

The Pike River mine disaster in New Zealand: Political lessons from the fight for truth and justice for the deaths of 29 men

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We are publishing below the slightly edited text of a speech given by Tom Peters, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand), at a public webinar on May 8 titled “Ten years after the Pike River mine disaster: Political lessons of the struggle for the truth about the deaths of 29 men.”

It has been more than a decade since the disaster at Pike River mine claimed the lives of 29 men. Despite repeated promises that their bodies would be retrieved and the truth told about what happened, the opposite has been the case.

The management of Pike River Coal sent men underground, day after day, into a mine that they had been warned was extremely dangerous, and that could have exploded at any time. They gambled with men’s lives for the sake of profit. This criminal operation was assisted by the government regulators and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which had 71 members working at Pike River, who did nothing to protect these workers.

The 29 deaths were not an unavoidable accident, just as the overwhelming majority of the 6 million deaths from the pandemic were not necessary or inevitable. We are living through a global catastrophe not because the coronavirus can’t be contained and beaten but because governments and big business have refused to take the necessary measures such as lockdowns and factory and school closures.

Decisions have been made to prioritise production and profit over human life, starkly revealing the real, brutal face of capitalism. Last October, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson reportedly blurted out during a meeting with his inner circle: “No more f***ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands!” That is the attitude of the British ruling class and its counterparts globally.

Governments would not be able to get away with this murderous policy without the collaboration of the trade unions. There is not one country where these organisations have mounted a campaign to defend workers from the virus or from the destruction of their living standards.

Likewise, Pike River reveals the real character of these organisations. They are thoroughly undemocratic and led by a privileged upper-middle-class bureaucracy, who are close to the Labour Party and whose interests are intertwined with those of big business. They oppose strikes and any action that could disrupt businesses, because that would also impact on the material interests of the well-paid union bureaucrats themselves.

Let us review what happened at Pike River. The causes of this disaster include the sweeping deregulation of the mining industry by successive governments. In 1992, the National Party government abolished worker-elected safety check inspectors; these were workers who were authorised to clear a mine if they considered it dangerous.

The number of mining inspectors employed in the Department of Labour plunged during the 1990s from about 20 people to just one

specialist mining inspector at the time of the disaster, who was responsible for thousands of mines and quarries throughout New Zealand. Companies were allowed to self-regulate and Pike River operated more or less without oversight.

When Helen Clark’s Labour Party government was elected in 1999, none of these attacks were reversed, and the unions did not mount any campaign to force the government to act.

In fact, the destruction of mining regulations was part of a sweeping pro-business agenda, begun by the Labour Party government in 1984, led by Prime Minister David Lange. It privatised telecommunications and prepared other industries for privatisation, including railways and forestry, by transforming them into profit-making enterprises and sacking tens of thousands of workers.

National protections and subsidies for industries such as agriculture were abolished, which devastated many farmers. The goods and services tax was introduced, while taxes for the rich and for corporations were slashed.

These brutal attacks on the working class led to soaring unemployment and social inequality that this country has never recovered from.

The 1980s Labour government was seen as a model for right-wing restructuring, which mirrored what was happening under President Reagan in the United States, Margaret Thatcher in Britain and the Hawke/Keating Labor government in Australia. In response to the globalisation of production, governments went about scrapping any restraints on profit making, including health and safety red tape.

All of this was done with the collaboration of the unions. These organisations, internationally, transformed themselves into industrial policemen, working with the state and big business to ensure orderly redundancies, suppress strikes, and to defend the ability of their country’s businesses to compete and make profits on the world market.

The deregulatory frenzy affected the construction industry, leading to thousands of unsafe and leaky buildings. The cheaply built and extremely unsafe CTV building, constructed in Christchurch in 1986, collapsed in seconds during the earthquake less than three months after Pike River, killing 115 people.

These were the conditions in which Pike River developed during the 1990s and 2000s, under National and Labour governments, and eventually opened in late 2008. Mining companies were now competing against rivals internationally with much lower wages and operating costs.

