

Online meeting on the 2010 Pike River mine disaster in New Zealand exposes cover-up by successive governments

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) held an important public webinar last Saturday, titled “Ten years after the Pike River mine disaster: Political lessons of the struggle for the truth about the deaths of 29 men.”

It discussed one of New Zealand’s worst industrial disasters: the underground explosions at Pike River, where 29 people were killed in November 2010. This was not an accident, but an entirely avoidable tragedy caused by Pike River Coal placing profit and production ahead of safety.

The meeting was an international event, attended by workers from New Zealand, Australia, Brazil, India and Norway. Some family members of those who died at Pike River also took part.

The speakers exposed the role played by National Party and Labour Party-led governments, abetted by the union bureaucracy, state regulators, the police and the judicial system—firstly in allowing Pike River Coal to operate with flagrantly unsafe and criminal practices; and secondly, in shielding the company’s chief executive Peter Whittall and other senior managers from justice for the past 10 years.

They also discussed why successive governments have refused to mount a thorough underground investigation to gather forensic evidence and recover bodies from the mine, despite promising to do so. This has prevented the full truth from coming to light about the cause of the first explosion on November 19, and what happened afterwards, including the cause of a second explosion on November 24. The families and independent investigators have gathered evidence which suggests that there may have been survivors following the first and second explosions—contrary to the findings of the 2012 royal commission of inquiry and claims made by police.

SEG member and *World Socialist Web Site* writer John Braddock, who chaired the event, pointed out that Pike River was far from an isolated case. Governments throughout the world were placing corporate profits ahead of human life by refusing to take steps to stop the spread of COVID-19. He noted that a new study estimates the real death toll from the pandemic at 6.93 million globally—more than twice the official figure.

The meeting then heard a recorded speech from Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died at Pike River. He highlighted the complicity of the Department of Labour and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which knew the mine

was unsafe but did nothing to protect workers.

Monk said Jacinda Ardern’s Labour Party-led government had reneged on its 2017 election promise to fully investigate the mine and recover evidence for prosecutions. The minister responsible for Pike River recovery, Andrew Little, announced in March that the government would no longer fund the underground investigation to explore the mine workings beyond a roof-fall, because it would be too expensive. Monk pointed out that parliament is due to be renovated at a cost of \$250 million—more than five times the amount spent on the investigation.

“We’re 10 years down the track, still haven’t got justice, still haven’t got accountability, and the families have had to go out and do an investigation of their own,” Monk said. “Our fight is going to continue, we’re going to bring the truth out... They’re trying to sweep this under the table, they’re trying to wear us out and hoping that we go away. Well, it’s not going to happen,” he said.

Kath Monk, Michael’s mother, added that the families wanted “every person who goes to work to come home safely. Our men didn’t, and no one’s been held accountable for that, and that’s not right.”

Richard Healey, an electrical engineer who has spent two years investigating the disaster on behalf of some of the families, denounced the official investigations led by the police as “a cover-up.”

His detailed and damning presentation outlined evidence suggesting that there may have been survivors after the first explosion on November 19, and even the second explosion five days later, if they had been trapped behind the roof-fall. The previous National Party government and the police had falsely claimed that the explosions turned the whole mine into an inferno, leaving no chance of survivors.

Healey displayed images taken deep inside the mine by cameras lowered into bore holes, which showed wooden pallets and other undamaged objects. The families have also seen an image of an intact and fully clothed body in the mine.

Healey debunked the Labour Party-led government’s lies, echoed by the union bureaucracy, that the mine is now too unstable to fully explore. He explained the crucial importance of examining evidence beyond the roof-fall, including the main ventilation unit. The unit, which was operated in a highly dangerous manner, is thought to be the ignition source for the first

explosion.

Terry Cook, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia), explained that the conditions at Pike River were mirrored in Australia. He described his experience writing about the 1994 Moura mine disaster and interviewing the victims' families for *Workers News*, a predecessor of the WSWs. The families became increasingly angry at mining company BHP, the Queensland state Labor government, and the Construction, Forestry and Mining Union, which knew about dangerous levels of methane but did nothing to prevent people from going underground.

Following the disaster, a union representative sat on the official inquiry, which recommended that no charges be brought against the company, its managers or executives. Cook said this gave "a green light to the mining companies, that they could continue to kill and maim with impunity." Cook has written recently about the explosion at Anglo American's Grosvenor mine in Queensland, which left five workers with horrific injuries.

Tom Peters, a leading member of the SEG, who has written extensively about Pike River for the WSWs over the past decade, reviewed how the political establishment and the EPMU were complicit in both the disaster and the cover-up.

He described how the Labour Party and its coalition partners, the Greens and NZ First, had sought to deceive the families in the 2017 election, promising to "immediately" re-enter the mine and to bring those responsible to justice. He pointed out that the WSWs had warned in January 2018 "that the government's pledges cannot be trusted."

The WSWs drew attention to the fact that the so-called "recovery" was being led by Minister Little, who was the EPMU leader in November 2010. Peters played a recording of Little's comments to the media defending Pike River Coal's safety record following the disaster.

"The Ardern government used different tactics to try and achieve what the National Party was unable to do: to shut down the investigation and make sure that no one faces any serious charges," the speaker said. This included attempts to divide the families by breaking up their independent committee.

The decade-long fight for justice by the families "contains critically important political lessons about the Labour Party and the trade unions," Peters said. He quoted from the International Committee of the Fourth International's (ICFI) recent statement, "Forward to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees!", which calls for a break from the pro-capitalist trade unions and the formation of worker-controlled organisations to fight for safety and against attacks on living conditions.

The experience of Pike River also demonstrated the need to build a genuine socialist party. Peters said this was "the only way to combat the enormous political pressure that is brought to bear by the ruling class to disarm and divide workers, through the instruments of the Labour Party and the unions, and all their allies."

After the reports, Peters, Healey and Cook answered several questions. They discussed the cynical attempts by the media to blame workers for Pike River and similar disasters caused by corporate greed. Peters also commented on the way the Ardern

government had commemorated the 10th anniversary of the disaster, by seeking to flatter the families and convince them that the government was on their side—even as it was preparing to shut down the investigation.

Healey encouraged listeners to read the WSWs coverage of Pike River, calling it "the most straight-shooting, forthright and comprehensive of all media outlets."

Dean Dunbar, whose son Joseph died at Pike River at the age of just 17, told the WSWs that the webinar was "really productive," and would help to combat the "litany of lies" about the disaster. "In the way that you explain [the history of the cover-up], it is logical, it's sensible."

After the meeting, Dunbar read some of the WSWs coverage "going back to 2010," and noted: "You've been very, very accurate along the way. You have been as close to the mark as one could expect."

He said the families had become "very aware of how sinister" the former National Party government was, and that it represented "big business." The Labour government, however, was "very good at disguising themselves." He hoped that people were beginning to understand that there were no differences between the major parties.

Dunbar also said the trade unions "have changed" and now "most are just branches of government, in the guise of being there to help the common man, the worker."

Responding to government claims that it would be too expensive to enter the mine workings, he pointed to the "quarter of a billion dollars" in government money spent on renovating parliament, and the same amount spent on the America's Cup yacht race "for Rich Listers to cruise their boats around the harbour."

"We want to bring our children home and we want to convict the people that murdered them," he said. "When did that become so wrong?"

Dunbar stressed the importance of the feasibility study conducted on behalf of the families by several mining experts, including former chief inspector of mines Tony Forster. The document, released yesterday, demolishes the government's claims that it would be too technically difficult and costly to explore the mine workings. It shows that this can be done safely for \$8 million.



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