

Brother of New Zealand mine disaster victim denounces abandonment of underground investigation

Tom Peters
18 March 2022

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with Gordon Dixon, whose brother Allan died at the age of 59 in the November 2010 Pike River mine disaster in New Zealand. Twenty-nine workers were killed in a series of underground explosions.

More than 11 years later, no one has been prosecuted over the disaster, despite clear evidence that the mine was a death trap. It had grossly inadequate ventilation and methane gas monitoring systems, and no suitable emergency exit. A 2012 royal commission found that Pike River Coal's management prioritised production over workers' health and safety, and regulators who knew about the dangerous conditions underground should have shut down the mine.

Despite this, the company's chief executive Peter Whittall and other members of management have been protected by successive governments and state agencies.

"We're gutted, as a family, that there was this injustice," Gordon said. "Justice needs to be done, not just for us but for the rest of the country."

He described what has happened over the past decade as "New Zealand's biggest cover-up," pointing out that the evidence gathered by the royal commission is embargoed for 100 years. "Really, I've got no faith in the justice system, because it depends who you are, and if you've got money," he said.

Police say they are continuing a criminal investigation into the disaster, but on March 9 they ended a programme of lowering cameras down boreholes into the mine to look for evidence. Police abandoned the operation after having found only six probable sets of human remains, and two more "possible" bodies.

Gordon Dixon strongly denounced the Labour Party-Greens government's refusal to allow investigators to re-enter the mine workings to recover bodies and to forensically examine underground equipment, especially the main fan, which is thought to have sparked the initial explosion.

Labour and its allies promised before the 2017 election to re-enter the mine, after the previous National Party government had refused to do so. But after exploring the drift tunnel, the manned re-entry operation was aborted. The mine was permanently sealed late last year, despite opposition from the majority of the victims' families.

"Why was the mine sealed before all the boreholes were finished?" Gordon asked. "What if they'd found something that was really crucial? It just stays in there. This is what we can't understand, and people I talk to about it are blown away," he said. "Any other place in the world, they'd go in and retrieve their loved ones."

Experts, including former chief inspector of mines Tony Forster, had shown that the mine workings could be entered safely, for a cost of \$7 or \$8 million. Gordon said his uncle Harry Bell, who was chief inspector of mines in the 1990s, also believed it could be done. "But [Minister for Pike River Re-entry] Andrew Little said it would cost an extra \$50 million, and the coffers were empty. That's what sickened us," Gordon said.

Andrew Little was the leader of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) when the mine exploded. The union had done nothing to protect workers, despite knowing about the dangerous conditions in the mine. After the first explosion, Little publicly claimed that there were no safety problems at Pike River.

The union, which was renamed E t? in 2015, is continuing its role as the defender of big business. It supported the Labour government's decision to seal the mine and has refused to mobilise workers to demand accountability for the disaster.

Gordon explained that Bell "always said if he was inspector of mines [at the time], that mine would never have been opened." Bell had done some contract work for Pike River Coal while the mine was being developed, and when he heard in late 2008 about underground gas ignitions, he urged the Department of Labour to shut the mine down until it was made safe. The state regulator took no action.

Workers at Pike River were under immense pressure to work long hours extracting coal, to satisfy the mine's shareholders. Gordon said Allan would "come home and just go to sleep because he was that exhausted." The poorly-ventilated atmosphere made him and other miners feel sick.

Workers who spoke out about unsafe practices were ignored or told to shut up. When Allan injured his knee in the mine, he was told to return to work before it had healed, or be sacked. "The surgeon actually said: Don't go back to work because your knee isn't right. He was limping like hell," Gordon said. The company, however, refused to give Allan any more time off.

On the day of the explosion, Gordon said, his brother "wasn't supposed to be there. He was supposed to be on a course in Greymouth to get his deputy's ticket renewed." Management intervened and insisted that Allan had to go down the mine.

Gordon does not believe the claims made by police that everyone in Pike River died in the first explosion on November 19. He said Allan telephoned his partner Robyn from inside the mine after the explosion, leaving a message on her cellphone. As the *Australian* newspaper reported soon after the disaster, the message was something brief like "I love you."

Police initially dismissed the message, telling the media it was not from Allan, but Gordon said police eventually admitted, about a year ago, that there are phone records showing a call was made from inside the mine. "They weren't happy about it and they've kept very, very quiet about it. I've actually asked for copies of the evidence and they said no," he said.

This was part of a pattern of mistreatment of the Pike River families by state agencies and successive

governments. Gordon recalled an exchange he once had during a meeting with former Prime Minister John Key: "I said to John Key one day: 'What would you do if that was your son down there?' He said: 'I would try and get him out.' I said: 'Exactly, and what are you doing? Nothing.' He said: 'I don't have to listen to this,' and he just wandered away."

Gordon concluded that, as far as the government was concerned, "We're nothing, in the end. We're just the ones who have been fighting to get our loved ones out of the mine. They're not worrying about us; we're just a number to them."

Government lawyers announced in court in 2013 that they were dropping charges against chief executive Whittall, for breaches of health and safety laws, in exchange for an unsolicited payment to the families. Gordon said he and several other family members who immediately denounced the back-room deal: "I stood up and said, 'This is blood money!' I was told by the judge to sit down or I'd be taken out of court. We weren't allowed to speak, just to sit there and listen. That was really, really hard."

Police also dropped their initial investigation into the disaster in mid-2013, saying that they could not charge anyone without establishing the precise cause of the explosion, despite ample evidence against the company from the royal commission. Given this record, Gordon was not optimistic that prosecutions would result from the present police investigation.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact