

New Zealand government installing final seal at Pike River mine

Tom Peters
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In November 2010, a series of underground methane gas explosions trapped and killed 29 men inside the Pike River coal mine in New Zealand. Nearly 11 years later, no one from the Pike River Coal company has been held accountable for the extremely dangerous conditions that led to this preventable disaster.

Now the Labour Party-led government has shut down the underground investigation of the mine. It is sealing crucial evidence in the mine workings, including the underground fan, which is thought to have sparked the first explosion on November 19, 2010.

The Pike River Recovery Agency's (PRRA) website indicates that work resumed over the past week on permanently sealing the mine portal. The work had been interrupted by a lockdown imposed last month following an outbreak of COVID-19.

The PRRA was established following the 2017 election, during which Labour and its coalition partners, the Greens and the NZ First Party, promised to uncover the evidence needed to prosecute those responsible for one of New Zealand's worst industrial disasters. The agency, however, only explored the mine's drift, or access tunnel. The government refused to authorise exploration of the mine workings, despite experts saying this could be done safely, to recover evidence and search for human remains.

A 2012 royal commission found that the company's management placed production and profit ahead of their workers' safety and ignored dozens of warnings that the mine could explode due to insufficient methane gas monitoring and ventilation, and other illegal practices including the lack of an emergency exit. The Department of Labour (DoL, now called WorkSafe) laid charges against Pike River CEO Peter Whittall for breaches of health and safety laws, but these were dropped in 2013 in a back-room deal with Whittall's lawyers.

The DoL was complicit in the disaster: it allowed the mine to operate in violation of health and safety regulations. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which had dozens of members at Pike River, acted as an

adjunct of the company. It took no action to defend the workers and made no public criticism of conditions in the mine.

After the first explosion, then EPMU leader Andrew Little defended the company's safety record. Not accidentally, Little is now 'minister responsible for Pike River re-entry,' in charge of sealing the mine and the evidence within.

The government's actions have triggered significant opposition, including protests by the victims' families and supporters, as well as international mining experts, miners and other working people throughout the world. A petition opposing the sealing of the mine was signed by 6,600 people.

In June, 22 of the 29 victims' families supported legal action taken by Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in the disaster, opposing the decision to seal the mine before a police investigation of the disaster had been concluded.

Following the 2017 election, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Little had promised to work closely with the families on every decision relating to the investigation. The PRRA website still prominently displays the words: "Working in partnership with the Pike River families." This has now been thoroughly exposed as a fraud.

Minister Little released a statement on September 14 as part of an agreement with the families' lawyers to end the legal action. It says: "Towards the tail-end of 2019 the Minister foreshadowed to the Family Reference Group that going beyond the drift was unlikely. The Minister now accepts that the families who were not represented by the Family Reference Group [FRG] were not advised and were not included in this communication."

The FRG was established as part of the PRRA and consists of three family members who support the government, and two advisers (Rob Egan and Tony Sutorius) employed by the agency.

Little's statement, which has been almost completely blacked out by the corporate media, basically admits that the FRG did not genuinely represent the majority of the families, as the government claimed.

In March 2020, Little told Cabinet he would not seek further funding to explore the mine workings. His statement now says he “accepts that his decision not to explore the feasibility of re-entering the mine workings should have been communicated to all Pike River Family members before it was presented to Cabinet. The Minister accepts this caused hurt to several family members as a result of this.”

Initially, the government told the families that the PRRA would assess the feasibility of exploring the mine workings once the drift had been recovered. This work was never undertaken.

Little does not give any explanation for the failure to consult the families on key decisions, implying that it was a regrettable oversight. The reality is that the majority of families were deliberately kept in the dark by the Labour-led government. Like the previous National Party government, it is engaged in a cover-up aimed at protecting those responsible for the disaster.

Little claims that he supports “the ongoing criminal investigation the Police is carrying out into the tragedy.” This consists of drilling bore holes to lower cameras into the mine workings. So far, no findings have been released from this process, which is far from the kind of thorough forensic examination normally undertaken at a crime scene.

The police, in fact, previously insisted that they were unable to lay charges without a scene examination establishing the precise cause of the explosions. An initial investigation was abandoned for this reason in July 2013, even though police admitted there was “ample evidence [from the royal commission] that there were widespread departures from accepted standards of mine operations.”

Bernie Monk told the WSWS that Little’s statement was “the closest we’ll ever get” to an apology from the government. “We’ve been screwed and there’s been a cover-up, everyone knows that now,” he said. “No one’s been convicted. [The authorities] did an out-of-court settlement [with Whittall] behind closed doors. They’ve done everything they could possibly do to cover this up.”

He believed the government had tried to wear the families out by dragging out the investigation for years. Monk added that the families have been leaked significant evidence, including electronic images and videos taken by cameras lowered into bore holes in 2011, pointing to the likelihood that men survived the first explosion. A second explosion five days later ended any chance of survivors. Monk and others, including electrical engineer Richard Healey, say there is evidence that the second explosion was caused by someone switching on a conveyor belt into the mine—something the police deny.

Dean Dunbar, whose 17-year-old son Joseph died at Pike River, told the WSWS that the lack of accountability for

Pike River Coal and government agencies meant that such disasters would inevitably continue.

He accused the Labour Party of using the Pike River families “as pawns” to win the 2017 election, and said Labour had never intended to go beyond a pile of coal at the end of the drift tunnel to find the truth about the disaster. He pointed out that police had misplaced significant evidence from the mine, including a part of the underground fan that blew out in the first blast, which could have provided answers about the cause of the explosion.

In response to Little’s claim that the government continues to seek “accountability” for the disaster, Dunbar pointed out: “It was only a couple of months ago that Andrew Little went on TV and said that the Pike River families have already received their justice. Can someone please explain to me and my family what justice has been served for my boy?”

Dunbar again appealed to workers employed by the PRRA to stop work on installing the final seal. He asked whether these workers wanted to be remembered as “the team that entombed our children and helped ensure the cover-up continued.”

Dunbar dismissed statements by the PRRA, intended to deceive workers, that the seal is technically reversible. The seal consists of 30 metres of concrete, and is designed to be permanent. Re-entering the mine would cost millions of dollars and take months of work.

The disaster and the decade-long cover-up at Pike River is an example of class justice that contains vital lessons for all working people. It demonstrates the role of the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy as the defenders of big business and the capitalist system. Like the global COVID-19 pandemic, the disaster underscores the need for workers to adopt a socialist perspective and to build new organisations to defend their conditions and their lives: rank-and-file workplace safety committees, independent of the unions and the political establishment, and controlled by workers themselves.



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