

Former deputy PM says New Zealand government is covering up mine disaster

Tom Peters
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The Labour Party-led government's Pike River Recovery Agency (PRRA) is continuing work on sealing the Pike River coal mine where 29 people were killed in the November 2010 disaster. The aim is to prevent the examination of crucial evidence about what sparked a series of explosions.

For more than a decade the political establishment has protected those responsible for the disaster, including former managers, chief executives and directors of Pike River Coal. A 2012 royal commission of inquiry established that the company endangered its workers' lives in order to save money. The mine had grossly inadequate ventilation and methane gas monitoring, an extremely dangerous underground fan, and no emergency exit as required by law. No one has ever been held accountable for turning the mine into a death trap.

In an update sent to family members of the victims on Monday, PRRA chief executive Dave Gawn said "good progress" has been made on the first seal, 170 metres inside the drift, the entry tunnel into the mine. Work will continue this week. The agency plans to install a second, permanent concrete seal 30 metres inside the mine in the coming weeks.

The ruling elite is extremely nervous about the widespread support from working people, in New Zealand and internationally, for the majority of the 29 families, who are demanding an end to the sealing of the mine, and a full underground investigation.

The media is attempting to keep the population in the dark, reporting as little as possible. On Friday July 30, *Newshub* falsely reported that "work to seal the mine has ceased temporarily." In fact, work was only delayed last week due to bad weather and a protest on Thursday on the road to the mine by Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in the disaster.

On July 30, Winston Peters, leader of the right-wing nationalist New Zealand First Party, visited Greymouth,

near Pike River, to pose as a supporter of the families. Peters served as deputy prime minister and foreign minister in Jacinda Ardern's Labour-led 2017-2020 government, which also included the Green Party. NZ First lost all its seats in parliament in the October 2020 election, getting only 2.6 percent of the votes.

Peters held discussions with some of the family members, as well as technical experts including former chief inspector of mines Tony Forster. Peters told *Newshub* the government was reneging on the 2017 coalition deal between Labour and NZ First. He stated: "I know what a cover-up looks like, and this thing stinks to high heaven."

All three parties promised in 2017 to re-enter the mine to look for human remains and gather the evidence needed to prosecute those responsible for the disaster. Minister for Pike River Re-entry Andrew Little announced in late March 2021, however, that the government was ending the underground investigation, having only explored the drift. The government claimed it was too expensive to proceed further, past two piles of coal into the mine workings.

The Ardern government is certainly engaged in a cover-up, aimed at protecting the company bosses and those who enabled their extremely dangerous operations. This includes successive governments that deregulated safety in the mining industry; the Department of Labour that allowed Pike River to operate; and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which was led by Andrew Little when the mine exploded and had done nothing to protect its members underground.

The *World Socialist Web Site* warns, however, that no confidence can be placed in NZ First. Peters is using the Pike River issue in a cynical attempt to resurrect his political career. When NZ First was in government, it went along with the efforts to shut down the investigation.

The Labour-NZ First-Greens coalition government

indicated that it would stop the Pike River re-entry well before the October 2020 election. In an official Cabinet paper dated March 9, 2020, Little stated: “I do not intend to bring any proposal to Cabinet to move beyond the roof fall at the end of the drift and explore the main mine workings.” On June 10, 2020, Little again told a parliamentary committee: “I’m very clear, and Cabinet has been very clear, there are no additional resources” to go beyond the drift.

There is no record of Winston Peters or NZ First’s other Cabinet minister, Defence Minister Ron Mark, raising any objections to these statements.

On October 7, shortly before the election, Peters was asked by the *New Zealand Herald* if he still supported the Pike River re-entry. Peters replied that he did, and wanted justice for the families, but he did not mention his own government’s refusal to enter the mine workings. Peters was clearly hoping to return to government in coalition with Labour, in which case there is every reason to believe he would have continued to support sealing the mine.

In the first term of the Ardern government, NZ First and Labour worked together closely on policies to slash immigration, ramp up military spending and strengthen ties with the United States. The government also transferred tens of billions of dollars to the rich in the form of low taxes, bailouts and subsidies, while starving essential services including the healthcare and education systems, which provoked nationwide strikes by nurses, doctors, teachers and other healthcare workers.

The decision to shut down the Pike River investigation and shield the corporate criminals from accountability is of a piece with these broader pro-business policies and attacks on the working class.

NZ First has been part of successive governments which created the deregulated, pro-business environment that led to the Pike River disaster.

Prior to the founding of NZ First in 1993, Peters was a senior MP in the National Party government that launched the wholesale destruction of mine safety regulations. In 1992, legislation was passed to disestablish the specialist Coal Mines Inspectorate and abolish the requirement for worker-elected safety check inspectors.

NZ First entered a coalition government with National from 1996–1998. As treasurer and deputy prime minister, Peters told a business audience on February 11, 1997 that he supported a “deregulated, competitive and open market,” with reduced costs for businesses, including the “lowest possible taxes.”

In 1997, the government’s Crown Minerals unit granted New Zealand Oil & Gas, Pike River’s major shareholder, a licence to develop the mine. According to journalist Rebecca Macfie, Crown Minerals was “a permitting factory” with “no interest in whether Pike’s proposal was technically sound, financially viable or safe.”

NZ First again played a major role in Helen Clark’s Labour Party-led coalition government from 2005–2008, with Peters serving as Foreign Minister. During this time, Pike River Coal began developing its mine. In 2007, the company told the Department of Labour it planned to install its main ventilation unit underground—something unheard of in coal mines because of the safety risks involved. The agency did not object, and there was nothing in the legislation to prevent the company from doing so.

By this point the mining industry was completely deregulated. According to the 2012 royal commission report, “from 2001 to October 2011 the number of mining inspectors fluctuated between one and two,” covering the entire country.

The record shows that no capitalist party can be relied on to stop the sealing of Pike River mine. The government’s push to bury the truth will protect those responsible for the disaster and pave the way for more flagrant workplace safety violations and deaths.

Only the intervention of the working class can stop this cover-up. The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on workers in New Zealand and internationally to demand an immediate halt to the sealing of the mine, and to support the fight for a full underground investigation.



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