

# Stop the New Zealand government's plan to seal Pike River mine!

**Tom Peters****27 June 2021**

The Labour Party-led government is racing to shut down the underground investigation of Pike River coal mine. It aims to prevent the recovery of evidence that could lead to prosecutions of those responsible for the disaster which killed 29 workers in November 2010.

The Pike River Recovery Agency (PRRA), which has only explored the mine's drift or entry tunnel, intends to pull workers and equipment out and start sealing the mine this week.

Nobody from Pike River Coal Ltd. has been prosecuted for the company's egregious violations of workplace safety legislation, including grossly inadequate ventilation, which allowed methane gas to reach explosive levels. A 2012 royal commission of inquiry established that the company placed production ahead of workers' safety and ignored numerous warnings of a catastrophe.

Pike River's executives, board members and senior managers have been protected by successive National Party and Labour Party governments, and by the police and judicial system. No officials have been held accountable from the Department of Labour, or the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which allowed workers to go underground despite knowing about Pike River's lack of an emergency exit and several other dangers.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government promised in 2017 to re-enter the mine to recover evidence, look for human remains, and carry out a proper criminal investigation. These promises are now being reneged on. Minister for Pike River Re-entry Andrew Little last month rejected a plan by mining experts, submitted on behalf of 23 of the 29 victims' families, for the recovery of crucial evidence in the mine workings.

On June 9 the *New Zealand Herald* reported that the plan to seal the mine was put "on hold" after the Pike River Families Group (PRFG), representing 22 of the families, applied for a judicial review of Little's decision.

Last week, however, families discovered that the government has decided to proceed with the sealing, before the case comes before a judge. The PRRA, whose website falsely states that it is "working in partnership with the Pike River families," did not consult the majority of the families on this decision.

The PRRA did not publicly announce its plan, and it was not reported in the *Herald* or other media outlets. The PRFG only found out after Alan Monk, whose brother Michael died in the mine, emailed PRRA chief executive Dave Gawn on June 23 to ask whether there were plans to seal the mine soon. Gawn replied the following day:

"We begin the initial process of withdrawing from PBIS [the area of the drift known as Pit Bottom in Stone] back to the 170m mark today. We will commence the erection of the 170m seal some time next week. We anticipate that work on the 30-metre seal will begin around the middle of August. We expect to hand the Mine site back to DOC [the Department of Conservation] at the end of November."

Carol Rose, whose son Stuart died in the mine, told the *World Socialist Web Site* she thought the 170-metre seal would be a temporary one, and the 30-metre seal would be a more permanent barrier, "but I don't know that for sure." Bernie Monk and Dean Dunbar, whose sons Michael and Joseph were killed, also said they did not know whether the 170-metre seal could be easily removed.

Rose said the PRRA was withholding information "from the families that don't want the sealing to go ahead." Only six families support sealing the mine and one is neutral. So far 48 people from the majority group of families have signed up to support the ongoing legal action against the sealing. Even if a judge eventually rules against the government, however, Rose did not know if it would unseal the mine. "This is why we have to stop it," she said.

Dunbar called on workers underground to stop work and refuse to install the seal: “I would like to appeal to the workers of the Pike River Recovery Agency—not the management, not the CEO Dave Gawn—I want to appeal to the workers, because what you guys are doing goes against everything the majority of the families want. You are about to entomb our children, entomb the evidence before this investigation is over. Do you want to be a part of that?”

He said the government was sending the message that “if you come to New Zealand you run a high risk of losing your life in the workplace, and no one will be held accountable.” He urged workers to “stop sitting on the fence and staying silent” and take a stand in support of justice and accountability.

Dunbar said the government was moving quickly and stealthily “because we’re gaining traction. People are starting to be told the truth. The evidence is starting to be compelling, we’re starting to release footage of bodies. They’re running out of time. We don’t have a campaign manager, we haven’t got unlimited resources, but we have the truth on our side.”

A petition started by the PRFG, titled “Help stop critical evidence in Pike River Mine from being locked away forever!” now has more than 6,150 signatures and hundreds of comments supporting their fight for truth and justice. The WSWS has published dozens of letters from readers in NZ and internationally supporting the families and expressing outrage at the Ardern government’s actions.

Some of the families have released an image of a body, taken by a camera lowered into the mine in early 2011, to counter the false claims—promoted for years by the media and the previous National Party government—that all human remains had been destroyed by fires. They have also shared an image of a self-rescue device photographed underground on November 23, 2010—which suggests there were survivors of the first explosion four days earlier. The images are among thousands that have been leaked to the families.

The only reason the government has given for refusing to investigate the mine workings is the cost involved. The families’ technical advisors, led by former chief inspector of mines Tony Forster, estimate it would take less than \$8 million to proceed past two roof-falls into the mine workings. This would allow investigators to examine the main fan, which is thought to have been the ignition source for the first explosion (see: “What is the New Zealand government trying to bury in Pike River mine ?

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Monk told the WSWS that the government “go on about the money, but it’s not the families’ fault that it’s come to this. The people that invested in the mine, I don’t see them coming to the table and giving us any help.” Pike River Coal’s shareholders and major creditors, including NZ Oil & Gas and the Bank of New Zealand, received tens of millions of dollars in insurance payouts.

The state-owned mining company Solid Energy purchased the mine in 2012 and sold off expensive machinery, which could have been used in the re-entry. The then-National Party government intended to permanently seal and abandon the mine, but was forced to back down after families’ protests in 2016-2017 gained widespread support in the working class. Now the Labour government is seeking to do what National was unable to.

The state cover-up is being assisted by the corporate media, which is reporting as little as possible, and the trade unions, which have maintained a conspiracy of silence on the families’ fight for truth. Little, who is overseeing the shutdown of the investigation, was the leader of the EPMU when the mine blew up. His immediate response was to claim that Pike River had a good safety record and there was “nothing unusual” about the mine. By supporting the sealing of the mine, the unions are continuing to protect corporate criminals whose actions caused 29 deaths.

The WSWS calls on working people, in New Zealand and internationally, to support the families’ demand that the government reverse its decision to seal the mine. The underground investigation must continue in order to uncover the full truth about what caused the explosions, and to hold those responsible to account. We urge readers to share this article widely, to break through the media’s blackout, and to send statements supporting the fight for truth and justice for the 29 men who died at Pike River.



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