To cut costs, Pike River’s leadership committed so many egregious safety violations, it’s impossible to mention them all. The mine had no suitable emergency exit, as required by law. It had grossly inadequate methane monitoring, ventilation and drainage systems. Its main ventilation fan was installed underground, which is never done in underground coal mines anywhere in the world because of the dangers it

poses.

The royal commission in 2012 documented many of these facts, many of which were already known by the company, the Department of Labour, and the EPMU.

This image shows one of the many complaints made to management by Dene Murphy, a shift supervisor, about poor ventilation. Nothing was ever done to address the issue.

Masaoki Nishioka, a Japanese hydro-mining expert who did some work for Pike River, told the commission that he warned chief executive Peter Whittall, manager Doug White, and others about the dangerous lack of ventilation. He was also ignored, and he quit one month before the explosion, because, he told the commission, “I felt the mine would explode at any time.”

The mine owners decided that to bring the mine up to standard would have been too expensive. Pike River had already borrowed tens of millions of dollars from its largest shareholder NZ Oil and Gas, and from the Bank of New Zealand.

The mine could have been shut down by the Department of Labour [DoL], which was warned in November 2008 about a series of methane gas ignitions underground. The Department sent letters to the company expressing concern but did not issue a prohibition notice or prosecute anyone.

The EPMU had the power to stop production by going on strike, but it also did nothing. The union revealed to the royal commission that it knew about the methane gas ignitions in 2008 and the lack of a proper emergency exit. On one occasion a group of miners walked off the job to protest the lack of emergency equipment underground. The union kept quiet about all of this, and Pike River was allowed to continue lying that it had an impeccable safety record.

The EPMU leader at the time of the explosion was Andrew Little. Later, in 2014 he became the Labour Party leader, until he was replaced by Jacinda Ardern shortly before the 2017 election. He is now the minister responsible for Pike River, tasked with shutting down the underground investigation.

During that election campaign, Labour declared that Little supported the Pike River families “from day one.”

In fact, on the *World Socialist Web Site*, the day after the disaster, we pointed out that Little was already rushing to defend the company, before the dust had even settled.

Little told Radio NZ 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.”

This was the union trying to cover up the conditions, over which it had presided, that led to the disaster.

Government and opposition parties alike defended Pike River Coal and its chief executive Peter Whittall, who was treated as practically a hero in the media.

On November 25, for example, Green Party MP Kevin Hague said this in parliament: “I will single out Peter Whittall... I will take this public opportunity to convey the Green Party’s thanks, our enormous sympathy, but also our tremendous respect for the integrity, responsibility, and compassion that he has unfailingly shown.”

Jim Anderton, leader of the Progressive Party and former leader of the pseudo-left Alliance, made a similar comment, saying Whittall had “shown calm, intelligent leadership and great strength at a difficult time.”

At a memorial service, Peter Whittall spoke along with Prime Minister John Key and the governor-general. He declared, “While we mourn our lost mates, we are still working continuously to bring them home.”

As we wrote at the time, the fact that Whittall was given this platform to

pose as a great “mate” to all his workers, while his company was officially under investigation from police and the DoL proved that the government’s real priority was protecting the company.

It also showed that the royal commission, announced by Key just a few days earlier, had nothing to do with holding anyone accountable.

On December 1, 2010, we wrote: “Its purpose is not to establish the truth about the conditions that led up to the disaster. On the contrary, as government spokesmen, including Energy Minister Gerry Brownlee have intimated, it is to put on a show of “learning the lessons” so that the way can be cleared for the industry to “move on”—allowing the unrelenting pursuit of profits to resume.”

This proved absolutely correct. The royal commission was forced to make public several of the flagrant safety breaches at Pike River, but it had no power to compel testimony from Whittall and others, who refused to answer questions that would incriminate them.

