The way forward against the Labour government's sealing of Pike River mine

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
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New Zealand's Labour Party-led government has ordered work to start on a final seal at the entrance to the Pike River coal mine. Its aim is to permanently entomb the 29 bodies of the workers who died in a series of underground explosions in November 2010, and to prevent the forensic examination of crucial evidence, including an underground fan, that could establish the precise cause of the disaster.

An initial seal has already been installed 170 metres inside the drift, the 2.3km entry tunnel. On August 15, in an email to Bernie Monk, whose son died in the mine, Pike River Recovery Agency (PRRA) chief executive Dave Gawn said "we currently expect to begin work spraying the 30m seal on 25th August." There is no guarantee that this will be delayed due to the COVID-19 lockdown that began on August 18.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government is continuing a decade-long cover-up. Successive governments, state regulators and the entire judicial system have ensured that no one has been prosecuted, despite a mass of evidence that the mine was a death trap, with grossly inadequate methane gas monitoring and ventilation, no emergency exit and other flagrant safety violations. Pike River Coal's senior managers and directors have escaped any accountability and many have left the country.

As well as burying the evidence in the mine, the government refuses to lift a 100-year embargo on thousands of pieces of submissions and other evidence given to the 2012 royal commission of inquiry, which would certainly strengthen the case for prosecutions.

The PRRA has only explored the drift and refused to enter the mine workings. Despite Labour's repeated promises since its 2017 election campaign to work "in partnership" with the victims' families, the government is ignoring the majority of the families, international mining experts, and thousands of supporters, who oppose the abandonment of the manned underground investigation.

On August 12 the PRRA released information from Rock Doctors Consulting explaining that the 30-metre seal is designed to be "permanent," while allowing for "relatively easy removal… to gain access to the mine at a later stage, if required."

No one should be lulled into complacency by these words. The seal actually consists of two separate concrete seals, 30 metres apart, with the space between to be filled with "cementitious material." Rock Doctors says removing all this would take up to 12 weeks of excavation, drilling and chainsaw work, plus another four weeks to remove the 170-metre seal. The aim is to make it as expensive and difficult as possible to re-enter the mine.

Contrary to the government's claims, its decisions have nothing to do with safety or the cost involved. According to mining experts , the mine workings can be safely entered for $8 million, on top of about $50 million spent so far by PRRA. Divided by 29 victims, this sum is less than half the average cost of a murder investigation and trial.

A political decision has been made to protect Pike River Coal's management, as well as the state regulatory agencies and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (now called E t?), which allowed the mine to operate despite knowing about the dangers to workers. Andrew Little, the union leader at the time of the explosion, is now the minister for Pike River re-entry, overseeing the shutdown of the investigation. His immediate response to the disaster in 2010 was to defend the company's safety record. E t? continues to side with the company against the Pike River families, by supporting the government's refusal to investigate the mine workings.

The families' application for a judicial review of the legality of the government's decision will not be heard in court until late next month; that is, after the government aims to have sealed the mine.

Sharp political lessons must be drawn from these experiences. Appeals to politicians, unions and the courts will not prevent the mine from being sealed. The decade-long fight for truth shows that the families and their supporters are in a political fight against the entire capitalist political establishment, the judicial system, and the union bureaucracy.

The National Party government promised in the lead-up to the 2011 election that it would re-enter the mine, only to renege the following year. National's plan to seal the mine forever was only stopped when families and supporters blockaded the road to the mine in late 2016, an action which gained widespread support from workers, small business owners and farmers throughout the country.

When the Labour Party came to power in 2017 in a coalition with the Greens and New Zealand First, the families had faith that it would properly investigate the disaster and recover vital evidence to bring charges against those responsible.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, however, warned that "the government's pledges cannot be trusted" any more than National's. We wrote that Labour's priority was to prevent "continuing protests over the disaster [from becoming] a focal

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point for broader working-class opposition to poverty wages, dangerous working conditions, and a regulatory and judicial system rigged in favour of big business and the rich."

