

New Zealand government rejects experts' plan to fully investigate Pike River mine disaster

Tom Peters
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On May 27, New Zealand's Labour Party-led government formally rejected a Conceptual Development Plan submitted by international mining experts to investigate further the Pike River underground coal mine, to uncover the precise causes of the 2010 disaster that killed 29 workers.

The Independent Technical Advisory Group (ITAG) produced the plan on behalf of 23 of the 29 families of the men who died at Pike River. The group includes former chief inspector of mines Tony Forster, UK-based mining engineer David Creedy and mines rescue expert Brian Robinson. They have all studied the disaster for years and provided advice to government agencies on how the mine can be safely explored to recover evidence and potentially human remains.

In the ten-and-a-half years since the disaster, no company leaders have been brought to justice for turning Pike River into a death trap. Despite overwhelming evidence of gross safety breaches at the mine, including the lack of a second exit and extremely inadequate ventilation, the police insisted criminal charges could not be laid without examining physical evidence from the mine.

The ITAG plan focuses on recovering a further 130 metres of underground roadway, primarily in order to gain access to the main ventilation unit. Pike River placed its main fan underground, which is unheard of in coal mines because of the risks posed if it malfunctions or breaks down. The 2012 royal commission of inquiry identified the fan as a possible source of ignition for the first explosion.

By rejecting the plan, the Labour government, led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, is renegeing on its 2017 election promise to do everything possible to

investigate the mine, gather evidence for prosecutions and work with the victims' families on all decisions. A team of miners has gone 2.2 kilometres up the drift, or entrance tunnel, but the government refuses to provide funding for them to proceed beyond two roof-falls and into the mine workings.

Minister Responsible for Pike River Re-entry Andrew Little took less than three weeks to reject the ITAG's proposal, following advice from the Pike River Recovery Agency (PRRA). Little told *Stuff* that he sought advice "in good faith and with an open mind," but the plan clearly has not been seriously considered, with Little refusing to authorise a full risk assessment or costing.

Little's decision was made on May 27 and blacked out by most of the media, with one report published by *Stuff* four days later. The government, assisted by the entire political establishment, the media and the unions, is rushing to end the underground investigation and permanently seal the mine, with as little public attention as possible.

The aim is to protect the company managers, politicians, government regulators and union officials who all bear responsibility for the conditions that led to the Pike River disaster. That includes Little, who as leader of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU, now called E t?) in 2010, defended Pike River Coal's safety record after the first explosion.

The four pages of advice from the PRRA to Little conceded that the ITAG plan is "technically feasible"—in contrast to Little's previous statements to the media that the area around the roof-falls was "inherently unstable" and it would be too difficult to deal with the safety risks. Little said he was rejecting

the plan “because of the significant costs... and the unquantifiable technical issues attendant to the plan, and because recovery beyond the drift goes outside the cabinet-mandated authority of the agency.”

The PRRA rejected the ITAG estimate that going through the roof-falls (which appear to consist entirely of coal) and recovering the main fan area, would cost less than \$8 million. Previously, the PRRA had told the media it could cost \$60 to \$100 million. This has been revised to \$20–\$25 million, largely based on the time it would take to conduct risk assessments and get approvals from the regulatory agency WorkSafe.

In 2017, the Labour Party and its then coalition partners, the Greens and NZ First, indicated that once the re-entry team approached the roof-fall, the government would consider going further into the mine. Had this promise been kept, the relevant risk assessments and feasibility studies could have been started months ago.

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in Pike River, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the government had previously relied on advice from Tony Forster and other experts in the ITAG, when it was preparing to re-enter the drift. “Now that [Forster’s] actually got a plan together to finish this job, they’re showing him no respect. It’s upsetting to see how they’ve treated all the experts,” Monk said.

When the Labour Party was in opposition it promoted these same experts. In parliament on December 13, 2016, Little asked then Prime Minister Bill English: “When he says it should be up to the experts to determine whether re-entering the mine is safe, is he aware a report saying re-entry is safe has been written by Dr David Creedy, vice-chair of the UN Group of Experts on Coal Mine Methane, and Bob Stevenson, former UK principal mines inspector, and that the report has been peer reviewed and endorsed by the United Kingdom’s leading mines rescue expert, Brian Robinson, and by mining ventilation experts John Rowland and Dr Roy Moreby?”

Little also asked: “Why does [English] not do the right thing, listen to the families, and fulfil his government’s promise to do everything he can to get their men out?”

Dean Dunbar, whose son Joseph died at the age of 17 in the Pike River disaster, told the WSWS: “Andrew Little and the Labour government used the Pike River

disaster as a means to get into parliament... When Andrew Little said on national television [on May 12] that the Pike River families have received their justice, I have no idea what he’s talking about.”

Dunbar said Prime Minister Ardern “should be taking the front stage in this instead of hiding behind others.” Ardern has said nothing about the decision to reject the ITAG plan.

He warned that the government was moving rapidly to dismantle the investigation and permanently “seal the crime scene, seal the evidence, seal the bodies.” Police have said the investigation will continue with cameras lowered through bore holes into some areas of the mine, but Dunbar said this would be “second-best” evidence-gathering.

He added: “There’s no rhyme or reason why they can’t put a temporary seal in there... They want that permanent seal and they want it done and dusted. Well, they’re not going to achieve that without a fight, because we’re not going to let them do it to us.”

Monk believed evidence gathered by cameras lowered through bore holes would be inadequate in any court case. He said finding the precise cause of the explosion was also necessary to prevent other mines around the world from operating as Pike River did. “We’ve got to stop people putting fans underground” and having no second means of egress, he said.

“We’ve got to go in there and get this information out, end of story, there’s no excuse,” he stated. Commenting on the claims that going into the mine workings is too expensive, Monk pointed to media reports that the government and Auckland Council are prepared to spend \$100 million on hosting the next America’s Cup yacht race—on top of \$250 million spent on last year’s race. The amount spent on the investigation aimed at finding out the truth and securing justice for the deaths of 29 workers pales in comparison.



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