

New Zealand: More bodies photographed after sealing of Pike River mine

Tom Peters

20 December 2021

On December 19, New Zealand Police announced that “two sets of probable human remains and one set of possible human remains” have been seen in footage taken by a camera lowered down a borehole into Pike River coal mine. The borehole was drilled into an area of the underground mine workings known as One West Mains.

This follows a similar announcement last month that two or three bodies were found near a piece of mining equipment called the Alpine Bolt Miner (ABM), where a borehole had been drilled.

In November 2010, more than 11 years ago, Pike River mine exploded, trapping 29 workers underground. Their remains are entombed in the mine, despite promises made by the previous National Party government and the current Labour Party government that everything possible would be done to re-enter the mine to recover the bodies, and to establish the precise causes of the disaster.

Jacinda Arden’s government has permanently sealed the mine, making it impossible for the bodies to be brought out or forensically examined. The decision to end the underground investigation, after investigators only explored the drift or entry tunnel, without re-entering the mine workings, was opposed by the majority of the families of the 29 men. It has prevented the examination of vital evidence, including an underground fan that may have sparked the first explosion.

Despite a 2012 royal commission finding that Pike River Coal broke numerous safety regulations, and took shortcuts in order to speed up production, endangering workers’ lives, no one has been held accountable for the decisions that led to 29 deaths. The mine had no emergency exit, inadequate methane gas monitoring, faulty equipment, and extremely poor ventilation. State regulators and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) knew about the risks facing workers, but kept the mine running.

While there is immense public interest in Pike River,

and widespread support for prosecutions, the latest police announcement was timed for release just a few days before Christmas. The news has also been largely overshadowed by the spread of the Delta variant of COVID-19 and the discovery of Omicron.

The bodies in the latest images have not yet been formally identified and have not been shown to the families. However, the images were taken in an area where up to five workers were thought to have been working before the first explosion: Jacobus Jonker, Malcolm Campbell, Ben Rockhouse, Josh Ufer and Joseph Dunbar.

Police superintendent Peter Read said that police were seeking to “do everything possible to provide the men’s loved ones with as much knowledge as possible about what happened.” The borehole drilling program was initially scheduled to end this year but has been extended, with another borehole to be drilled in January.

Read told a press conference that police have “a preliminary view on what’s happened,” but did not explain what this view was. Asked whether there would be enough evidence to lay charges over the disaster, he said any answer would be “speculating.”

The press conference raised serious questions about the conduct of the investigation. Read was again asked, as he was last month, why it had taken 11 years to gather the images. He gave no convincing answer, saying simply that technology was now more advanced, allowing for clearer images to be taken. In fact, there was already the technology to take high-quality images underground a decade ago.

Dean Dunbar, whose son Joseph died in Pike River at the age of 17, told the *World Socialist Web Site* he was grateful that police had personally called him to inform him that his son’s remains might have been found.

However, Dunbar criticised the decision to delay the borehole drilling program until after the mine was sealed.

He said that if superintendent Read's announcement had been made a few months ago, before the final seal, "there would have literally been thousands of people driving to stand at those gates [on the road to the mine] and demand those boys come home."

Several family members and supporters protested at the gate in July, and sought to challenge the decision to seal the mine in court. They had the support of thousands of ordinary people, and of international mining experts, who presented a case that the mine workings could be safely entered to examine evidence and retrieve the bodies.

Dunbar said he wants the full truth to be told about Pike River, including whether there were survivors after the first explosion, and about all the subsequent decisions made by police and government agencies.

The latest footage was gathered from a new borehole drilled adjacent to borehole 44, where images were taken in 2011 and concealed from the families and the public. They were leaked to the media in 2017, including images of bodies which could not be identified. According to police, the new images are much clearer.

Police have shown families some very poor images taken of the underground fan site, and have not said whether they intend to conduct a more thorough examination of the machine, which may have sparked the first explosion. Dunbar told the WSWS that police only showed him video footage of the fan, rather than still photographs, which can produce much better images in a dark underground environment.

Superintendent Read refused to comment on whether any self-rescue devices could be seen in the new images. The presence of this breathing apparatus would indicate that at least some workers survived the first explosion. In November, *Newshub* reported that a source said that deployed self-rescue devices could be seen in the images taken near the ABM.

One reporter asked Read to address families' concerns about the decision made in 2011 to pour tonnes of grout down a ventilation shaft into an area known as the mine's "fresh air base," where survivors may have gathered after the first explosion. The concrete would have obliterated any evidence in the area.

Read replied: "I'm not going to comment on that, sorry. I don't have a great deal of knowledge on that." He said police were not investigating the issue.

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in Pike River, told the WSWS the decision to pour concrete into what should have been treated as a crime scene had been made while Pike River Coal's Steve Ellis was still the statutory

manager in charge of the mine. He questioned why the Department of Labour (the government regulator now called WorkSafe) and the police had allowed this destruction of evidence to take place. "I've written letters to them and they don't even write back to me," he said.

Monk explained that the families had been repeatedly lied to over the past decade. The National Party government, which wanted to prevent any investigation of the mine, had falsely claimed "that everyone was ashes, that the men died straight away, there was nothing to retrieve, the mine was a burning inferno."

Electrical engineer Richard Healey, who has worked with Monk and Dunbar to independently investigate the disaster, wrote on Facebook in response to the latest announcement: "They covered up the [fresh air base] in hundreds of cubic metres of concrete, they sealed the evidence behind hundreds more. [Police] refuse to use the most basic of photographic techniques to image the mine properly. It's clear to me that this isn't just incompetence."

The Labour Party government had promised to conduct a thorough manned investigation underground, only to pull the plug on it before the mine workings could be entered. Andrew Little, the Minister responsible for Pike River re-entry, falsely said that the mine was too unsafe to proceed any further—claims that were refuted by former chief inspector of mines Tony Forster and other experts.

Little, who led the EPMU in 2010, defended Pike River Coal after the mine exploded, falsely saying it had a good safety record. The union had never publicly criticised the company or sought to shut down the mine until it could be made safe. Now, as the minister overseeing the permanent sealing of the mine, Little is continuing to cover up the causes of the disaster and protect those responsible.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact