

Families demand investigation into New Zealand mine disaster

Tom Peters
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A New Zealand parliamentary committee on February 16 heard submissions on behalf of 25 of the 29 families who lost members in the November 2010 Pike River Coal mine tragedy.

The hearing was called in response to a petition organised by novelist Fiona Kidman, with the support of the families, calling on the government to re-enter the 2.3-kilometre drift tunnel leading into the mine to search for bodies and for evidence of what caused the fatal explosion.

Since November 2016, the families have picketed the road to the mine site, on the remote West Coast of the South Island, to prevent Solid Energy, the government-owned company that now owns the site, from permanently sealing the mine.

No one has entered the tunnel since the disaster, despite initial promises by the National Party government and Solid Energy that everything possible would be done to retrieve the 29 bodies.

The day before the committee hearing, some families met with Prime Minister Bill English, who refused to instruct Solid Energy to re-enter the drift because it “would be unsafe.” Anxious, however, about growing anger toward the government over the dispute, English said he would direct the company not to seal the mine and to investigate the “feasibility” of sending in a camera-equipped drone.

At the committee hearing the families were given less than an hour to make their submission and answer questions from government and opposition members of parliament.

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died at Pike River, told the hearing that an electrical substation several hundred metres inside the drift could provide vital information. “Nobody is being held responsible for this disaster and we need evidence to get this justice,” he

said. “Now is the time to get the evidence and any remains of the men ... This is a crime scene and should be investigated as such.

“Twenty-nine men died while working. The mining company and the regulators were aware of the safety concerns underground and no one fulfilled their responsibility to protect the workers.”

The government regulators and the police have refused to prosecute anyone for the tragedy, despite a Royal Commission finding in 2012 that it was preventable and that Pike River Coal was in flagrant breach of health and safety laws. The mine had inadequate ventilation and methane gas monitoring, and no adequate emergency exit. WorkSafe, however, dropped charges against Pike River CEO Peter Whittall in December 2013 on the pretext that there was not enough physical evidence of the explosion’s precise cause.

Just hours after the committee hearing, the Court of Appeal dismissed a bid by some of the families for a judicial review of the decision to drop the charges against Whittall. Anna Osborne, whose husband Milton died in the disaster, told the media the outcome was “despicable” and “I’m so frustrated with the court system.” She said the families would take the case to the Supreme Court.

At the hearing, government MPs and members of the opposition Labour, Green and New Zealand First Parties feigned sympathy with the families while remaining silent on the role of successive governments in paving the way for the catastrophe. Since the 1990s, National and Labour-led governments have gutted the mines inspectorate and allowed companies to self-regulate.

Pike River mine was developed during the previous Labour government and there were no objections to its

safety violations from official regulators or the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, whose national secretary Andrew Little now leads the Labour Party.

Labour, the Greens and NZ First have said they would consider re-entering the drift if they win the September election. But none of these parties has pledged to prosecute anyone over the disaster.

MPs concentrated on asking how the drift could be re-entered safely. Tony Forster, who worked as the government's chief mines inspector from 2013 to 2016, spoke in support of a re-entry plan drawn up for the families by Dr David Creedy, a renowned coal methane gas expert, and Bob Stevenson, former UK Principal Mines Inspector. Forster said he was confident the drift could be made safe and he did not know why Solid Energy had decided against re-entry.

Solid Energy CEO Andy Coupe responded by declaring that the decision not to re-enter was based on safety concerns. He told the hearing "the insinuation of a cover-up is unfounded." Yet he and the government have refused to arrange a meeting between the company's advisors and the families' experts. Coupe was interrupted more than once by family members in the audience, who scoffed at his suggestion that Solid Energy was primarily concerned about safety.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site* after the hearing, Bernie Monk denounced the refusal to investigate "one of the biggest homicides in New Zealand's history." He said it was "not right" that the families had been forced to fight for six years just to be heard.

His wife Kath Monk had no confidence the government would change its position after hearing the families' petition. "But we have to fight on," she said. "It's not right, in New Zealand, that 29 men died at work and no one has taken any responsibility for that. Where else would that happen?"

Sonya Rockhouse, whose son Ben died in the mine, thought Solid Energy and the government were "hoping we will just go away if they give us a little bit of what we want." Anna Osborne said Prime Minister English "gave us nothing we don't already have."

The families' protest has gained widespread support in the working class, and local contractors on the West Coast have refused to assist Solid Energy in sealing the mine. Anna Osborne added that even if a drone were

sent into the mine, as English suggested, this would not be enough to gather all the evidence.

Responding to the denials of a cover-up by Solid Energy and the government, Osborne said: "We live in a very corrupt society. There's lots of evidence to be found down there and it will point fingers at the government departments who should be brought to account for the loss of our men's lives as well.

"There's no will on the government's part to get into the drift. It's easier for them to seal it and walk away. This isn't just about the Pike 29, this is about every single person's right to go to work and return home safely to their loved ones."



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