

Media blackout of growing support for full investigation of Pike River disaster

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There is growing anger among workers internationally over the New Zealand Labour Party-led government's decision to end the manned underground investigation of Pike River mine. The government is reneging on its 2017 election promise to properly investigate the mine and retrieve evidence for the prosecution of those responsible for the 2010 disaster that killed 29 men.

Despite overwhelming evidence that the mine was a death trap, and that warnings about explosive levels of methane gas were continually ignored, no one has been held accountable for the mine's criminal safety breaches. Police insisted they could not lay charges against Pike River Coal's managers and executives without physical evidence.

After recovering the 2.2km drift or entry tunnel, however, Minister for Pike River Recovery Andrew Little announced in March that the investigation will not proceed beyond a roof-fall and into the mine workings.

Yesterday, *Stuff* reported that Little has rejected a Conceptual Development Plan, written by international mining experts, to continue the underground investigation in order to examine vital evidence, including the main ventilation unit. The plan was written on behalf of the Pike River Families Committee, which represents 23 of the 29 families, who are demanding that the Labour Party-led government reverse its decision.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has received nearly 100 responses from readers throughout the world to its May 21 perspective Justice for the 29 miners killed at New Zealand's Pike River! calling for an international campaign by workers to support the Families Committee's demand to open the mine and continue the investigation. We have published powerful statements from readers in New Zealand and internationally, including former miners and their relatives, who have watched in disgust as government agencies and the judicial system have protected the company's leadership for more than a decade.

Expressing sentiments shared by many, Tracey stated: "Everyone deserves the right to know what happened in the mine and [to] hold people accountable. This was no accident

and could happen again."

Others denounced Little's claims that the government has competing priorities and his priority is the living. Rachel wrote: "This is really about protecting big business. Protecting the working class of New Zealand does not appear to be a priority. Neither is compassion or closure for all the victims of the Pike River disaster, either living or deceased."

There has also been major support for a Facebook post by Olivia Monk, whose brother Michael died at Pike River, demanding accountability and a full investigation. The post has received 170 shares, 115 comments and 865 reactions. Hundreds more people have commented in support of the families in Facebook groups including "Uncensored Pike" and "Supporting the Recovery of our Pike 29."

An online petition launched this week titled "Help stop critical evidence in Pike River Mine from being locked away forever!" has so far received over 550 signatures.

The sentiments of working people stand in stark contrast to the entire political establishment. Labour, its coalition partner the Greens, the right-wing NZ First Party (which is no longer in parliament) and the opposition National and ACT Parties all support, either tacitly or openly, the decision to shut down the re-entry. Standing with them are all the New Zealand unions, which remain silent about the campaign to uncover the truth about how and why 29 workers died.

The growing support for the Pike River families has been met with a conspiracy of silence by virtually the entire corporate and state-owned media, which is helping the government to bury the issue.

Neither the WSWS's campaign nor the petition mentioned above have been reported anywhere in the media. *Stuff* is the only publication, apart from the WSWS, that reported on the Facebook statement by Olivia Monk, and the support for the Pike families from Fiona Kidman, one of New Zealand's most acclaimed writers.

Following reports by *Newshub* and *Stuff*, there has been almost no reporting about the Conceptual Development

Plan, which demolishes the government's claims that it is too difficult or dangerous to enter the mine workings. The authors include Tony Forster, a highly-respected expert who worked as NZ's chief inspector of mines from 2013 to 2016, and who previously advised the government's Pike River Recovery Agency. Forster resigned from the agency in March, telling *Stuff* "no one is listening."

The *New Zealand Herald*, the country's largest circulation newspaper, published just two misleading sentences, buried at the end of an article on May 18: "Last week, some of the Pike River families released a possible plan on how to go past a rockfall to the fan. A process they say would take 12 weeks and cost under \$8 million."

The *Herald* chose not to inform its readers that the plan was the work of international mining experts, and that it is backed not by "some" families, but by the overwhelming majority.

The state-owned broadcasters TVNZ and Radio NZ have not reported on the expert plan, apart from a link to *Stuff*'s May 11 article in a news round-up on TVNZ's web site. The Radio NZ web site's most recent story on Pike River is from April 8, nearly two months ago, when it reported Little's insistence that there would be no more funding for the re-entry.

Newstalk ZB, the radio station with the largest audience, is completely silent. On March 26, its right-wing host Mike Hosking, who has long opposed the Pike River families' fight for justice and defended chief executive Peter Whittall, praised Andrew Little as "my political hero of the week" for refusing to provide more funding for the investigation.

The trade union bureaucracy is likewise backing the government. An appeal for support sent by the Pike River Families Committee to the Council of Trade Unions weeks ago has not been answered. The E tu union, which purports to represent miners, told the WSWS on May 5 that it "supports the government's position regarding not re-entering the main mine."

The pseudo-left groups that function as cheerleaders for the unions—Socialist Aotearoa, the International Socialist Organisation and Organise Aotearoa—remain completely silent on Pike River.

None of this is accidental. The unions long ago ceased to be workers' organisations: they are integrated into the operations of the state and big business. Their staff are part of a privileged upper middle class social layer, which defends capitalism against working class opposition.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which is now called E tu, was complicit in the Pike River disaster, which killed 11 of its members. Union officials knew about dangerous conditions in the mine, including the lack of a proper emergency exit, but made no

public criticism of the company and refused to organise industrial action to shut down production.

Following the first explosion, EPMU leader Andrew Little defended Pike River Coal, telling Radio NZ and the *Herald* that there was "nothing unusual" about the mine and the union had no concerns about the company's operations.

For his services to big business, Little was elevated to the role of Labour Party leader in 2014. He was replaced by Jacinda Ardern shortly before the 2017 election, and now he serves as the Minister responsible for Pike River Re-entry.

The political and media establishment, including the unions, are conspiring to bury the Pike River case—literally and figuratively—because of their class position as defenders of capitalism.

The government and its supporters undoubtedly fear that the determined stand taken by the Pike River families could inspire broader sections of the working class, who are beginning to enter into struggle against historic attacks on their living standards. Wellington bus drivers are facing attempts to strip them of a week's leave and penalty pay rates; tens of thousands of nurses are preparing to strike nationwide against an effective pay freeze. A major issue in both disputes is unsafe working conditions caused by lack of staff, long shifts and under-funding.

The refusal to prosecute anyone over Pike River sends a clear message to big businesses that they can continue to operate however they like, with no real consequences if workers are killed or maimed. The working class, in New Zealand and internationally, must support the Pike families. Stop the cover-up! Demand the full investigation of the mine and justice for the Pike 29!



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