

New Zealand government lies about Pike River mine re-entry promises

Tom Peters
11 August 2021

The Pike River Recovery Agency (PRRA) in New Zealand is continuing work on sealing the underground Pike River coal mine, where 29 workers lost their lives in a series of explosions in November 2010.

Newshub incorrectly reported on August 7 that “a permanent seal won’t go on until the police investigation is over.” The first of two seals has already been completed 170 metres inside the mine and preparations are underway for a second seal to be installed at 30 metres.

The Labour Party-led government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern is aborting the manned underground investigation of the mine, having only explored the drift—the 2.3km entry tunnel to the mine. It refuses to explore the mine workings, thus blocking the forensic examination of crucial evidence including an underground fan that may have sparked the first explosion.

For more than a decade, successive Labour and National Party governments, along with the judicial system, have worked to prevent anyone from the Pike River Coal company being prosecuted, despite multiple breaches of workplace safety legislation. The mine was a death trap that could have had an explosive level of methane gas on dozens of occasions leading up to the disaster. Yet the company, the government’s Department of Labour and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), did not shut down the operation to protect the workers’ lives.

Speaking to *Newshub*’s “Nation” program on August 7, Minister for Pike River Re-entry Andrew Little sought to justify the shutdown of the investigation with a series of brazen lies.

He declared that prior to the 2017 election the Labour Party only promised “to recover the drift,” and this was the mandate given to the PRRA by Cabinet, which included Labour and leading members of its coalition partners NZ First and the Green Party. “That is very clear in the [Cabinet] papers,” Little said.

Little accused NZ First leader Winston Peters, who was deputy Prime Minister from 2017 to 2020, of trying to “rewrite the Cabinet minutes” by claiming that the

government had led families to believe they would consider going further into the mine. Peters, whose party is no longer in parliament, recently said the government was engaged in a “cover-up” of the mine disaster.

In fact, Little and the Labour Party repeatedly promised, in 2014, 2016 and 2017, to do everything possible to recover bodies and evidence from the mine, and to make all decisions relating to the re-entry “in partnership” with the families of the 29 victims.

The November 2017 Cabinet paper established that the PRRA left open the possibility of exploring the mine workings. It said: “At a point when the process of recovering the drift is well advanced, the responsible Minister will report to Cabinet on whether any further work, to assess the feasibility of reentering the mine workings, should be undertaken.”

In March 2020, however, when only a quarter of the drift had been explored, the Cabinet ruled out any additional funding. Little told *Newshub* that the government had decided the investigation into one of New Zealand’s worst industrial disasters was becoming too expensive, even though there was no feasibility study conducted about the cost of entering the mine workings.

Interviewer Simon Shepherd asked: “If money wasn’t an object, would you keep going?” Little replied: “The critical factor was safety.” He said “experts,” whom he didn’t identify, had said that getting through a roof-fall and into the mine workings “was all-but impossible” without spending “hundreds of millions of dollars.”

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in the mine, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the Minister’s statements were “absolute rubbish.” He said the government had “used” the Pike River families “to get into power, and now they’re just casting us aside. If he’s not using money, then he’s trying to use health and safety. We’ve proved him wrong. It’s not a health and safety issue, we’ve gone 2.3km down the drift, we haven’t had any trouble with health and safety up to now... He’s continuously lying to the public on this. It’s unforgivable.”

In 2017, he said, “we had a Labour Party who said we’re going to do everything possible to go into the mine, we’re going to get your men out, we’re going to get accountability for you... Now they’re saying no, we didn’t say that.”

Monk pointed out that internationally respected mining experts had produced a Concept Plan on behalf of the families showing that the mine workings could be safely re-entered for less than \$8 million. The experts included several who had previously advised the government, including former chief inspector of mines Tony Forster, UK-based mining engineer David Creedy and mines rescue expert Brian Robinson.

Little himself praised the work of these experts when they advocated for drift re-entry in 2016. In the *Newshub* interview, however, he dismissed their report, which, he falsely claimed, that no expert had “put their name to.” In fact, Creedy, Robinson and Forster have all spoken out publicly in support of their findings.

Little rejected the Concept Plan in May, not because of safety concerns, as he now claims, but due to the “significant costs” involved, which the PRRA estimated would be over \$20 million—not “hundreds of millions.” This was not backed by any feasibility study.

Little claimed that a police investigation would “continue for the next few months,” but “the process of sealing the mine is underway.” Police are drilling bore holes into the mine and will lower cameras to get “good evidence to consider whether or not they can take a prosecution,” he said.

As Monk pointed out, lawyers for the families have been saying, for more than a decade, that bore holes should be drilled into the mine to gather information, but this work is only now being done. Even if the cameras lowered into the mine do find significant evidence, the sealing of the mine will prevent it from being thoroughly examined.

The majority of the 29 families are seeking a judicial review of the government’s decision to close down the mine, against the wishes of the families and before the investigation is completed. They have gained significant public support, including an online petition with more than 6,500 signatures.

Even if a court eventually finds in favour of the families, the government will not be obliged to re-enter the mine workings. Carol Rose, whose son Stuart died in the mine, explained to the WSWS: “They will then have to evaluate the Concept Plan, and they will then have to engage with the families and consult with them over the decision to not go in. We are expecting that they would come to the same decision. All we can really hope to gain from the judicial review is that we will name and shame them.”

The government would not be able to proceed with sealing

the mine and locking away the evidence without the assistance of the trade union bureaucracy. Neale Jones, a former official for the EPMU, told *Newshub* he had “sympathy” for the families but insisted that Little had “fulfilled the promise he made.” Little was the EPMU leader at the time of the disaster and his immediate response was to defend Pike River Coal’s safety record.

The union, now called E t?, is continuing its role as an adjunct of the business elite by endorsing the government’s actions. “Where have they been?” asked Monk. “They don’t mind leaving 11 of their members underground?”

Monk said the message being sent to businesses was: “Come and invest in New Zealand: You can kill people in the workplace and get away with it and walk away, it’s not going to cost you a razoo.”

He praised 30,000 New Zealand nurses and healthcare workers for “standing up to” Andrew Little, who is also the Health Minister, by carrying out a nationwide strike and rejecting a sellout pay agreement presented by the union.

The government claims there is not enough money to adequately fund public hospitals—just as it says there is no money to properly investigate 29 workplace deaths at Pike River. The same government, like others around the world, has given tens of billions of dollars to businesses, to protect them from the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic.

The working class is coming into ever-more direct struggle against the government’s austerity measures, which are being enforced by the unions. A major issue for healthcare workers is the lack of workplace safety due to understaffing, which could lead to disaster if an outbreak of COVID-19 occurs. The WSWS calls on these workers, and the working class more generally, to support the Pike River families’ fight for the full truth about what caused the 2010 disaster, and for those responsible to be brought to account for their criminal practices.



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