We noted that the appointment of the former EPMU leader Little as the minister in charge of Pike River, and former NZ Army chief Dave Gawn as the PRRA chief executive, showed that the re-entry project "will be guided, above all, by the needs of big business and the political elite."

The entire political establishment was complicit in creating the conditions that led to the Pike River disaster. It was the foreseeable outcome of decades of privatisation and deregulation of the mining industry, by successive Labour and National governments, aimed at maximising corporate profits.

As New Zealand's first major private coal mine specifically developed to supply the world market, Pike River was competing against companies, backed by governments and trade unions, that were fighting to maintain their edge by pushing up productivity and cutting costs at the expense of workers. In 2010, practices similar to those at Pike River contributed to fatal mine disasters in Turkey, China, Russia, and the US state of West Virginia.

Only the intervention of the working class, independently of the unions and every party in parliament, can stop the sealing of Pike River mine. For workers, in New Zealand and around the world it is a matter of life and death for the causes of such disasters to be fully investigated and measures taken to prevent them happening again. The working class has a right to know.

The fight for truth and justice for the 29 workers who died underground in 2010 must be linked to the emerging movement among workers, in New Zealand and internationally, who are demanding safe workplaces and an end to all policies which prioritise corporate profits ahead of workers' lives.

The unions' role both before the disaster and in the ongoing cover-up vindicates the analysis of these organisations by the International Committee of the Fourth International, and its call for the establishment of rank-and-file workplace committees controlled by workers themselves. In every country, the unions act as the adjuncts of the corporations and the state. This can be seen most clearly in the role they are playing in the United States, UK and other countries enforcing homicidal back-to-work and back-to-school orders during the COVID-19 pandemic, paving the way for hundreds of thousands more hospitalisations and deaths.

In New Zealand, the Ardern government is relying on the union bureaucracy to enforce its pro-business response to the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic. It has given out tens of billions in business subsidies and bailouts, kept corporate tax rates low, and encouraged rampant speculation in the property market, leading to soaring housing costs.

Workers are seeking to fight back against brutal austerity measures. Tens of thousands of nurses and midwives have held nationwide strikes, demanding better pay and more staffing. Understaffing has made public hospitals increasingly unsafe for both workers and patients. The system is completely unprepared for a serious COVID-19 outbreak.

There is widespread support for the Pike River families and disgust at the lack of justice and accountability for the disaster. This has been expressed in an online petition signed by thousands of people, thousands of Facebook comments, and dozens of letters published by the WSWS.

Protest action taken by the Pike River families has previously gained significant support, and has been able to force work to stop on sealing the mine—both in late 2016 and, briefly, during July 2021. Lessons must be drawn, however, from the entire 10-year struggle to stop the sealing of the mine, retrieve the 29 bodies and thoroughly investigate the disaster.

To oppose the cover-up, the families and their supporters need to know who they are pitted against: Labour and National governments; the other parliamentary parties, including NZ First and the Greens; the trade unions, whose role is to police the working class on behalf of the state and corporations; and the entire state apparatus including the courts, the police and the agencies that paved the way for the disaster.

On the other side stands the New Zealand, Australian and international working class that must be turned to for support. Protest alone is not enough. What is required is a new political perspective—a socialist program—and the creation of entirely independent organisations of the working class which will oversee and organise the safe retrieval of the dead miners and the process of investigation. These rank-and-file committees will also organise the safety measures necessary for all sections of the working class.

The Ardern government is determined to seal Pike River mine as quickly as possible once the present lockdown is lifted. We call on workers in New Zealand and internationally to intervene to stop this from happening.

To break through the corporate media's blackout of the families struggle, we urge readers to share this statement widely and send us your own statements opposing the government's actions. Organise meetings in your workplace, university or school and pass resolutions to demand an immediate halt to all work on sealing Pike River mine; and a thorough, independent investigation of the mine workings to uncover the full truth about the disaster and hold those responsible to account.

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