

New Zealand: International mining experts release plan for full investigation of Pike River disaster

Tom Peters
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On May 11, a group of international mining experts released a 23-page Conceptual Development Plan to expand the underground investigation of Pike River coal mine in New Zealand.

The document is a major step forward in the fight to uncover the truth about the mine disaster in November 2010 that killed 29 men. It was prepared by the Pike River Independent Technical Advisory Group, which consists of highly-qualified mining experts, including former chief mines inspector Tony Forster. They wrote the plan for free on behalf of 23 of the families of 29 men.

It demolishes the claims made by the Labour Party-led government that to go deeper into the mine to fully investigate the precise causes of the explosions and recover bodies would be too expensive and dangerous. The experts explain how this can be done safely, using standard mining techniques used all over the world, for under \$8 million—much less than the figures thrown around by the government of between \$60 million and \$100 million.

The Pike River Coal company gambled with the lives of its workers and contractors. A 2012 royal commission established that it placed production and profit ahead of safety, breaking numerous laws and regulations. A decade later, however, no individuals in the company leadership have been prosecuted for the entirely avoidable deaths.

Health and safety charges brought against Pike River CEO Peter Whittall were dropped in 2013 in a back-room deal between his lawyers and the government's Department of Labour. This was a blatant case of class justice. The state regulator was itself complicit in the disaster; it knew about the life-threatening conditions in the mine but did not shut it down.

The Labour Party-Greens-NZ First coalition, elected in 2017, promised to re-enter the mine to look for bodies,

which have not been recovered, and to gather forensic evidence for criminal prosecutions.

The government is now renegeing on these promises. Andrew Little, the minister for Pike River recovery, announced in March that, having explored the 2.2km drift tunnel, the re-entry operation would not proceed through a roof-fall and into the mine workings. He claimed that the area was “inherently unstable” and would be “phenomenally expensive” to explore. As the Conceptual Development Plan points out, Little's statements “were highly speculative and not based on any feasibility study.”

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in the mine, told the *World Socialist Web Site* he had written to Little asking which experts' advice he was relying on, but the minister had not replied.

Following the release of the plan, however, Little doubled down, telling *Newshub*: “we've reached the end,” and “we have delivered justice for the families.” This statement is patently false. Prior to the 2017 election, Labour and its allies led the families, and the public, to believe they would consider entering the mine workings after recovering the drift.

By preventing the examination of evidence beyond the roof-fall, especially Pike River's main ventilation unit, the government will ensure that there is no justice for the victims' families. The experts say the fan site could contain “the most critical items of evidence relating to the cause of the initial explosion” on November 19, 2010.

Little said the Pike River Recovery Agency would look at the expert plan, but added, in a callous and provocative statement: “When you're in government, you've got to weigh up competing priorities. For me, my priority now is the living.”

In response, Kath Monk, Michael's mother, told the WSWs: “Little was the national secretary of the EPMU

[Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union] back in 2010. Well, he should have been as concerned about the living back then, because some of the men underground were members of that union.”

Eleven of the 29 men who died were EPMU members. The union knew about the dangerous conditions at Pike River but took no action to shut down the mine and protect workers. Days after the first explosion, Little, speaking to the *New Zealand Herald* and Radio NZ, defended the company, saying that the union had no concerns about Pike River mine, and that it had a good health and safety committee.

The Labour-Greens government, like the previous National Party government, is covering up the causes of the disaster to protect those responsible. This includes the company, successive Labour and National governments which deregulated health and safety in the mining industry, as well as state regulators, and the EPMU, now called E t?, which functions as an adjunct of big business and the state.

E t? is supporting the state’s cover-up. Asked by the WWSW what position it took on the Pike River investigation, national secretary Bill Newson replied on May 5 that the union was “satisfied that the government has kept its promise to re-enter the drift and supports the government’s position regarding not re-entering the main mine.”

Going further into the mine could also determine whether any of the 29 men survived the first explosion, and even the second explosion five days later, but were trapped in the mine workings, which some experts believe is possible. This could raise questions about the initial response to the disaster, led by the police, and the royal commission, which concluded that the first explosion was not survivable.

Steve Rose, whose stepson Stuart Mudge died in Pike River, posed the question: “What could be so awful in that mine that they don’t want brought into the light of day?... Andrew Little knows stuff, and the stuff that he knows, they obviously consider to be damaging to the government.”

Regarding Little’s insistence that it is unsafe and too difficult to continue exploring the mine, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, Rose said: “I think he’s working on the basis that if you repeat something often enough then the public will believe it’s true.”

Carol Rose, Stuart’s mother, noted that Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was remaining conspicuously quiet about Pike River, and said, “I would really, really like to hear

what she’s got to say on this.” She believed the Labour Party wanted “to leave her untainted by any of this, because they’re going to need her at the next election, they’re going to need her reputation to remain intact.”

Members of the Independent Expert Advisory Group have made strong statements urging the government to continue the underground investigation and seek justice for the families. Forster told *Newshub*: “This job should have been done years ago. As a mining engineer, I’ve never understood why so much dithering has been carried out.”

Another member of the group, mining engineer David Creedy, said “none of the barriers are really technical. The barriers are political and financial.” Creedy said reaching the fan area could also lead to the recovery of human remains, and “we owe that both to them and to their families.”

UK-based mines rescue expert Brian Robinson told *Newshub* the mine re-entry “would be a half-finished job if it was given up now.” David Bell, an engineering and mining expert at Canterbury University, agreed that the mine should be recovered “at least to the main fan” and this could be done safely.

Writing in the Facebook group “Uncensored Pike,” electrical engineer Richard Healey, who has carried out an extensive investigation of data from Pike River over the past two years in collaboration with some of the families, stated: “Like Little, my priorities are with the living. In the last decade 60 to 70 people every year go to work and come home in a box... the living are important, we owe it to them to make sure that the guilty are held to account for their actions at Pike—because if we don’t, we will surely see the tragedy at Pike happen again.”

The families of the Pike River 29 have the right to know the truth about what happened to their loved ones, and to see those responsible brought to account. This is a matter of crucial importance for the entire New Zealand working class, and for working people in countries throughout the world who are being forced by corporations, governments and the pro-capitalist trade unions to work in life-threatening conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic.



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