

New Zealand government preparing to seal Pike River mine

Tom Peters
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The New Zealand Labour Party government's Pike River Recovery Agency (PRRA) is aiming to install the first of two seals in the underground coal mine this week, having already removed technical equipment. Work on the temporary seal 170 metres inside the drift, or entry tunnel, was to have started last week, but was delayed by bad weather.

Just over two years ago, on May 21, 2019, workers employed by the PRRA re-entered the mine to determine the causes of the November 2010 explosions which killed 29 workers. Labour and its allies, the Greens and NZ First Party, had promised in the 2017 election to conduct the underground investigation and to try to recover bodies from the mine.

By pulling the plug on the re-entry, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government is continuing a cover-up, begun by the previous National Party government, aimed at protecting those at the helm of Pike River Coal who turned the mine into a death trap. To this day, no one has been held accountable for the company's extremely unsafe design. It failed to construct a proper emergency exit, and grossly inadequate ventilation allowed methane gas to reach explosive levels on dozens of occasions leading up to the disaster.

Having explored the 2.26 kilometre drift, Labour has refused to go into the mine workings, with Minister for Pike River Re-entry Andrew Little saying that the investigation has become too expensive. The government is refusing to go beyond two piles of coal to examine Pike River's underground fan, which is thought to have sparked the first explosion. Independent mining experts working on behalf of the families say getting to the site would cost less than \$8 million.

In an email to the Pike River families on July 5, PRRA chief executive Dave Gawn said a "plastic mesh barrier" had been installed in the last week 190 metres inside the drift. Two refuge chambers have been removed, as well as

"gas monitoring equipment, real-time geotech monitoring gear and the quick fill change over station... The plan is now to construct the 170m barrier this week." After this is done, a permanent concrete seal will be installed 30 metres inside the drift. The PRRA has not said exactly when this will happen.

"The cryogenic unit for the nitrogen plant is due to be removed from site next week," Gawn continued, "followed by other specialist equipment in the coming weeks including 2 loaders, 2 specialised mining vehicles and attachments and refuge chambers."

All this is proceeding despite legal action being taken by representatives of the majority of the families challenging the government's decision to seal and abandon the crime scene and leave bodies and crucial evidence locked in the mine forever. The PRRA's actions expose the utter fraud of its claim to be "working in partnership with the Pike River families."

Gawn stated that Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in the mine, "is bringing the case in his personal capacity but says he has the support of members of twenty-four of the families of the twenty-nine men who died. Bernie does not identify whether there is consensus about his case within individual families."

In fact, when the application for a judicial review was lodged with the High Court in Wellington on June 4, the Pike River Families Group (PRFG) committee said in a press statement that the action had the support of 22 of the 29 families.

Carol Rose, whose son Stuart died in the mine, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the PRRA had "stripped out months of work." Summing up the families' decade-long fight to investigate the mine, she said: "We've been screwed by successive governments, but this government is by far the most arrogant."

Cloe Nieper, whose husband Kane was killed in the disaster, said the PRFG had received strong support for its

campaign, including over 6,000 people backing a petition to the government to stop sealing the mine. “I’ve read some of the comments and they’re pretty amazing. I think people are very supportive and a lot of people still want to know what we want to know, they want answers and they want us to have justice.”

She said people were “gobsmacked” by the information that has come to light, including the families’ release of a photo of a body underground. The photo is one of several taken in the months after the disaster by cameras lowered through boreholes in the mine, which debunk the lies of the previous National Party government that everything in the mine was destroyed by fire and there would be no remains to recover.

Nieper said the money required to excavate to the fan site was “pennies compared to what they’ve spent on other things, like the America’s Cup [yacht race], for instance,” and the government’s recently announced plan for a \$685 million cycle bridge over the Auckland harbour. “They could easily go through that roof-fall,” she said. “Why are they all of a sudden pulling the pin, when they’ve got so close?”

She criticised the PRRA for not waiting while the families’ legal action is underway. “The government wants to close it very quickly. Something’s not right, something’s definitely being covered up again.”

Malcolm Campbell, whose son Malcolm died in the disaster, wrote on Facebook on June 28: “We just want the government to postpone the sealing of the mine till all avenues are looked at. If they don’t listen, and seal the mine, we will never get closure.”

He pointed out that Minister Andrew Little was the head of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) when the mine exploded, and that “along with mine managers, and especially health and safety management, they said the mine was safe.” In fact, the union had sent men “into an unsafe, highly dangerous workplace.”

After the first explosion, Little told the media, falsely, that the union had not been aware of any problems with the mine. In fact, it knew about the lack of an emergency exit and workers’ concerns about unsafe conditions. But the EPMU chose to remain silent and made no attempt to organise an industrial campaign in defence of its members.

The EPMU’s successor, the E t? union, has closed ranks with the government to support the shutdown of the investigation, essentially continuing its role as a defender of company management.

The PRRA, backed by the corporate media, is seeking to foster illusions that the police investigation will still be able to examine evidence underground, following the sealing of the mine, with cameras lowered down boreholes. If boreholes are sufficient to gather forensic evidence for prosecutions, this raises the question: why didn’t police do this ten years ago? In fact, the 2012 royal commission of inquiry and the police themselves have previously stated that the exact cause of the disaster cannot be determined without a manned re-entry.

The *Greymouth Star* reported last Saturday that only one of six planned boreholes will look at the fan site. Electrical engineer Richard Healey, who has carried out extensive research on the Pike River disaster, working with some of the families, told the WSWS that the majority of the boreholes were unlikely to reveal significant new information about the causes of the explosions.

He added that anything at the fan site “will be distorted, covered in debris,” and that it would take close examination of the machinery “to find anything meaningful.” Healey compared it to the investigation of a plane crash: “Everyone can see the big chunks of metal lying on the ground, but you have to microscopically examine those bits of metal to tell what forces were involved, and not just take photos.”

Healey also pointed out that there was no plan to use a camera to investigate the cause of the rupture of a compressed air line seconds before the first explosion. The examination of this site beyond the roof-fall could provide valuable information about the disaster.

A statement published by the *World Socialist Web Site* late last month called “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.”



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