

Public anger over cover-up of Pike River mine disaster

Tom Peters**29 September 2021**

There is widespread anger at the New Zealand government's decision to seal Pike River coal mine, ending the manned underground investigation into the 2010 disaster that claimed 29 lives. The Pike River Recovery Agency is currently working on a permanent concrete seal at the mine entrance.

The Labour Party-led government, including its then-coalition partner NZ First and the Greens, promised before and after the 2017 election to re-enter the mine to look for bodies and examine physical evidence. Its stated aim was to prosecute those in Pike River Coal's management responsible for the appalling lack of safety in the mine, which led to the series of underground explosions. More than a decade later, no one has been held accountable for this preventable tragedy.

The majority of the victims' families opposed the decision to seal the mine without exploring the mine workings to establish the precise cause of the explosions. Their wishes, supported by international mining experts and thousands of ordinary people, have been disregarded.

Every party in parliament supports this cover-up, as does the trade union bureaucracy. The corporate media is complicit; it has completely blacked out the broad opposition in the working class to the government's actions.

Malcolm Campbell, whose son, also named Malcolm, died at Pike River, responded in the Facebook group Uncensored Pike to the September 18 WSWS article reporting on the sealing of the mine:

"Now we have come to the end of our fight for justice and recovery of our loved ones killed doing their jobs for these incompetent so-called mine managers and corrupt government." He asked how the dangerous mine got approved and was allowed to operate.

"So sad for all the families it has come down to our

loved ones [remaining in this] hellhole, they deserved better," Campbell said. "We as a family thank all our family and friends here and around the world for their everlasting support and kind words over these difficult years, so sorry we couldn't get Malky home, thinking of you all xx."

In the Facebook group Underground Miners, which includes thousands of mineworkers from around the world, the WSWS's article received more than 200 reactions and 50 comments, almost all denouncing the NZ government.

Troy Reynolds wrote: "Very disappointing for the families and yes it feels a little like a cover up. Even if there is no fault to be had I am sure there are some poor mums and dads who will now go to their grave without closure."

Jamie Harris commented: "The government should give the families some closure over this. They want to know. They also want other companies to learn from this, so others don't have to go through it. No family should have to go through waiting for their loved ones to come home from work."

In the Uncensored Pike group, Karyn Stewart was one of hundreds of people who commented, opposing the sealing. She questioned the role of Andrew Little, minister responsible for Pike River re-entry, who was leader of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) when the mine exploded.

"Isn't this a conflict of interest?" Karyn asked. "How can Little front the recovery when he was a part of the union that allowed the health and safety violations?" She added: "The issues with Pike have been beset with corruption from beginning to end and one of the problems seems to be that the mainstream media are silent (have been silenced) over publishing anything."

The union took no industrial action that could have

prevented the disaster and made no public criticism of the life-threatening conditions in the mine. Little's immediate response following the first explosion was to defend the company's safety record.

Marc Thomlinson, who worked at Pike River mine, wrote a statement on Little's Facebook page on September 23, highlighting that Little was aware of Pike River's violations in 2009:

"I remember the first time I met you Andrew. I was a union delegate at an EPMU meeting held in Reefton, 2009. [...] You shook my hand at the conclusion of the meeting where we both shared a concern with the Pike River Mine in regards to the [inadequate] ventilation and secondary egress." In violation of the law, government regulators allowed Pike River to operate with no proper emergency exit.

Thomlinson said to Little: "You looked me in the eye and affirmed to me that you were aware of the situation." He urged the minister to "bring our men home to where they belong, because it is the right thing to do."

The *World Socialist Web Site* has also received a statement supporting the Pike River families from Professor Maan Alkaisi, whose wife, Dr Maysoon Abbas, was one of 115 people who died in the collapse of the CTV building in the February 2011 Christchurch earthquake.

In late 2017 Brendan Horsley, then deputy solicitor-general, advised police not to lay any charges against those responsible for the building's design, despite a mountain of evidence that it violated numerous laws and regulations and was essentially a death trap.

"After more than ten years the victims of the CTV building collapse are still waiting for accountability and justice," Alkaisi said. "We have been let down by the very people who are supposed to protect us and apply the rules of law. The similarities of the CTV case with Pike River tragedy [show] that our legal system is dysfunctional when it comes to ensuring justice for victims.

"This is demonstrated by the delay in starting the investigation, by ignoring significant evidence, relying on irrelevant matters, the decision not to prosecute anyone for the loss of lives, the silence of government and legal officials, the lack of accountability when it comes to influential, well-connected wealthy culprits, and not answering our legitimate questions."

He believed Crown Law, the state's solicitors, "avoid going through cases of national or even international significance" because they are part of an "old boys' club" and are "incompetent and scared" of facing lawyers hired by the wealthy.

On February 23, 2021, the day after the tenth anniversary of the Christchurch earthquake, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said in parliament that New Zealand would continue to "stand with" the victims.

However, Alkaisi said that the day before, "when I asked our PM to meet to explain to her in private our concerns regarding the decision not to prosecute, and victims' mistreatment, she refused to meet with me. How do you expect us to trust the politicians? How do you expect us to trust the decision Crown Law made not to prosecute was the right decision? Why were decisions made behind closed doors and without documentation? Why not conduct a just trial in front of a Judge and Jury?

"Our government has both a legal and moral responsibility to uphold our justice system to ensure it protects all citizens, and to ensure in situations where lives were lost, that those responsible will be held accountable in accordance with the rule of law. That is justice.

"The CTV collapse and Pike River tragedies will only end, when those responsible are held to account, when there is proper closure for victims and when justice is done."



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