It recommended some cosmetic changes to health and safety laws that have done nothing to address the real cause of workplace deaths. In 2019 there were 108 workplace deaths—the worst toll in nearly a decade. That was the year of the White Island eruption—another avoidable tragedy, caused by the utter negligence of tourism companies which made immense profits from taking people to visit this extremely dangerous active volcanic crater.

The Department of Labour and the police protected Pike River chief executive Peter Whittall. Twelve charges against him for breaches of health and safety were dropped in a backroom agreement with Whittall’s lawyer, in exchange for a one-off payment to the families from Pike River Coal. The Supreme Court later found that this deal was unlawful, but the charges were never reinstated.

Meanwhile the police had quietly dropped their initial investigation into the disaster.

For years the Pike River families waged an extremely significant campaign for truth and justice. When the National Party government reneged on its initial promise to re-enter the mine and recover the bodies, and tried to permanently seal up the mine, the families blockaded the road to the mine in late 2016 and 2017.

They received widespread support from working people as well as small businesses. Meanwhile, the EPMU, which had changed its name to E t? union, abandoned the families. It has now endorsed the government’s decision to end the underground investigation.

With the 2017 election approaching, however, the Labour Party and its allies, NZ First and the Greens, sprung into action, seeking to contain the anger over Pike River and exploit it for votes. All three parties declared they would “immediately” re-enter and investigate the mine.

Some family members have raised that NZ First put pressure on Labour to promise to re-enter Pike River. But it would be a dangerous mistake to have any illusions in this right-wing party. NZ First was founded as a breakaway from the National Party in 1993. Before that, Peters was part of the government that launched the sweeping deregulation of the mining industry. In the Ardern government, Winston Peters was deputy PM. His main priority was not Pike River, but spending billions of dollars on the military and strengthening the alliance with the United States.

Jacinda Ardern and Andrew Little promised that the new Pike River Recovery Agency would work closely with the families to see that justice was done. Here is one example from after the election.

But now the government is completely disregarding their wishes by refusing to even contemplate a further exploration of the mine workings beyond the roof-fall, where there is likely to be crucial evidence.

Andrew Little’s sudden announcement in March, the reneging of election promises, the pretence that promises were never made, has come as a shock to many people.

But it did not surprise us. We wrote on January 6, 2018:

“The Labour-Greens-NZ First coalition government... is posturing as a friend of the Pike River families. It is undoubtedly concerned that continuing protests over the disaster could become a focal point for broader working-class opposition to poverty wages, dangerous working conditions, and a regulatory and judicial system rigged in favour of big business and the rich... The WSWS warns that the government’s pledges cannot be trusted.”

We completely reject the Ardern government’s claim that there isn’t enough money to properly investigate the 29 homicides. Under the pretext of the pandemic, billions of dollars have been found to bail out mostly large businesses, including Fletcher Building, Air New Zealand, SkyCity, which have sacked thousands of workers. Billions more dollars are being printed by the Reserve Bank to buy up bonds from the commercial banks. Hundreds of millions are now being spent to renovate parliament.

There is limitless money for the banks and big business, and nothing to secure the basic rights of working people who have died in a preventable disaster. NZ Oil and Gas, the major shareholder in Pike River, has not been made to contribute one cent to the recovery effort.

The Ardern government has 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 Pike River families were able to mount a determined struggle against the National Party government by maintaining their political independence from every party in parliament and from the unions. They ran a democratic committee where all the families could have a say.

Labour calculated that it needed to divide the families and stop them from appealing directly for support from other workers. As part of the Pike River Recovery Agency, the government set up a Family Reference Group [FRG], which it falsely said would represent the majority of the 29 families. The FRG is an unelected body which only has three family members, and two advisors, Rob Egan and Tony Sutorius, who have very close links to the Labour Party and the trade unions.

The majority of the families were left out of important decision-making. When the FRG issued a statement on March 30th, declaring that the families accepted “Andrew Little’s advice that there will be no more government money” to go further into the mine, many families objected that they had not been consulted.

These experiences contain critically important political lessons about the role of Labour Parties and the trade unions.

