

Recovery 29 whitewashes New Zealand government's cover-up of Pike River mine disaster

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The documentary *Recovery 29*, directed by Sofia Wenborn, was aired on Prime Television in New Zealand on October 26 and added to the Sky Go streaming website.

The state-funded film is a whitewash of the Labour Party-led government's decision to continue the cover-up of the Pike River mine disaster, in which 29 workers were killed in a series of underground explosions in November 2010.

The film provides a superficial account of the Pike River Recovery Agency's (PRRA) work over the past three years. The PRRA was established by Jacinda Ardern's government following the 2017 election. Labour and its coalition partners, the Greens and New Zealand First, had campaigned with a promise to re-enter the Pike River coal mine to thoroughly investigate the disaster.

To this day, no bodies have been recovered and no one has been held accountable. For more than a decade, government regulators and the judicial system have shielded the company's leadership from prosecution. Police insisted they could not lay charges without knowing precisely what sparked the first explosion, which meant re-entering the mine.

A 2012 royal commission of inquiry found that the Pike River Coal company had broken numerous health and safety laws and regulations, and placed production ahead of workers' safety. The mine had grossly inadequate ventilation and gas monitoring systems, and no proper emergency exit. The company made the reckless decision to install its main ventilation unit underground—the fan is thought to have sparked the explosion.

Wenborn's 2016 documentary *Pike River* addressed some of the conditions in the mine leading up to the explosion. The new film focuses on how the PRRA made the mine's drift tunnel safe to re-enter, by venting methane gas and using nitrogen gas to neutralise the atmosphere, before entering to retrieve debris and equipment for forensic examination.

Many of the victims' families had hoped that the Ardern

government would uncover the full truth about the disaster. *Recovery 29*'s narrator Bryan Crump declares that the PRRA was set up to “right the wrongs” and “recover the 29.”

The film does not point to the glaring conflict of interest in the fact that Minister Responsible for Pike River Re-entry Andrew Little, was the leader of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) at the time of the explosion. The EPMU had about 70 members at Pike River.

The union knew about the dangerous conditions in the mine, but did not make this public and did nothing to protect the workers. Instead, the union collaborated with the company to keep the mine running. When it exploded, Little defended the company's safety record, saying there was “nothing unusual” about the mine.

The Labour government pulled the plug on the underground investigation before it had the chance to uncover human remains and the most significant evidence. Minister Little announced in March that the government would not fund the PRRA to go beyond a roof-fall at the end of the 2.3km drift, or entry tunnel, into the workings where the underground fan and other crucial evidence is located.

Over the past month, the PRRA has been installing a permanent, 30-metre thick concrete seal at the portal of the mine—a decision opposed by 22 of the 29 victims' families.

Recovery 29 sets out to justify the government's decision. Crump states: “Pushing on is not an option... to go beyond the roof-fall would require a whole new plan.”

Some mine workers at the PRRA express frustration at being told the job will be abandoned. Shane McGeady, who had friends among the Pike River 29, says not going beyond the roof-fall “frustrates the shit out of you, knowing you're so close.” Another worker comments that “it's like doing a half-finished-job.”

Rowdy Durbridge, whose son Dan Herk died in the mine, and who is among the minority of family members supporting the government, says the re-entry “didn't

achieve what I really wanted, and that was to get [the bodies] out.” However, he echoes Minister Little’s position that too much has been spent on the re-entry already, and it would be too expensive to proceed into the mine workings.

Durbridge is a member of the Family Reference Group, which is part of the PRRA and does not represent the majority of the families.

PRRA chief operating officer Dinghy Pattinson acknowledges that the decision will be seen “as a lost opportunity.” But he defends the government, saying it never promised to go beyond the drift, and that “there is no more money” to go further.

The film does not question these statements. There is no mention of the detailed proposal by the Independent Technical Advisory Group (ITAG), led by former chief inspector of mines Tony Forster. The experts supported the majority of the Pike River families pushing for a thorough underground investigation. They estimated it would cost less than \$8 million to proceed through the roof fall—which was actually two large piles of coal—and recover the underground fan area. This could be done safely using standard mining techniques.

Recovery 29 devotes just over five minutes to the protests and legal action supported by 22 of the Pike River families, in an attempt to stop the government from sealing the mine. Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in the mine, points out that Minister Little broke his promise to the families that the government would make a proper assessment of whether to explore beyond the mine workings, once the drift had been recovered.

Monk says in the film: “I feel sorry for [the PRRA workers]. They’ve got to walk down the street and see us and think: ‘I sealed Michael Monk into the mine.’”

Monk told the WSWS that the film was “very light-hearted” and “weak.” Much of what he raised in his interview was edited out; including questions about whether the miners survived the first explosion on November 19, only to die following a second explosion five days later. He noted that police were not investigating the cause of the second explosion (see also: “What is the New Zealand government trying to bury in Pike River mine?”).

Monk pointed out that the film makes no mention of the widespread support for the families on the West Coast and more broadly. An online petition titled “Help stop critical evidence in Pike River Mine from being locked away forever!” received more than 6,600 signatures. The *World Socialist Web Site* has published dozens of letters of support from workers in New Zealand and internationally, including miners in the UK and Australia, who condemned the official cover-up and the drive to seal the mine.

The film concludes with the end-title: “The families settled

their legal dispute with the government outside of court,” without giving any further explanation. Carol Rose, whose son Stuart died in the mine, told the WSWS this made it sound like the families had been paid. In fact, the legal action was withdrawn in exchange for an admission from Minister Little that the Family Reference Group did not represent the majority of the families, and that the government had not properly consulted the families on its “decision not to explore the feasibility of re-entering the mine workings.”

Pattinson says in *Recovery 29* he hopes there will be prosecutions as a result of the evidence gathered from the drift tunnel, “because you can’t have 29 people dying in a workplace and no one being held accountable.” Police are currently drilling bore holes and lowering cameras into parts of the mine workings; it is unclear whether useful evidence can be gathered in this way, without a manned re-entry.

The film presents the police investigation uncritically. There is no mention of revelations in 2019 that crucial pieces of evidence have gone missing, including a door to a control panel on the underground fan, which was blown out of a ventilation shaft and found shortly after the mine exploded. If tested, it could have revealed whether the fan was a source of ignition.

All in all, *Recovery 29* is thinly disguised propaganda, “a big pat on the back for the government,” as Carol Rose told the WSWS. It seeks to give the false impression that everything possible has been done to find out the truth about the disaster, to shore up the severely damaged credibility of the Ardern government, and to justify what is, in fact, an ongoing cover-up.



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