

An urgent warning: NZ Labour government moves to seal Pike River mine

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The New Zealand government's Pike River Recovery Agency (PRRA) resumed work this week on installing the first of two seals in the Pike River underground coal mine.

The Labour Party-led government is intent on ending an underground investigation into the November 2010 disaster in the mine, which killed 29 people. It has brushed aside the objections of the Pike River Families Group Committee, which represents the majority of the 29 families. These families are demanding that the investigation proceed into the mine workings to examine crucial evidence about what caused the underground explosions. They are backed by several international mining experts who have explained that this can be done safely.

For more than a decade, successive Labour and National Party-led governments have protected those responsible for the disaster, including company managers, directors and chief executives. No one has been prosecuted, despite mountains of evidence that Pike River Coal gambled with workers' lives and broke numerous health and safety regulations.

Police insisted that they needed physical evidence from inside the mine, to prove the precise cause of the explosion, in order to lay criminal charges. Investigators have safely recovered the 2.4km drift, or entry tunnel. But the government is refusing to investigate beyond two roof-falls to examine the underground fan, which is thought to have sparked the first blast.

Several family members and supporters picketed along the road to the mine earlier this month. They are also seeking a judicial review of the government's decision to shut down the investigation and permanently seal away the evidence in the mine.

Several days after protests began, on July 14, the

PRRA told the families they would cease work on installing what is described as a temporary seal 170 metres within the drift.

However, an email sent to the families on July 19 from PRRA chief executive Dave Gawn stated: "As of this morning the workforce were at the mine site to continue the mandated tasks including work on the 170m rated seal." He made clear that the work was only paused for a few days, in response to the protest, and that "the Agency's intent and the Government mandate has not changed and work will continue to seal the mine."

The PRRA did not publicly announce that this work had resumed. It is clearly nervous about the widespread support that the families have received, including more than 6,400 signatures in an online petition demanding that the government "keep its promises," made during the 2017 election, to investigate the mine.

After completing the 170-metre seal, the agency will begin work on a permanent, concrete seal 30 metres inside the tunnel. Gawn said it "will not be in any position to contemplate work on the permanent seal for another 4 to 6 weeks yet."

The government could well move to speed up the work, given its clear determination to seal the mine. There is no reason to believe that any notice will be given before work starts on the final seal.

In November 2016, under the previous National Party government, the state-owned company Solid Energy (which had bought the mine from Pike River Coal's receivers) attempted to seal the mine. Work on the seal was only stopped after families and supporters blockaded the road to the mine, gaining support from workers, farmers and small business owners. At the time, families said they had been misled to believe the seal would be a temporary barrier.

The National government was forced to back down. Now, Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party government, which includes the Greens, is seeking to finish what National was unable to do.

"I think it's pretty clear there's no will or desire to get to the evidence required to secure convictions," Dean Dunbar, whose son Joseph died in Pike River mine at the age of 17, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. The PRRA, he said, "has one motivation and only one, and that is to seal that mine as quickly as possible." He added that it was not possible to trust the PRRA's statements about the time frame, asking, "When has anything to do with Pike River been upfront and honest?"

Dunbar noted that the PRRA was seeking to pile on the costs that would be involved in continuing the underground investigation. It has stripped technical equipment from the mine, claiming it will cost \$4.2 million and take three months to reinstall.

The government has repeatedly made clear its intention to seal the mine, even before a court has ruled on the families' application for a judicial review of this decision. Dunbar said, "When a government needs to do something to protect its own, they will make sure that the gloves are off and they will achieve it by any means they can, and they will think about the consequences later. There will be none anyway."

He pointed out that when the Pike River royal commission released its findings in 2012 there were expressions of shock, throughout the world, at how the company had broken several laws and ignored multiple warnings that the mine could explode. "Yet nobody is in jail, no one's been charged, no one's been held accountable," he said.

Labour and National, and their parliamentary allies the Greens, NZ First, the Act Party and the Maori Party, represent the interests of big business. Successive governments paved the way for the Pike River disaster by deregulating the mining industry and allowing companies to operate as they pleased. The Department of Labour (now WorkSafe) knew about the unsafe conditions in the mine but took no action to shut it down.

The record shows that they are determined to protect those responsible for the 29 avoidable deaths at Pike River. The government is relying on crucial assistance from the trade union bureaucracy, which supports the

plan to seal the mine.

The fact that Andrew Little was placed in charge of the Pike River "re-entry" is no accident. He was the leader of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) at the time of the disaster, and his immediate response was to defend the company's safety record. The EPMU, now called E t?, made no public criticism of the company and did not stop its operations to protect workers.

The WSWs warns that there can be no confidence that any ministers or party leaders will be swayed by appeals. The only way to stop the mine from being sealed is through the intervention of the working class. We call for working people throughout the country to support the demands for an immediate end to the sealing of the mine, and for a full underground investigation.

Click here for full coverage of the Pike River disaster, and to send a message of support for the fight to uncover the truth about what happened.



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