

Bernie Monk, father of Pike River victim: “Ten years on, we still haven’t got justice”

27 May 2021

We are publishing below a slightly edited speech by Bernie Monk, whose son Michael was one of 29 men who died in the 2010 Pike River mine disaster. The speech was recorded and played in the May 8 webinar, “Ten years after the Pike River mine disaster: Political lessons in the fight for truth about the deaths of 29 miners.” The webinar was hosted by the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) in New Zealand, to discuss the causes of the 2010 Pike River disaster and the efforts by successive New Zealand governments, aided and abetted by the trade unions and the entire political establishment, to protect the corporate criminals responsible.

SEG member Tom Peters’ speech reviewed in detail the complicity of National Party and Labour Party-led governments, including Labour’s allies the Green Party and the NZ First Party, and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, in the conditions that led to the disaster, and the ongoing cover-up. Socialist Equality Party (Australia) member Terry Cook also gave a speech, titled “The lessons of the 1994 Moura mine disaster in Australia.”

The World Socialist Web Site is calling for working people throughout the world to send messages of support for the fight by the Pike River Families Committee for a full and thorough underground investigation of the mine. The committee, representing 23 of the 29 victims’ families, is opposing the moves by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s government to shut down the investigation before it uncovers critical evidence that could lead to the prosecution of company leaders responsible for the disaster.

There has been a huge coverup at Pike River. I could sense it from very early on. The real turning point in this story was when someone came to me just before Easter 2011, and showed me a photo of self-rescue boxes open underground [suggesting that men could

have survived the initial explosion on November 19]. We then went to the police and we got them to show us the evidence for this.

As we went on and interviewed people we realised how bad it was. It’s just been an endless story. To think that we’re 10 years down the track, still haven’t got justice, still haven’t got accountability, and the families had to go out and do an investigation of their own. Because there’s the same police force overseeing the present investigation of the disaster that did the initial investigation. I just don’t think that’s right.

I think it’s wrong that the families have had to do their own investigation, and had to protest outside the mine to stop it from being sealed in late 2016. ACC [the state-owned Accident Compensation Corporation], who were shareholders in Pike River Coal, and the Bank of New Zealand, which was a major creditor, have never come and knocked on our door and said that they want to help to retrieve the men.

The National Party government continuously lied to us, claiming it would re-enter the mine to investigate and retrieve the bodies. Now we’ve nearly come full circle. The official investigation has come to the end of the drift tunnel, and now we’ve got to fight the Labour Party government to finish the job.

We’ve got a good band of experts, top people from overseas, and I’m humbled by the faith that they’ve had in the families and by all the work that they’ve done. They have done this investigation and explained on paper how to do this job.

I’ve asked [Minister for Pike River Recovery] Andrew Little: Who are his experts? I’ve written to him three times. I’ve had no replies. I asked him, when he spoke about the amount it would cost to finish the job: Who are the people who are investigating the cost of re-entering the mine workings? Still, I’ve had no answer. I’ve rung local Labour Party MP Damien

O'Connor—still no reply.

But our fight is going to continue. We're going to bring the truth out, and we've got all the information now to be able to do that.

I have to take my hat off to people that have come and helped us. The biggest turning point was the select committee hearing in 2016 that was arranged by writer Dame Fiona Kidman, and mining expert Tony Forster, the former chief inspector of mines for the government. Along with myself and other family members, we went up to Wellington and spoke at a select committee. NZ First leader Winston Peters put the stake in the ground and said that he would go down into the mine. He knew that this job could be done.

New Zealand, and the world, you've got to realise that we've seen bodies of men in pictures taken by cameras lowered into the mine. We've got SCADA [electrical] data from the mine. We've got all the information. Yet the police do not want to share anything with us. They say that to share information with the families could undermine their investigation. Well, they've had 10 years to investigate this. We've had 18 months, and we've found out that some information given to the royal commission by the Department of Labour and police was incorrect.

How is the official investigation being conducted? They're trying to wear us out, they're trying to sweep this under the table and hoping that we'll go away. Well, it's not going to happen.

The people I hold responsible, and that should be in the courts, are not only Pike River. There is also the Department of Labour (now called WorkSafe): they knew that this mine was unsafe; Mines Rescue: they said in the royal commission that this mine had never had a second form of egress; and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union: union members went to them and said that this mine was unsafe. What did they do? They did absolutely nothing.

Now the government claims the investigation will cost too much money. Well, if they are going to renovate the parliament buildings for over \$200 million, they can spend a bit more money on getting justice and accountability. What I'm saying to New Zealand is: do not let corporate manslaughter be governed by money. That's what happened here. Pike River Coal paid money out, and they let people off the charges that should have laid in the first place. That's

what our fight's all about.

Kath Monk, Bernie's wife and Michael's mother, added the following statement:

I want people to realise that another reason the families are so insistent on having someone accountable for what's happened, is so that everyone in New Zealand who goes to work can be sure that they come home safely. Our men didn't. No one's been held accountable for that, and that's not right.



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