

UK mines rescue expert: Sealing Pike River mine “morally and professionally indefensible”

23 July 2021

The *World Socialist Web Site* is reprinting, with permission, a letter sent by UK mines rescue expert Brian Robinson earlier this month to Pike River Recovery Agency (PRRA) chief executive Dave Gawn, opposing the decision to seal Pike River mine and abandon the underground investigation into the causes of the 2010 disaster that killed 29 people. The government is currently installing the first of two seals, and intends to put in a second, permanent concrete barrier as quickly as possible, regardless of legal challenges by family members of the victims.

The PRRA was established by the Labour Party-led coalition government following the 2017 election. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Minister Responsible for Pike River Re-entry Andrew Little, along with leaders of Labour’s coalition partners the Green Party and the NZ First Party, promised to re-enter the mine to look for human remains and establish what caused the disaster.

No one has been held accountable, despite voluminous evidence that Pike River Coal broke laws and regulations and placed its workers in life-threatening conditions, day after day. Police claimed that physical evidence had to be examined to determine the precise cause of the explosions in order to prosecute those responsible.

However, having explored the 2.3km drift (the entry tunnel into the mine), the government has refused to enter the mine workings, where there are human remains and crucial evidence, including related to the underground fan which may have sparked the first explosion.

Robinson has provided advice on the re-entry of Pike River mine for several years, including to the PRRA. He is a member of the Independent Technical Advisory

Group (ITAG), which has worked closely with the Pike River families. It is led by Tony Forster, a former chief inspector of mines in New Zealand, the UK and New South Wales, Australia.

The ITAG released a plan in May showing how the mine workings could be safely re-entered. This was rejected by Minister Little. In December 2016, when he was still in opposition, Little had praised Forster, and described Robinson as “the United Kingdom’s leading mines rescue expert.”

The WSWs encourages readers to send letters supporting the fight to stop the government sealing the mine, and for those responsible for the disaster to be brought to account.

To: Dave Gawn

CEO Pike River Recovery Agency

Dave, we met in Greymouth some 3 years ago. I’m one of the ITAG expert group advising the Pike River families that have put the Conceptual Main Fan Re-Entry plan together.

It is obviously a shock at this stage of the Drift re-entry project to suddenly see the plug pulled, the finances stopped, especially as (as far as the public are aware) almost nothing of significance has yet been achieved. I’m aware finance is not your sole responsibility, but falls with Minister Little, I’m hoping this note may find its way to him.

Some years ago Minister Little certainly gave me the impression that they (Labour), if elected, would stop at nothing to re-enter the mine to find the cause of the disaster and repatriate human remains to the families. Having been involved in several mines rescue and body recovery operations in the UK, I now find it incredulous that after more than 10 years, and after

such an encouraging start in 2018, this has not yet happened at Pike River and not a single body has been recovered and returned. So for me there are many, many more significant reasons NOT to seal the drift at this point than there are any reasons (apparently other than financial) to seal it.

As unpaid independent mining professionals committed to supporting the families, we have worked on this project for years, many having followed it right from day one of the explosion, and find the current situation both morally and professionally indefensible. The police will find it practically impossible to even view evidence properly, let alone recover any via borehole and that's only if the boreholes land in the right place. If after 10 years the police have not remotely conducted their investigation (i.e. without the benefit of re-entry), have not yet secured the evidence to lay criminal charges, I believe sealing the Drift without further exploration beyond the roof fall cannot be justified on any grounds.

The one thing that the Drift recovery has proven is the Agency have all the necessary skills and ability to re-enter the mine workings when the correct measures and precautions are taken. Your team of engineers have amply demonstrated they can dilute and control mine gases wherever they need to, ensuring safety of all personnel at all times.

The Conceptual Recovery Plan put together by the ITAG, presents a credible and technically feasible plan to go beyond the roof falls that is based on sound mining practice, and is a task that has been carried out many times without incident. As a mining operator, PRRA must, by law, already have ventilation PCPs [Principal Control Plans] and Ground Control PHMPs [Principal Hazard Management Plans], so having demonstrated what they can safely achieve, to claim that it would take 8 months to plan the job frankly lacks credibility.

The ITAG group is an eminent group of worldwide, very experienced Mining Engineers and mine safety practitioners. Most of the ITAG have at some time or other taken part in similar tasks within mines just for production reasons, let alone to gain evidence or recover remains, and in far shorter time frames and cost.

In summary, I firmly believe that the Agency should not seal the drift until the police have concluded their

investigation fully, recovered sufficient evidence with criminal charges being laid, and the possibility of human remains being found.

Otherwise, \$NZ50 million has been wasted. Any independent analysis would conclude that there are just too many negatives associated with sealing the mine permanently at this critical time.



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