

Families picket road to prevent the sealing of New Zealand's Pike River mine

Tom Peters
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This morning, family members of some of the 29 workers killed in the Pike River mine disaster, as well as their supporters, held a protest blocking the road to the mine site on the West Coast of New Zealand's South Island.

The action is part of the fight by 22 of the 29 families to stop the Labour Party-Greens government from permanently sealing the mine and preventing the forensic examination of evidence about what caused the November 2010 explosions.

In March, Minister for Pike River Re-entry Andrew Little announced that the government would withdraw underground workers and equipment, after they had only explored the drift or entry tunnel. Little rejected advice from mining experts who said it was safe to excavate through two piles of coal into the mine workings to examine the underground fan, which is thought to have sparked a methane gas explosion.

By stopping the investigation, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government is continuing a decade-long cover-up begun by the previous National Party administration. It is shielding Pike River Coal's managers and directors, who should face prosecution for the extremely unsafe conditions in the mine. The mine had no emergency exit, as required by law, grossly inadequate ventilation and gas monitoring, and equipment that constantly malfunctioned or was unsafely installed.

This is the second protest by families on the road to the mine. In late 2016 and early 2017, several families gained widespread support when they blockaded the road, preventing the then-National government from sealing the mine with concrete.

With the 2017 election approaching, Labour and its allies, the Greens and NZ First, feigned support for the families. Now, however, Labour, supported by every

other party and the trade union bureaucracy, is seeking to shut down the investigation.

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in the mine, told *Stuff* the families aimed to stop the Pike River Recovery Agency's (PRRA) work, which began this week, to install two seals in the mine. He appealed to the mine workers to "down their tools [and] support us."

"We are prepared to stay here until they sit around the table and come to some agreement and don't seal the mine until they finish the investigation," Monk said.

About 30 people joined this morning's picket. The families are calling for more supporters to join when they resume next week, from around 6:15am.

Olivia Monk, Michael's sister, wrote on Facebook: "If we let the mine be sealed permanently, we destroy any evidence to find out the cause of the explosions at Pike, and anyone being held accountable. All the evidence from the [2012] Royal Commission has already been locked away for 100 years. It is important to all workers of New Zealand, and mine workers around the world. Everyone should have the right to come home safe from work." The post has received more than 100 likes and dozens of shares.

Despite the media reporting as little as possible on the families' fight for truth and justice, they have growing support among ordinary people, as seen in an online petition signed by 6,310 people, and hundreds of social media comments.

Carol Rose, whose son Stuart died in the mine, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "it's a shame that it's come to this. We have tried really hard, as a group, to engage the government in a conversation and they choose not to engage. We decided we needed to exercise our democratic right and protest."

She said the government was trying to "bulldoze"

and “bully” the families. The families have applied for a judicial review of the government’s decision, “so, in good faith, they should be stopping work until there’s a resolution reached” in the courts. Instead, in recent weeks the PRRA has worked more rapidly than ever before to withdraw equipment and prepare the mine to be sealed.

Dean Dunbar, whose son Joseph was just 17 when he was killed at Pike River, said the protest’s “objective was to send a message to the workers that the families don’t agree with what you’re doing, and you guys need to make a decision. If they drop tools, I think it will have an impact like no other.” He said it was “absolutely cruel” that the government had left the families with no other options.

The families have made clear to the PRRA and the police that they are not seeking to prevent the ongoing work of drilling boreholes into the mine, which is part of the police investigation. “But as for their retreating from the drift,” Dunbar said, “we will be stopping the workers doing that, sealing that mine and entombing our children.”

Ben Joynson, who was 10-years-old when his father Willie died in Pike River, told the WSWs he hoped the protest gained support “because this is just a low blow to the families if they seal it after everyone fighting to keep the investigation going.” Continuing the search for evidence was “the most honourable thing to do for the men who worked in those conditions” and their families, and was “the right thing to do morally,” he said.

Cloe Nieper, who lost her husband Kane, hoped that the protest would demonstrate that most families opposed the decision to seal the mine, and generate “more public interest in what’s actually going on, because the media haven’t been covering things.”

Minister Little has so far made no public statement on the families’ protest. Nor has the E t? union, which purports to represent mine workers. The disaster and its aftermath show how the unions have been thoroughly integrated into the structures of corporate management and the state.

The former Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), E t?’s predecessor, knew about the dangerous conditions in Pike River but did not act to shut it down and protect its members working in the mine. Eleven of the 29 dead men were union members.

At the time of the explosion, Little, who was then leader of the EPMU, defended Pike River Coal, claiming that there was nothing unusual about its practices.

The WSWs calls for working people, in New Zealand and internationally, to support the demand for a thorough underground investigation to determine precisely what caused the disaster, and for an end to all plans to seal the mine. We urge readers to share this article, send us statements of support and, where possible, join the families’ protest.



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