

New Zealand: Police suppressed video recorded in Pike River mine

Tom Peters
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On April 30 TV3's Newshub showed video footage from inside Pike River mine in the South Island of New Zealand, where 29 men were killed in an explosion in November 2010.

The footage was leaked after being kept secret since it was taken in March 2011, when the mine was controlled by police. It clearly shows members of Mines Rescue working inside the drift, the 2.3-kilometre tunnel that leads into the mine.

The fact that the video was suppressed for six years has outraged the Pike River victims' families and working people throughout the country. After excerpts of it were shown on TV, police released 13 hours of footage on May 4. Many more hours of footage and photos have still not been seen by the families.

The National Party government has worked to prevent any real investigation into the disaster and to shield Pike River Coal's leadership from prosecution. No one has been held responsible for the disaster and the 29 bodies remain in the mine. After initially promising to re-enter the mine, the government and state-owned company Solid Energy, which owns the mine site, has claimed since 2014 that the mine is too dangerous to enter.

A Royal Commission in 2012 concluded that there had been flagrant safety breaches by Pike River Coal. The company violated numerous health and safety laws and placed production and profit above safety. The precise cause of the explosion, however, has not been established because no thorough investigation inside the mine was conducted.

A police investigation into the company was dropped. Health and safety charges laid by the government's Labour Department against CEO Peter Whittall were also dropped in a sordid backroom deal.

Solid Energy's plan to permanently seal the mine

entrance was shelved in February only because of months of protests by the victims' families.

Sonya Rockhouse, who lost her son Ben in the Pike River mine, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the leaked video "shows that we've been deceived, that what they've told us, that the mine was too dangerous to enter, simply wasn't true. It begs the question: what else are they not telling us?"

Many experts dispute the government's statements that re-entry is unsafe. Tony Forster, who was the government's chief mines inspector from 2013 to 2016, told a parliamentary Select Committee hearing in February how the drift could be explored safely.

The families have rejected claims by the government that the leaked video footage was made available during the Royal Commission. It had not been shown to the families or their lawyers, apart from a few minutes of grainy excerpts. It is not clear who else, aside from the police, knew about the footage.

Rockhouse said: "I've always thought that the Royal Commission fell short. I never really understood the purpose of it. We were so naive back then. When they said they were having a Royal Commission I imagined that because it was in a courtroom and it seemed like a court that someone would be held responsible."

Rockhouse added that workplace safety had not improved since the Royal Commission, despite the government's claims. On April 24 Radio NZ reported there had been seven workplace deaths within the space of a fortnight in the forestry, farming and construction industries.

Anna Osborne, whose husband Milton died in the mine, told the WSWS that the video showed the drift was "still very intact and we have been misled that the drift was in such a bad state of repair that it was too dangerous to get in."

She said the mine was “an uninvestigated crime scene. There’s lots of evidence to be found there and it’s going to point the finger at some government departments as well.” The Labour Department knew about safety breaches at Pike River but did nothing to prevent the disaster.

In February, the Court of Appeal rejected an appeal by Osborne and Rockhouse seeking a judicial review of the decision to drop charges against Whittall. The court gave the spurious justification that the Pike River directors had made unsolicited payments to the disaster victims’ families. Rockhouse said the families’ lawyers were “astonished” by the decision, which she described as “chequebook justice.” The pair intend to take the case to the Supreme Court.

Osborne explained: “We’re not just doing this for the 29 men who died, we’re doing it for every New Zealand worker. You can’t let this happen in a workplace and no one does a proper investigation.” Rockhouse said: “We have to stand up because if we don’t there’s nothing to stop this from happening again and again. We need to show them that they can’t get away with this. We’re entitled to have truth and justice.”

Rockhouse also told the WSWS: “I’m not pinning my hopes on the opposition parties being elected … We’re out for what we believe is right and we won’t stop until we get it, no matter what party is in.”

The opposition Labour Party, the Greens and New Zealand First have feigned sympathy for the families. Labour leader Andrew Little stated: “It is disturbing that such important footage, which undercuts the Government’s reasons for stopping a re-entry into Pike, has been kept from the public eye for so long.”

The Labour Party has made no promise to re-enter the mine if it wins the September election, but instead called for an investigation into the issue.

The opposition parties’ principal aim is to divert attention from their role in creating the conditions that led to the disaster. Successive National- and Labour-led governments deregulated the mining industry and dismantled the mines inspectorate, allowing companies to self-regulate their safety procedures.

NZ First Party leader Winston Peters has called the mine a “crime scene” and demanded that it be entered. As Treasurer in the National government between 1996 and 1998, however, Peters advocated deregulation, cost

cutting, tax cuts and other policies to boost profitability for New Zealand businesses. This is the environment in which Pike River was allowed to cut costs by ignoring basic safety requirements.

The union bureaucracy also helped pave the way for the disaster. These organisations, which function as the adjuncts of big business and the government, did not organise any campaign against the deregulation of mine safety by Labour and National.

In 2010, the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), now part of the E Tu union, had about 70 members at Pike River. Immediately after the disaster then-EPMU leader Andrew Little joined the government and opposition parties in defending Pike River Coal. He told the media there had been “nothing unusual” about the mine and praised its health and safety record.

In fact the union was aware of workers’ concerns about safety, which had prompted a walk-out on one occasion. It kept quiet about the safety breaches and collaborated with the company to keep the mine running.

The WSWS asked E Tu whether the EPMU knew about the suppressed video recording from 2011, which shows the mine can be safely entered to conduct an investigation. A media liaison replied, “We will not be making any comment at this time.”



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