

Justice for the 29 miners killed at New Zealand's Pike River!

Tom Peters
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The Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand is calling for international support for the Pike River Families Committee's demand for a thorough investigation of the disaster and the prosecution of the company leaders who turned the mine into a death trap. We appeal to workers around the world to send statements of support for the families and their struggle!

The fight to establish the truth about the deaths of 29 workers killed by an explosion at Pike River coal mine 10 years ago requires the urgent support of working people throughout the world.

Families of 23 of the 29 men killed in the 2010 coal mine disaster are demanding that the Labour Party-Greens government, led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, overturn its recent decision to end the forensic investigation of the mine and seal it permanently, entombing the men's bodies and crucial evidence as to the cause of the disaster. The government is seeking to protect the corporations, state regulatory agencies, politicians and union leaders who all bear responsibility for one of the deadliest industrial disasters in New Zealand's history.

On November 19, 2010 the mine, located on the West Coast of the South Island, in production for less than a year, was shaken by a powerful explosion of methane gas. After a second blast five days later, police and the National Party government declared that the 29 men who had been working deep underground were dead. The victims included 24 New Zealanders, two Scotsmen, two Australians and one South African. The youngest, 17-year-old Joseph Dunbar, was killed on his first day underground.

This devastating tragedy was not a random accident, but a crime. It was the outcome of conscious decisions by Pike River Coal's (PRC) management that placed profit and production ahead of workers' safety. After sending an initial shipment to India in February 2010, following numerous delays and cost overruns, the company significantly ramped up coal extraction in October, with a two-shift, 24-hour operation. PRC was determined to avoid any further expensive delays necessary to bring the mine up to standard.

A royal commission of inquiry in 2012 established that the mine was a death trap. Grossly inadequate ventilation and gas monitoring meant the atmosphere underground was in the explosive range on dozens of occasions in the days leading up

to the first blast. Contrary to mandatory guidelines, the mine had no second means of egress. Its main fan was installed underground, something that is never done in coal mines, partly because of the risk that it could be a source of ignition for methane and coal dust.

To this day, however, no one has been held accountable. The entire political establishment, along with government regulators, the trade union bureaucracy, the police and the judicial system, have worked together over the past decade to shield PRC's executives, directors and managers.

Chief executive Peter Whittall was initially charged with health and safety breaches, but these were dropped by the Department of Labour in 2013, in exchange for a one-off payment to the 29 families. The regulatory department itself was complicit in the disaster: it knew about the dangerous conditions at Pike River but did not order the mine closed. Its backroom deal with Whittall was later ruled unlawful by the Supreme Court, but the charges were not reinstated. While the disaster devastated entire communities, Whittall and others in PRC's senior leadership were able to move into comfortable positions in other companies around the world.

As the Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand—SEG) explained in a recent webinar, the Pike River deaths and the ongoing cover-up contain vital political lessons for the international working class. The disaster mirrors the experiences of workers in country after country, who are being forced to work in life-threatening conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The trade union bureaucracy is enforcing policies described by the *British Medical Journal* as “social murder,” while victimising those, like London bus driver David O'Sullivan, who seek to mobilise workers in opposition to such policies.

Like the pandemic, the SEG argued, Pike River demonstrates the need for workers to build new organisations to take control of their own health and safety out of the hands of the trade unions as well as the corporations and governments they represent. Rank-and-file committees should be established that are run democratically by workers themselves, and are politically independent of the unions. The SEG also raised the need for a genuine socialist political party, fighting to break the working class from the stranglehold of all big business parties,

including Labour, and to unite workers of all countries against capitalism.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which had 71 members at Pike River mine, acted as an adjunct to the company, suppressing opposition to its life-threatening practices. It never publicly criticised management or organised industrial action—even after a group of union members walked off the job to protest the lack of emergency equipment underground. The union’s then-leader Andrew Little defended PRC’s safety record following the first explosion, telling the media there was “nothing unusual” about the mine.

Not accidentally, Little is now the minister in charge of “Pike River Recovery.” He is tasked with shutting down the investigation right at the point where it could uncover critical evidence that could be used to bring criminal charges. He is seeking to protect the company, the government and the union bureaucracy, which he led, and which helped pave the way for the disaster.

In the 2017 election, Labour, led by Ardern and Little, its Green Party allies and the right-wing NZ First Party, sought to deceive the Pike River families with false promises to fully investigate the mine and recover bodies from the mine. Now these pledges are being brushed aside.

Little has made unsubstantiated statements that it is too difficult, expensive and dangerous for investigators to proceed beyond a roof-fall into the mine workings, where they would find the ventilation unit thought to have sparked the first explosion. The minister’s claims have been thoroughly demolished by international mining experts who are backing the families’ fight for justice.

The barriers to a full and thorough investigation, and to holding people criminally accountable for the disaster, are not technical or financial, but political.

The response of successive New Zealand governments to Pike River is a class one, with parallels including the official response to the 2017 Grenfell Tower disaster in London, and the 2011 CTV building collapse in Christchurch. Pike River bears a striking resemblance to other mining disasters including the 1986 and 1994 explosions at BHP’s Moura mines in Australia, which killed 23 miners combined, and the 2010 Upper Big Branch disaster in West Virginia, where 29 workers perished. In virtually every case, those responsible have been protected from any serious consequences.

In a recent outburst, seeking to justify abandoning the Pike River investigation, Little told a reporter that the government had to “weigh up competing priorities” and “my priority now is the living.” The truth is that Labour and the unions did not prioritise the lives of mining and other workers in 2010, nor are they doing so now. Their real priority is the interests of the corporate elite. They uphold an economic system—capitalism—which produced Pike River and countless other disasters and is responsible, on a world scale, for an

estimated 7 million deaths from coronavirus.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s government is fraudulently promoted by the world’s media and pseudo-left groups as a compassionate, reformist alternative. In reality, New Zealand’s Labour government has responded to the pandemic and resulting economic crisis, like governments around the world, by handing tens of billions of dollars to big business and the banks. It is overseeing tens of thousands of job cuts and imposing a three-year wage freeze for teachers, nurses and other public sector workers to pay for bailing out the rich.

The SEG, which has for more than 10 years exposed the cover-ups at Pike River on the *World Socialist Web Site* and in public meetings, is the only political tendency supporting the families’ fight in insisting on a proper investigation of Pike River mine.

The families’ determined struggle for truth has brought them into conflict with the entire political establishment, as well as the union bureaucracy. The media and the Ardern government’s upper middle class, pseudo-left supporters are seeking to bury the issue.

For the working class internationally, however, this fight has a burning, life-and-death significance that cannot be ignored. Big business must not be allowed to continue to kill and maim with impunity. Human life is more important than corporate profit!

There is no time to lose. According to recent media reports, the government is set to begin preparations to seal up and abandon the mine site as early as next week. Any pretence that there will be prosecutions will be ditched soon afterwards.

The Pike River Families Committee is appealing for support from workers internationally, including mineworkers, to oppose this deliberate coverup and to thoroughly investigate the cause of the disaster and prosecute those responsible. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges readers to send statements of support using the form below.



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