

New Zealand: Pike River mine disaster families oppose government plan to end underground investigation

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On March 23 New Zealand's Labour Party-led government announced there would be no more funding to continue the underground investigation into the causes of the Pike River Coal (PRC) mine disaster.

The announcement by Andrew Little, the minister in charge of the Pike River Recovery Agency (PRRA), shocked and angered many families of the 29 men who were killed when multiple explosions tore through the mine, beginning on November 19, 2010. For ten years, successive National and Labour Party governments, along with the police and the judicial system, have ensured that no PRC managers, chief executives or directors have been prosecuted for the extremely unsafe conditions in the mine.

A 2012 royal commission of inquiry found that the company had placed production ahead of its workers' safety and, ultimately, their lives. There had been multiple warnings that the mine had grossly inadequate methane-gas drainage and ventilation, with gas levels frequently in the explosive range, making it a death trap. There was also no adequate emergency exit, as required by law. The commissioners, however, could not identify the precise cause of the explosion due to a lack of physical evidence.

The Labour Party and its coalition partners, the Greens and New Zealand First, promised in the 2017 election campaign to re-enter the mine to look for bodies and gather evidence for future prosecutions. More than three years later, however, no charges have been laid.

Miners have explored the drift tunnel, but have stopped at a roof-fall blocking the main workings of the mine. Beyond the obstruction there is likely to be crucial evidence, including an underground ventilation fan, which is a probable source of ignition for the explosion.

On March 30, the Pike River Family Reference Group (FRG), which is part of the PRRA, said in a press release: "Families accept advice that going further would be a major, expensive engineering project, with complex potential safety risks... Families accept, with heartbreak, Andrew Little's advice that there will be no more government money to expand the project at this time."

In fact, many families were not consulted on this statement and have strongly objected to it. The FRG consists of three family members and two advisers: Rob Egan, a former senior adviser to two Labour Party leaders, and Tony Sutorius, a documentary filmmaker close to the unions.

Cloe Nieper, whose husband Kane died in the mine, told Radio NZ: "I didn't agree to [the FRG statement], so I don't know why they're saying that we all agreed to it... I feel like I've been blindsided."

Carol Rose, who lost her son Stuart Mudge in the mine, told the *World Socialist Web Site* she had heard from 14 families "who are against what's happening" and knew nothing about the FRG's decision prior to reading the press release. Rose said in her opinion the FRG was not operating democratically and had served to "divide and conquer" the families.

Before the 2017 election, the families had united against the then-National Party government. They won widespread support in the working class in 2016 when they picketed the mine access road and stopped the government's plan to seal it forever and prevent any underground investigation.

Rose had hoped that Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government would be more "honourable," but she now wondered "if the Pike River families were used to get election votes by making these promises," which are now being reneged on.

Minister Little told *Stuff* on March 30: "There never was a commitment to re-enter the mine workings. There was only ever a commitment to recover the drift."

This statement is deeply misleading. Dean Dunbar, whose 17-year-old son Joseph was killed in Pike River, told the WSWWS that in 2017 the government agreed "that once we reached that roof fall an assessment and a feasibility study would be done, to see what it would take to go further."

He said claims by the FRG that it could cost another \$60 to \$100 million to explore further in the mine appeared to have been "plucked out of the air," and the government was "trying to scare everyone into submission" with unsubstantiated claims that it is too dangerous.

Responding to claims that the investigation had become too expensive, Rose noted that New Zealand recently hosted the America's Cup yacht race, which got \$250 million in public funds. The government has also distributed tens of billions to prop up businesses throughout the country in response to the economic crisis produced by COVID-19 over the past year.

Technical experts also criticised the government. Tony Forster, New Zealand's former chief inspector of mines, announced on March 23 that he had resigned his position as an advisor to the

FRG because “no one is listening.” He told *Stuff* that the roof fall would be relatively straight-forward to pass and the obstruction was composed of coal, not rock as previously thought.

Forster said: “I have a problem with the families being told it is too difficult when it is not. They deserve the truth.” He said the government had promised to assemble an expert panel to advise “on the feasibility of re-entry into the main mine workings, [but] to my knowledge, that never occurred. So in the absence of that feasibility study, how can anyone say what it would cost?”

According to Newshub, geology expert David Bell and ventilation expert Dr. Roy Moreby also said it would be feasible to proceed past the roof fall.

Richard Healey, an electrical engineer who has spent years investigating the disaster on behalf of some of the families, explained to the WSWs that passing the 20-metre roof fall was an “absolutely standard mine engineering problem” that was tackled “every day” in mines around the world.

Healey said the government “has said it’s too dangerous, too expensive and too technically difficult without ever assessing the danger, the difficulty or the cost. They don’t seem to understand how important that particular area of the mine is... This is where we have really good reason to believe that the first explosion was centred.”

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in Pike River, said he was particularly angry because Little was the leader of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) when the disaster happened, and several of the dead miners were union members. Little entered parliament in 2011 and led the Labour Party from 2014 to 2017. He had attended annual meetings of Pike River families and supporters in Blackball to sing “Solidarity” and repeatedly promised to do everything possible to recover the bodies.

Monk said immediately after the explosion in 2010 Little “announced that Pike River was one of the safest mines, and he had to retract that after he found out he was wrong.” Prior to the explosion several union members at Pike River had protested against unsafe conditions in the mine, but the union leadership never attempted to shut down the operation and never criticised the company. It collaborated with PRC to ensure that nothing disrupted the mine’s operations.

Malcolm Campbell, whose son, also called Malcolm, died at Pike River, told the WSWs that Monk and other family members pushing for a thorough investigation had been “treated pretty awful,” and the government’s decision not to go beyond the roof-fall “is heart-breaking. We always thought when the recovery was set in place, the decision about the rock fall would be assessed when they reached it, as nobody really knew how big it was, and now the [experts] say it could be passable.”

The WSWs also spoke with Ben Joynson, who was 10-years-old when his father William died in the mine. He said he had been surprised by the FRG’s statement and he urged all the families to “come together and talk.”

Joynson said it was essential to continue the investigation and “someone needs to be held accountable for the decisions that caused the explosion. They may not have thrown a match in it, but because of their decisions and their lack of morals, that’s what

occurred, an explosion that killed 29 men.” He added: “A lot of corporations, most of them if not all of them, don’t do 100 percent of what they should do. At the end of the day it comes down to money.”

He said families had suffered “many sleepless nights, tears, pain... You try to move on, but you can’t.” For the investigation to stop now “would be, as many have said, a betrayal to all of us.” Joynson urged the government to “do what’s morally right by the families... People aren’t just numbers, they are living, breathing creatures that deserve respect.”

Monk, Rose and Dunbar all expressed scepticism that the police and crown prosecutors would lay any charges with the evidence gathered so far. In 2013 police dropped an initial investigation into PRC and the government’s Department of Labour withdrew charges against chief executive Peter Whittall for health and safety breaches. Police have also destroyed evidence, and some items have gone missing.

Dunbar and Monk compared their struggle to that of the CTV building families. The building collapsed in the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, killing 115 people, because of its extremely unsafe design. Police announced in 2017 that they would lay manslaughter charges against the builders, but the state’s solicitors intervened to ensure that this did not happen.

Both cases—and many similar ones internationally—are examples of class justice, in which the entire political establishment, the trade unions and judicial system has acted in the interests of big business, and against the basic rights of the working class to safe working conditions.

Following the outrage over the government’s decision, Little said he will meet the Pike River families next week, with every family invited to attend. Monk, Dunbar and Rose said they and others would keep fighting for the underground investigation to continue and for justice to be done. The WSWs and the Socialist Equality Group (NZ) urge all working people to support this fight.



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