

New Zealand police announce they have photographed bodies in Pike River mine

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On November 17, two days before the eleventh anniversary of the Pike River mine disaster in New Zealand, police announced that they had photographed “two sets of human remains, plus a possible third,” within the mine workings. The images were taken by cameras lowered down a bore hole into the mine; they have not been publicly released.

The Pike River coal mine exploded on November 19, 2010, trapping 29 men underground. Five days later, there was a second explosion, ending all talk of a rescue operation. None of the bodies have been recovered, and no one has been charged over the disaster, despite a 2012 royal commission of inquiry finding that Pike River Coal gambled with the lives of its workers, placing production and profit ahead of safety.

Pike River mine had no adequate ventilation or monitoring system for methane gas, and no functional emergency exit. In the 48 days before the first explosion, gas reached explosive levels on 21 occasions, and there were 27 other instances of lower, but still dangerous gas build-ups, but neither the company nor government regulators took any action to protect those being sent underground. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) refused to call industrial action or to criticise Pike River Coal publicly for endangering its members and breaking numerous laws.

For more than a decade, the state has shielded those responsible from accountability. In 2013 police dropped an initial investigation into Pike River Coal, declaring that it was not possible to prosecute without physical evidence from inside the mine. The government’s Department of Labour withdrew charges against chief executive Peter Whittall for health and safety breaches, in a deal later found to be unlawful.

The announcement that bodies have been found follows the Labour Party-led government’s decision to install a permanent concrete seal at the mine portal, preventing the

bodies from being forensically examined and recovered. A manned re-entry of the mine, which Labour and its allies had promised in the 2017 election, was aborted after workers had recovered the drift, or entry tunnel, without entering the mine workings.

Minister for Pike River Re-entry Andrew Little told reporters last week that there would be no more money allocated to the Pike River Recovery Agency (PRRA) and the mine will not be unsealed. Little was the leader of the EPMU at the time of the disaster and his immediate response to the first explosion was to defend the company’s safety record.

Police and the government sought to present the discovery of bodies as a milestone in an ongoing criminal investigation. Several of the disaster victims’ families and supporters, however, reacted with anger and frustration.

Cloe Nieper, whose husband Kane died at Pike River, told Radio NZ: “I just wish the government wasn’t in such a hurry to close or to seal the mine for god only knows what reason.”

On the “Stand With Pike” Facebook page, one person commented that Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern “hasn’t kept her promises including bringing these guys home.” Another said: “Jeez how bloody frustrating for the families. You’d want to just get in there. Why was the plug put in before evidence was all seen and analysed?” Dozens of similar comments appeared in the groups “Supporting the Recovery of our Pike 29” and “Uncensored Pike.”

During a media conference, one reporter asked Detective Superintendent Peter Read why it had taken 11 years to insert a camera into an area of the mine, near a machine called an Alpine Bolter Miner, where men were known to have been working. Read replied vaguely, saying that “the recovery of the drift has assisted in focusing on what we need to look at” and that advances in imaging technology had also improved significantly.

Asked what sort of evidence could be gathered from a photograph of a body, without physically examining it, Read said he was “not going to go into that level of detail.”

Significantly, a source told *Newshub* that deployed self-rescue devices could be seen in the images. These are emergency breathing apparatus with enough air for up to 30 minutes. Read refused to comment when asked to confirm this. The presence of self-rescue devices would be powerful evidence that at least some of the 29 men survived the first explosion, contrary to the findings of the 2012 royal commission.

The previous National Party government falsely told the families that the explosions turned the mine into a raging inferno, destroying all human remains and making a manned re-entry impossible. It tried to permanently seal the mine in 2016, but was prevented by protests staged by the families and supporters. Five years later, the Labour Party-led government is continuing the cover-up by refusing to re-enter the mine workings.

Minister Little told the media that it “simply was not safe, nor technically possible to get through the most unstable and dangerous part of the mine site,” the roof-fall at the end of the drift, blocking the mine workings.

This claim has been thoroughly disproven. Independent experts, led by former chief inspector of mines Tony Forster, released a proposal showing that the roof-fall could be passed safely using standard mining techniques. The PRRA acknowledged that this was technically possible, but the government was determined not to fund the agency to re-enter the workings, saying the investigation had become too expensive.

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in the mine, told the WSWs the government’s statements were “propaganda to make the public think that this is a huge job.” Monk was part of the majority of the 29 families who opposed sealing the mine before the police investigation was completed. Families protested on the road to the mine site in July, and sought to challenge the government’s decision in court. A petition against sealing the mine gained more than 6,600 signatures.

Monk pointed out that it is common for survivors trapped in mines to write letters, and if this happened at Pike River it could help establish the precise causes of the disaster. “That’s why we stood at the gates to say: do not seal this mine up,” he said.

Dean Dunbar, whose son Joseph died in Pike River at the age of 17, said the mine should have been completely recovered “a long time ago.” He said the discovery of self-

rescue devices next to bodies raised questions about whether the men could have been rescued.

Dunbar also pointed out that images of bodies had been recorded in Pike River in 2011, with equipment lowered down bore holes—showing that it was perfectly possible to do so using the technology available a decade ago. The images were only released to the families in 2017 after being leaked.

He believed the Labour Party had used the Pike River families as “pawns” in its 2017 election campaign, saying “they never had any intentions of going any further [into the mine], to where the evidence pointed and to where the guys are.”

Police have so far refused to place a camera in the area directly behind the roof-fall, where Dunbar and Monk believe survivors may have gathered after the first explosion to access fresh air from a ruptured pipe.

Dunbar also questioned whether police will drill a bore hole in the vicinity of the underground fan, which they had previously discussed. “If they don’t do that, then they’re not looking for physical evidence of an ignition source for the first explosion, because that’s where all the evidence points that that is,” he said.

Detective Superintendent Read told the media that the police work at the mine site would be over by the end of the year, and gave no further details on what is planned. The record of the police, however, demonstrates that their main concern is to protect the company managers, as well as the government departments and union bureaucrats whose negligence paved the way for the disaster.



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