The ruling class is increasingly relying on the unions to suppress the class struggle. In the United States, Democratic President Joe Biden and the leading Republican Marco Rubio have both campaigned in favour of unionisation at Amazon. They are not doing this to advance workers’ interests. Rather, these big business politicians are terrified by the prospect of a rank-and-file movement of workers emerging outside their control.

The same tendency can be seen in New Zealand, where the Ardern government is relying on the unions to block workers’ resistance to its brutal wage freeze policy announced this week. The NZNO and the teacher unions, which pushed through sellout agreements in 2018 and 2019, will again be called upon to suppress the immense anger brewing up among their own members—just as Pike River Coal relied on the EPMU to suppress opposition to the conditions in its mine.

What is the way forward? There is undoubtedly widespread anger and disillusionment about the unions. In 1985 nearly half of all workers were in a union. Ten years later, it was down to 20 percent and today the figure is below that. In the private sector, just 7 percent of workers are union members.

In opposition to the union bureaucracy, our movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), ahead of our annual online

May Day rally, called for the building of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). We explained that this initiative “will work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale. The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance.”

The IWA-RFC “will be a means through which workers throughout the world can share information and organize a united struggle to demand protection for workers, the shutdown of unsafe facilities and nonessential production, and other emergency measures that are necessary to stop the spread of the virus.”

We advanced this call “within the framework of the perspective of world socialist revolution.” The formation of new workers organisations is not “a substitute for the building of the revolutionary party. Action is required, but serious action must be based on program and principles. Sustaining and developing a network of independent organizations requires the development of a socialist leadership in the working class.”

The Pike River deaths and the subsequent cover-up demonstrate the urgent need for a genuine socialist party. This is 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.

The disaster has also exposed the pseudo-left organisations that hover around Labour, the Greens and the union bureaucracy and falsely call themselves socialist. These include the International Socialist Organisation [ISO], Socialist Aotearoa and Organise Aotearoa. The ISO last wrote about Pike River in 2012, in an article that presented the EPMU as a vehicle for defending workers and covered up its role in paving the way for the disaster. On the ninth anniversary of the disaster, in 2019, Organise Aotearoa published a Facebook post also promoting the unions as a means to ensure workplace safety.

These are not socialists, but groups representing the interests of the upper middle class. Instead of fighting to unify workers and expose Labour and the unions. They defend these organisations, while obsessively promoting divisive identity politics, based on race, nationality, gender and sexuality.

The ICFI fights to unify workers internationally, against capitalism. We have described the pandemic as a “trigger event” in world history that has intensified and exposed all the contradictions inherent in capitalist society.

To defend policies that are leading to mass death and record social inequality, politicians around the world are promoting authoritarian and outright fascist forces. And to counter its economic decline, the United States is now threatening war against China and Russia—which would be a nuclear war that would threaten the very existence of human civilization.

Because New Zealand has experienced only 26 deaths from the pandemic, it is portrayed internationally as an exception, a progressive country with a “kind” and compassionate prime minister. This is a fraud. Pike River and the CTV building collapse show that New Zealand is not immune from global developments, which are pushing workers and young people to the left.

We are in a period of history, like the First World War and the Great Depression, where the future of humanity will be decided in revolutionary struggles, involving masses of people.

The First World War was only ended by the intervention of the masses of workers and peasants in the Russian Revolution, led by the Bolshevik Party, which sparked revolutionary uprisings throughout Europe. Today too, the immense crisis facing the world cannot be resolved outside of a revolution.

That is why workers and young people listening to this meeting must make serious political decisions. There is more than enough wealth in the world, if it was not hoarded by a tiny number of billionaires, to end

inequality and to organise society along rational, scientific lines, to put an end to nation states and therefore to put an end to war, and to address climate change.

I urge everyone listening to study our perspective, read our articles and make the decision to join the Socialist Equality Group and fight to build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in New Zealand. Thank you for your attention.



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