns.

From 2000 to 2011, Little was national secretary of EPMU, which had 71 members at Pike River Coal (out of 180 staff plus contractors).

Fairfax Media reported on January 18 that the Labour Party leader dismissed “claims that as head of the

miners' union at the time of the explosion he could have done more to ensure health and safety at the mine." Little said: "Our union and its members led a walk-out on health and safety grounds just weeks before the fatal explosion. .. I absolutely stand by our track record on improving health and safety both at Pike River and in mining generally."

The walk-out, the only industrial action ever taken at the mine, was initiated by a group of miners. One miner, Brent Forrester, called a union representative and said workers were concerned about the lack of emergency equipment. The official agreed that the workers should walk off the job. That advice was the full extent of the EPMU's involvement.

The EPMU knew about other safety breaches, including the lack of an adequate emergency exit in the mine and problems with methane gas accumulation. Yet it never organised a strike and did not publicly criticise Pike River Coal. The walk-out was only revealed more than two weeks after the explosion by Forrester, in an interview with TVNZ on December 5, 2010. (see: "Former Pike River Coal miner hits out at lack of mine safety" and this video)

Following the disaster, Little defended the company's safety record. He told the *New Zealand Herald* on November 21, 2010, that the company had an "active health and safety committee" and that there was "nothing unusual about Pike River or this mine that we've been particularly concerned about." (see video) He repeated his comments to Radio NZ the following day, saying the company had taken "great care" with safety.

These statements were false. The EPMU was well aware of the dangerous conditions at the mine but chose to take no action to halt Pike River's operations.

Sonya Rockhouse told the WSWs that the families had been made many empty promises in the past. She would "wait and see" what the opposition parties did. Prior to the 2011 election, then-Prime Minister John Key also promised to recover the bodies, only to renege afterward. Rockhouse noted that Labour and the Greens had made no promise to re-enter the mine if they form the next government, but have instead called for an independent review.

None of the parties has made any commitment to reinstate charges against former Pike River directors and CEO Whittall. Rockhouse and Anna Osborne, who

lost her husband in the mine, are seeking a judicial review of the decision to drop the charges.

Rockhouse believed that Solid Energy wanted to seal the mine before the election. She said: "They need to be very careful because we are gaining momentum every single day. We're not going away."

Rockhouse criticised the EPMU, now called E Tu, for not supporting the Pike River families' picket. Osborne also told the WSWs the union had been "conspicuous by its absence."

E Tu has members at Solid Energy but has made no attempt to organise an industrial campaign against the company's plan to seal the mine. The company's staff members have continued to cross the families' picket line to visit the site. The union has accepted hundreds of job cuts at Solid Energy, devastating the West Coast region, as part of the government's plan to privatise the company.

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