

Families fight to continue underground investigation of New Zealand's Pike River mine disaster

Tom Peters
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The Pike River Families Group (PRFG), representing 22 of the 29 men who died in the 2010 Pike River mine disaster, lodged papers in the New Zealand High Court in Wellington on June 4 seeking a judicial review of the Labour Party-Greens government's decision to abandon the underground investigation of the mine and permanently seal it.

The government last month rejected a Concept Plan prepared by international mining experts, on behalf of the families, which established that it is safe and technically feasible for investigators to proceed beyond two roof-falls into the mine workings. As the PRFG said in a press statement, this is crucial to examine "the main fan, which has been established as the likely source of the explosion and the most critical forensic site within the mine."

The mine is the site of one of the largest homicides in New Zealand history and should be treated as a crime scene. No one has ever been prosecuted over the 29 deaths, despite a 2012 royal commission of inquiry finding overwhelming evidence that Pike River Coal breached safety regulations and laws. The company's grossly inadequate ventilation turned the mine into a methane bomb that could have exploded on dozens of occasions in the weeks leading up to the disaster.

The Labour Party and its allies, the Greens and NZ First, promised in the 2017 election to re-enter the mine to look for bodies and gather physical evidence to bring people in the company's leadership to justice. These pledges are now being brushed aside as the government rushes to shut down the investigation after exploring only the drift, or entrance tunnel.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government is preparing to block the mine entrance with concrete to ensure that no one ever re-enters and the truth about the disaster is never fully known.

The families' statement said Minister for Pike River Re-entry Andrew Little rejected the expert plan "without engaging or consulting with [the families] or their technical advisors."

Little was the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) leader at the time of the disaster, and publicly defended the company, telling the media after the first explosion there was "nothing unusual" about Pike River. Before the explosion, the union never publicly criticised Pike River Coal and took no action to stop its extremely unsafe operations.

Responding to Little's claims that there is no "blank cheque" for the investigation, the families pointed out that "early on the Police advised that they were treating this investigation as a 29-man homicide. Never before has the New Zealand justice system been subjected to arbitrary fiscal restraints in this way."

Paddy Brand, the lawyer for the families, told the media outside the court: "The review seeks to establish whether the promises made by Mr. Little and the current government have in fact been met... [and] to challenge the decision to seal the mine without the police investigation being fully completed."

A delegation of families also visited Wellington: Bernie and Kath Monk, whose son Michael died at Pike River; Carol Rose, whose son Stu died, and her husband Steve; Cloe Nieper, who lost her husband Kane; and Cloe and Kane's 12-year-old son Kalani.

Bernie Monk told the media that the government "see it as their right to stop us from going in and getting the proper evidence," which was just 130 metres away. "The world is looking at this," he said, and urged New Zealanders to "support the Pike River families to do what has to be done."

Monk pointed out that the mining experts supporting the

families had previously advised the government on its re-entry of the drift. He said Little had not answered his questions about which experts are advising the government now.

Asked whether he was tired after more than a decade of fighting successive governments, Monk replied: "I'll never be tired, because we owe it to 29 men who went to work and never came home. Our death rates in the workplace are still as high as they were then."

Steve Rose told TVNZ the families felt "somewhat bullied and kicked around. The Labour Party was happy to use us prior to the [2017] election to get votes," but after recovering the drift tunnel the government had stopped short. "What's in there that's so horrible they can't bring themselves to discover?" he asked.

Kalani said: "I want answers, I want to know what happened. I don't want them to just seal it up and it's going to be forgotten."

Writer Fiona Kidman, a long-time supporter of the Pike River families, joined them outside the High Court. She told the WSWS: "A group of people sitting on the margins of the land can easily be forgotten. It's easy to sit here in Wellington and say: 'Well, that's over and done with.' They can't see the way the Pike River mine disaster has affected people over the years, and it's important to recall that."

As well as taking legal action, the Pike River Families Group has established a web site and Facebook page, and produced a powerful short video to alert the public about their fight, which until last Friday had been virtually blacked out by the media.

In the video, Cloe Nieper asks: "Do you want to know what happened at Pike River mine? I do. My husband was killed there. I don't understand how 29 men were killed at work and no one has been held accountable." Kath Monk says: "It is safe to enter the mine, and we have a plan that follows normal mining practices. The answers lie in the fan. If they seal the mine, they lock away forever the critical evidence, and with it, finding out what really happened, holding those responsible to account, and of making sure that this never happens again."

Another video featured on the PRFG web site, made by Michael's brother Alan Monk, highlights evidence suggesting that some men could have survived the initial underground explosion on 19 November 2010. He points out that the family of miner Allan Dixon allegedly received a phone message from him, from inside the mine, after the explosion, which was subsequently deleted by police.

The video denounces the decision to place a 100-year embargo on all the evidence examined by the 2012 royal commission. Alan Monk concludes: "This fight is not only for my brother, this fight is for all of New Zealand. We can't just let government and the police cover things up."

The families are promoting an online petition, titled "Help stop critical evidence in Pike River Mine from being locked away forever!" So far it has more than 2,100 signatures and many comments, demonstrating the growing support for the families in the working class.

On the petition, Kylee wrote: "A family member's body is in that mine. How can you simply think not returning them home is okay? Disgraceful to say the least, what if it was your family member?" David commented: "The Government cannot be allowed to continue with this cover up. They are wasting millions elsewhere (America's Cup [yacht race] for example) but cannot spare 8 million dollars to get to the truth."

The WSWS has received more than 100 statements of support from readers in New Zealand, Australia, Britain, the US, UK, Canada and Sri Lanka. Our perspective, Justice for the 29 miners killed at New Zealand's Pike River! has been translated into five languages, bringing the Pike families' struggle to the attention of workers in many countries.

We urge the working class, in New Zealand and internationally, to support this campaign. Share the Pike River families' material and WSWS articles on social media, write statements of support, and oppose the Ardern government's criminal plan to seal the mine and protect the company managers and directors, government agencies and union officials who all bear responsibility for the disaster.



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