

Writer Fiona Kidman supports demand for continued investigation of Pike River mine disaster

Tom Peters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to New Zealand writer Fiona Kidman, a long-time supporter of the fight to fully investigate the 2010 Pike River mine disaster, uncover the truth about what happened and hold people accountable for the deaths of 29 men. To this day, no one in the company's leadership has been brought to justice for the criminal breaches of safety at the mine.

Andrew Little, minister for Pike River recovery in the Labour Party-led government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, announced in March that the government would end an underground investigation of the mine. This would prevent investigators from reaching crucial evidence beyond a roof-fall, which could be used in prosecutions, including the main ventilation unit that is thought to have sparked the initial explosion.

The Pike River Families Committee, representing 23 of the 29 families, is demanding that the government reverse its decision and continue the investigation. The WSWs urges readers to send statements of support for this crucial fight.

Kidman has written several novels and collections of short stories and poetry. Her novels include *The Book of Secrets*, *The Captive Wife* and *This Mortal Boy*, which won the top award for fiction in the 2019 New Zealand Book Awards. She told the WSWs, "In my writing over many years I think I've tried to demonstrate some social conscience... I think if we start to neglect injustice to any part of society, then we're failing."

In late 2016, Kidman and her husband Ian travelled to the West Coast of New Zealand's South Island to join a picket organised by the Pike River victims' families on the road to the mine site. The families were protesting

against a decision by the then-National Party government of Prime Minister John Key to permanently seal the mine, entombing the bodies and evidence inside.

Kidman explained that her husband Ian, who died in 2017, had worked on the West Coast "as a schoolteacher for a couple of years, and he had a very strong feeling for the Coast. One evening we were just watching the picket line when the sealing of the mine was happening and we said to each other: 'They look a bit lonely, do you think we should go and help them?' When we got there it was very obvious to us that what was happening was not right."

In early 2017, Kidman promoted a petition initiated by her friend Alexandra Dumitrescu, calling on the government to re-enter the mine. Kidman joined Tony Forster, a former chief inspector of mines, Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died at Pike River, and other family members, in presenting the petition and accompanying statements to a parliamentary select committee hearing in February 2017.

At the time, the National Party government and the state-owned company Solid Energy (which had bought the mine site from Pike River Coal's receivers) were making unsubstantiated claims that it was too dangerous to re-enter and explore even the drift, or entry tunnel. Forster presented evidence that demolished these claims.

The Labour Party-led government that formed in late 2017, including the Greens and the right-wing NZ First Party, promised to re-enter the mine to gather evidence and look for bodies. Having explored the drift tunnel, however, the government is now refusing to go beyond a roof-fall, claiming it would be too difficult, dangerous

and expensive. These assertions have again all been refuted by Forster, as well as David Creedy and other international mining experts, who are supporting the families' push to continue the investigation.

Kidman described the present situation as "ironic, really and truly. It is the same scenario playing out under a Labour government." She noted that in her submission to the parliamentary committee, she had said: "at the time of the disaster, John Key said that no effort or money would be spared to bring the bodies of the deceased out of the mine. There was later some dispute about his actual words. But in video evidence he was seen and heard saying: 'The first thing is, I'm here to give you absolute reassurance: We're committed to getting the boys out and nothing's going to change that.'"

"Well, of course they didn't do anything," Kidman said. Later, when Labour came into office, "one of its promises was that they would right this wrong of Pike River. When they are so close to getting through that drift, and when there is a plan to continue, why stop now? I simply do not understand it."

She urged the government to "keep going," saying: "I'm not pointing fingers at any particular person or people, because I don't think that there is a lot to be gained by that. As far as Andrew Little is concerned, I would prefer to think that I would be supporting him and a Labour government to keep going."

Kidman questioned claims made by the government's Pike River Recovery Agency that it would cost upwards of \$60 million to explore past the coal-fall. "I don't know where this huge sum came from," she said, adding that Tony Forster and the other mining experts have estimated the operation will need only another \$8 million. "Tony has been proven right over and over again. So, listen to him now."

The plan produced by Forster and the other mining experts points out that the figures of \$60 million to \$100 million, reported in the media, "were highly speculative and not based on any feasibility study."

"We spend millions and millions of dollars on overseas war graves and on recovering and repatriating people from overseas," Kidman added. "Why are we not trying to repatriate these human remains? It is still important. People say to me: 'Let them be, they're entombed and it's a beautiful place.' It's not a beautiful place, it's the wreckage of a mining disaster."

Kidman said she was frustrated that public attention to the Pike River families seemed to have been worn down because of "this huge delay in doing what should have been done years and years ago... A lot of people in the cities have tuned out. It gets up my nose, because they say, 'It's been a long time and it's over now.' But it's not over." She said people's attitudes would be different if Wellington's Mount Victoria tunnel had collapsed with people inside.

"I do understand that there's a division in the ranks of the families, and the government seems to be listening to one side and not the other. I don't understand why that is," Kidman said. (Six of the 29 families are not challenging the government's decision.)

"If you look at someone like Bernie Monk, in 2011 he was being hailed as potentially the New Zealander of the Year. He received honours for supporting that community. He's still the same person. Bernie is Bernie. They're not different people, they're still honourable, gutsy, down-to-earth people who are trying to tell the truth as they see it."

Kidman thanked the *World Socialist Web Site* for its articles supporting the Pike River families, saying: "I think they're very good and very hard-hitting. You're certainly prepared to lay yourselves on the line... Somebody has to say these things, so good for you."



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