

New Zealand police end borehole drilling at Pike River mine after finding more human remains

Tom Peters
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On March 9, New Zealand police announced that they had taken images of two more bodies inside the abandoned Pike River coal mine. Twenty-nine workers were killed in a series of underground explosions which started on November 19, 2010. Their bodies have not been recovered.

The latest images were captured in a roadway leading to an area known as the goaf. Police had already reported the discovery of four bodies, and two possible bodies, in November and December last year, meaning a total of 6 or 8 bodies have now been sighted.

After drilling 10 boreholes since June 2021, police announced they will not drill any more, abandoning the search for the remaining bodies.

Pike River was among the worst workplace disasters in New Zealand's history. It was also a crime. A royal commission of inquiry in 2012 established that Pike River Coal had placed production ahead of workers' safety. The company cut corners and broke numerous laws and regulations.

More than eleven years later, no one from Pike River's management has been held accountable; nor have the state regulators or the union bureaucrats who allowed the mine to operate, despite knowing about the dangers.

The Labour Party-led government promised before the 2017 election to re-enter the mine to look for bodies and to determine the precise cause of the disaster, in order to prosecute those responsible. Last year, however, the government aborted the re-entry after exploring just the drift, or entrance tunnel. It refused to allow investigators into the mine workings, despite experts saying this could be done safely.

The mine was permanently sealed last year—a decision that the majority of the victims' families opposed. The government locked away the 29 bodies and vital evidence, including the underground fan, which may have sparked the first explosion. It is extremely unusual, and dangerous, for coal mines to place their main ventilation fan underground.

Minister for Pike River Re-entry Andrew Little was the leader of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, which had about 70 members at Pike River, at the time of the disaster. His immediate response to the explosion in 2010 was to defend the company, falsely declaring that it had a good safety record. With the decision to seal the mine, he has continued the cover-up of what took place there.

Detective Superintendent Peter Read told the media that the latest discovery of remains was “significant,” but he was “very aware that it still leaves many unanswered questions for the men's loved ones.” None of the bodies have been publicly identified and the images have not been released.

Superintendent Read said the borehole drilling program had provided “valuable information to inform our investigation into the underground activity that led to the first explosion.” He did not explain why police have decided not to attempt to locate all 29 bodies. Nor did he say what sort of evidence could be obtained from the images, without a forensic examination of the bodies.

According to *Stuff*, “police have drilled a borehole into the area containing the main ventilation fan.” No details have been released about this. Again, it is unclear how much information can be gleaned without physically inspecting this area.

According to Radio NZ, Read said he expected the criminal investigation would be concluded in “months, rather than years.” Nigel Hampton QC, a lawyer for some of the families, said he was optimistic that there would be prosecutions. Police, however, have not said whether they are considering charges against anyone.

In October 2021, *Stuff* reported that police told the families their investigation had found “gas content in the mine during October and November 2010 was high. There is evidence that management knew this and some evidence that they actively chose to ignore it. Furthermore, they either omitted or chose not to install gas monitoring devices that would have warned them of the dangers with absolute

clarity.”

This statement echoed the findings of the royal commission in 2012. The following year, police suspended their initial investigation into the disaster without laying charges, saying that they could not do so without retrieving physical evidence from inside the mine.

Gordon Dixon, whose brother Allan was killed in the disaster, told *Stuff* that the family was “feeling pretty gutted that now they have sealed the mine they are now coming out with images of bodies. They should have kept the mine open until all the boreholes were done in case they could get in and get the bodies out. But money has dictated once again.”

Dean Dunbar, whose 17-year-old son Joseph was underground for the first time when the mine exploded, pointed out to *Newshub* that the latest discovery of bodies was in exactly the same location where a borehole was drilled in 2011 and an image of a body was taken at the time. He questioned why it had taken more than a decade for police to revisit the area and obtain more images.

Asked by the *World Socialist Web Site* about the likelihood of prosecutions, Dunbar noted that Pike River’s chief executive Peter Whittall and the rest of the management have been under “an umbrella of protection” for more than a decade. He said they probably have evidence about what occurred in the mine that implicates government agencies.

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in the mine, denounced the “cheque-book justice” which allowed Whittall to avoid prosecution in 2013 on health and safety charges. The state’s prosecutors dropped the charges in exchange for an unsolicited payment to the families.

Monk told the WSWS that the discovery of bodies vindicates those families and supporters who protested last year to try and stop the mine being sealed before the investigation was concluded.

Monk and Dunbar believe some of the 29 men could have survived the first explosion on November 19. A second explosion occurred five days later, prompting rescue attempts to be abandoned. Monk said survivors would have gathered behind a roof-fall at the end of the drift, where a ruptured pipe was sending compressed air into the mine. The police refuse to investigate this area.

“I think the families have the right to know,” Monk said. “If they don’t go in and get the guys out, then at least they should put a borehole down.”

Dunbar criticised police for refusing to say whether they have seen deployed self-rescue devices near any of the bodies, as *Newshub* reported there were last November, which would indicate that at least some of the miners survived the first explosion. “It’s a simple question. If police are continuously refusing... us access to that footage,

then [they should] answer the question,” he said.

Monk hoped that electrical gear recovered from an area of the drift known as Pit Bottom in Stone would assist in building a case against Pike River’s management. He was not sure whether this was being thoroughly examined by police.

Monk pointed to the series of lies and false promises made to the families over the past eleven years. In 2011, then-Prime Minister John Key promised that the mine would be re-entered, but the National Party government later reneged on this. Labour then made the same promise, only to seal the mine without retrieving bodies.

There is widespread anger over the lack of accountability for the disaster. A typical comment on the *One News* Facebook page said: “12 years and still no remains removed from the mine, and nobody’s been held accountable, can’t imagine the toll this has taken on those poor families.” A comment on *Newshub*’s report asked: “Why haven’t the mine owners been made to recover the bodies and do the investigation or at least paid for it?” Many similar comments appeared in Facebook groups such as “Uncensored Pike” and “Supporting the Recovery of our Pike 29.”

Workers should have no illusions: the experience of the last decade proves that the justice system is rigged in favour of the rich and powerful. New Zealand’s Pike River is far from unique. Last month, the Office of the Work Health and Safety Prosecutor in Queensland, Australia, refused to charge anyone over an underground explosion at Anglo American’s Grosvenor Mine, which left five mineworkers with horrific injuries. This was despite an inquiry last year finding that the company failed to control methane gas levels and exposed workers to “unacceptable” risks.



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