Son of New Zealand mine disaster victim denounces lack of accountability

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with Ben Joynson, whose father William died in the Pike River coal mine disaster. Twenty-nine workers were trapped underground by an explosion on November 19, 2010 and were declared dead five days later after a second explosion removed any chance of a rescue attempt.

Ben, who was 10-years-old at the time of the disaster, spoke about the trauma that the victims' families have endured for more than 11 years—made worse by the fact that no one has been held accountable for the extremely unsafe conditions at Pike River.

A 2012 royal commission of inquiry into the disaster found that Pike River Coal had placed production ahead of workers' safety. It also criticised government regulators for allowing the mine to operate with no adequate emergency exit, and grossly insufficient methane gas ventilation. In 2013, however, the state dropped its prosecution of chief executive Peter Whittall for health and safety-related charges.

The Labour Party-led government promised before and after the 2017 election to re-enter the mine and look for human remains and evidence, in order to lay charges. Last year, however, the government permanently sealed the mine after recovering just the drift or entry tunnel and refusing to re-enter the mine workings. The 29 bodies remain locked in the mine, along with crucial evidence such as the underground fan, which is thought to have sparked the explosion.

Minister for Pike River Re-entry Andrew Little was the leader of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union in 2010, when it had dozens of members at Pike River. This is a conflict of interest, since the union did not take any action to prevent the disaster, and after the first explosion Little claimed that there was "nothing unusual" about the mine.

Ben recalled how, for days following the first explosion, the families were told by the company that it was believed the men "were still alive, and they knew how to get them out and they were going to get them out." These hopes were shattered when families were told there had been a second explosion, and that the men were all dead. "When mum came home and told us, she broke down," Ben said.

A few years later, Ben experienced serious health problems as a result of post-traumatic stress. "I suffered a rupture in the optic nerve of my left eye, which is an injury that only happens to people in their 50s and 60s who have had heart attacks or strokes." Ben was one of the youngest Australians to experience such an injury. He also suffered from epilepsy and severe anxiety.

He emphasised that the decision not to issue any charges "caused a lot of pain and a lot of heartache" for the families. Like other family members, Ben believed that the unsolicited payment from Pike River management, in exchange for the charges being dropped, was unjust and was "blood money."

William Joynson, who died at the age of 49, had moved his family from Queensland, Australia to work at Pike River. He had a 17-year history working in underground mines, making him one of Pike River's most experienced workers. Ben said, "he was considered a very valuable team member in any workplace that he was in, because he was a man of diligence, honesty, integrity, and he was just a damn good worker."

William had concerns about safety issues, including the gas levels at Pike River, and Ben said he confronted management shortly before the disaster. Ben did not know what was said, but his father "would have had to have been incredibly upset about something to actually go to management, because in 17 years of working he

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had never done that."

William had spoken about his fears that he would not live to the age of 50. Journalist Rebecca Macfie relates in *Tragedy at Pike River* that, days before the disaster, Kim had urged her husband to walk away because she feared for his safety. Ben told the WSWS that his father "said he wanted to be there for his co-workers," but was planning to resign. The family were going to return to Australia in 2011.

The morning of the explosion, Ben said, "Dad came into my room and woke me up and said: whatever happens, look after your mum, look after your brother, make sure that they are looked after, just in case something happened to him."

Ben had a mixed reaction to the government's decision to walk away without exploring the mine workings. On the one hand, he said it was good that the investigation was ending because he felt tired of dealing with the ongoing media coverage and public discussion of Pike River, year after year. "It is quite detrimental to people's mental health," he said.

He added that the government has said the mine workings are not safe to enter. The WSWS explained that mining experts, including former chief inspector of mines Tony Forster, outlined last year how the re-entry could be conducted safely, but their plan was rejected by Minister Little.

Ben said, "I can also see the negative impact of stopping [the underground investigation]: we will never know what actually happened." He added that it "makes no sense" that police dug boreholes into the mine workings to search for evidence only after the mine had been sealed. He pointed out that this could have been done years ago, "it didn't need to wait over a decade." He did not understand why the boreholes have now been blocked, "because you would think they would need to reuse them at some point."

The police borehole drilling operation was ended after only six sets of probable human remains were found, and two more "possible" bodies.

Asked whether he believed there had been a cover-up of the disaster, Ben said, "It does feel like a cover-up, it does feel like they're trying to hide something." He was not optimistic that the police investigation would result in prosecutions, saying that after more than a decade, "there should have been an answer by now, there should have been someone held accountable."

He said he thought the case would be dropped and Pike River would be "left to rot," but it would be remembered as an example of how not to run a mining company.

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