

New Zealand: Pike River mine disaster families demand continued underground investigation

Tom Peters
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Families of most of the 29 men who died following a series of explosions at the Pike River Coal mine in November 2010 are continuing to demand a thorough underground investigation of the disaster, in opposition to the Labour Party-Greens government's attempt to shut it down.

After more than a decade, no one has been held responsible for the disaster, despite a royal commission in 2012 finding overwhelming evidence of unsafe and illegal practices by the company, which put production and profit ahead of workers' safety. The police, state regulators, the courts and successive governments have shielded those responsible from accountability.

The former National Party government planned to seal the mine forever, preventing any investigation or recovery of bodies. It was forced to back down after protests in 2016 and 2017 by the Pike River families demanding justice gained widespread support.

The current Labour-led government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced last month that it would end funding for the investigation inside the mine. The re-entry, which began in 2019, was a major election promise by Labour, the Greens and the NZ First Party, which formed a coalition government in 2017. All three parties pledged to do everything possible to recover the miners' bodies and crucial physical evidence of what caused the explosions, in order to prosecute Pike River Coal chief executives, managers and directors.

Now this promise is being brushed aside. The minister in charge of Pike River recovery, Andrew Little, declared last month that it was too expensive to proceed into the mine workings beyond a roof-fall at the end of the drift, the mine's 2.3 kilometre entry passage. He falsely claimed that the government never made any commitment to explore beyond the drift.

In a meeting with 45 family members from 17 families on April 7, Little repeated that there was "no money" to expand

the re-entry. Carol Rose, whose son Stuart died in Pike River, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that after Little left, an overwhelming majority of those in attendance voted in favour of pursuing an independent feasibility study to continue exploring beyond the roof-fall. She has since received statements of support from 23 of the 29 families.

Electrical engineer Richard Healey, and Tony Forster, who has worked as chief inspector of mines in both New Zealand and New South Wales, both attended the meeting and spoke in support of the feasibility study. Both have carried out extensive technical investigations of Pike River. They have criticised the government for providing no evidence in support of its claims, and for misleadingly saying that it was not possible to go beyond the roof-fall.

Rose explained that "Andrew Little was quite adamant that the government is not budging," but the feasibility study is well underway. "The international mining fraternity has stepped forward and said: how can we help you? Tony Forster is inundated by amazing international mining experts."

"The whole world is watching this," Rose said. "The whole world knows that if you go to New Zealand you can get away with multiple murders. It's just wrong."

Rose and several families are part of the Pike River Family Committee, a democratic body that the families themselves established in December 2010, independently of all political parties and the unions. The committee unified the overwhelming majority of families to fight against the National government's plan to seal the mine, Rose explained, "so by the time we had the change of government, the mine was still open and we had managed to hold them off. It was a big achievement."

The Labour government, however, had divided the families by establishing the Family Reference Group (FRG), which is now supporting the government's plan to end the underground investigation. Several media outlets falsely reported last month that the families agreed with the

government's decision, based on a statement by the FRG. The FRG is an unelected body, attached to the government's Pike River Recovery Agency. It consists of three family members and two advisors, who are both close to the Labour Party and the union bureaucracy.

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael was killed in the disaster, told the WSWS: "We've got a right to challenge the government, and they're not listening to us. [Little] treated us with no respect at all in that meeting. None.... The families are still very strong and we're going to challenge them right to the end, we're not going to let them get away with it."

He explained that the mine recovery workers were "probably 30 metres away" from crucial evidence: the underground fan which is thought to have sparked the explosion, which is blocked by the roof-fall. Unlike virtually every other coal mine in the world, Pike River had its main ventilation fan installed underground, without any proper risk assessment.

"You can't judge a roof-fall until you stand in front of it," Monk said. However, according to official cabinet papers, the government had already decided in March 2020 not to proceed beyond the roof-fall, because it was supposedly too expensive, but at the time the re-entry had only explored about 400 metres of the drift.

Monk said the Labour Party had "lied" to the Pike River families. "We were part of their election victory and now they've done an about-turn. We are astounded at the lengths the crown will go to... in terms of impeding access to the truth and to justice. The trust I have in the government and institutions has evaporated."

Healey told the WSWS that Little's claim that the mine was too "unstable" near the roof-fall was unsubstantiated and false. He pointed out that there had been no further roof fall in 10 years.

Healey said in the April 7 meeting: "Little was very clear: this is just about money. There was no discussion about evidential sufficiency and whether or not we're going to get an outcome out of this... I never expected to hear a Labour minister say they were going to abandon an investigation into something like this, an industrial accident that resulted in the deaths of 29 miners, simply on the basis of cost."

As of last September, the government had spent \$36 million on the re-entry, which, divided by 29, is below the average cost of a homicide investigation. While Little claims there is "no more money," the government still has endless money for handouts to the corporate elite. Yesterday, for example, the government confirmed that Amazon, one of the world's richest companies, would be eligible for a \$160 million rebate for producing a TV series of *Lord of the Rings* in New Zealand.

Healey also said it was "outrageous" that Little was attempting to "intimidate the families into not pushing for further discovery of evidence." In a meeting last month called by the FRG, Little told those in attendance that he found it "annoying" that families were speaking against the government. In a recording leaked to the media, Little claimed that "people going around and saying [the official investigation is] not good enough... has a real potential to undermine the prosecution case."

Ardern was forced to contradict Little's blatantly false statement, telling Newshub: "I can't see any reason why" families pushing to go further could jeopardise a prosecution.

Little was leader of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which had about 70 members at Pike River, when the disaster happened. The EPMU, now called E t?, never spoke out about unsafe conditions at Pike River before the disaster. It ensured there was no interruption to production at the mine.

Little initially defended the company, telling Radio NZ on November 22, 2010, three days after the first explosion: "Every mine on the West Coast takes great care when it goes into production and I don't think Pike River is any different to that. They've had a good health and safety committee that's been very active. So, there's been nothing before now that's alerted us to any greater risk of this sort of incident happening than at any other time." These false statements underscored the union's support for big business and its complicity in the disaster.

The determined stand of the Pike River families has now brought them into conflict with every party in parliament, as well as the union bureaucracy—all of which defend the ruling elite's policy of class justice that has protected Pike River CEO Peter Whittall and others in the company's leadership for more than 10 years.

The WSWS and Socialist Equality Group (NZ) again urge working people, in New Zealand and internationally, to support the Pike River Family Committee's fight for an exhaustive underground investigation and for justice for the 29 men.



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