

Meeting to launch book on New Zealand's Pike River mine disaster exposes 11-year long cover-up

Our reporter
6 June 2022

The Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand held an online public meeting last Saturday to launch the new book, *Pike River: The Crime and Cover-up*, by leading SEG member Tom Peters, published by Mehring Books. The book contains 20 articles, interviews and speeches originally published on the *World Socialist Web Site*, from its archive of more than 70 articles on the disaster, as well as a selection of letters from about 100 that were posted on the WSWS in support of the victims' families.

The meeting attracted an attentive and engaged international audience, with participants from New Zealand, Australia, the UK and India.

The book addresses the causes of the 2010 Pike River coal mine disaster, which killed 29 workers. It also deals with the ongoing fight for truth and justice by the victims' families, in opposition to the cover-up by National and Labour Party governments, which have spent more than a decade shielding Pike River Coal's owners and managers from accountability for the extremely dangerous conditions in the mine. The grossly inadequate ventilation and methane gas monitoring, and lack of a second exit, turned the mine into a gas bomb waiting to explode.

Max Boddy, assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia, who chaired Saturday's event, emphasised the global context in which the book appears. "The Pike River mine disaster demonstrates the policy of capitalism and capitalist governments the world over: the sacrifice of workers' lives for profit," he said. Nowhere was this more evident than in the millions of needless deaths from the pandemic.

In New Zealand, as a result of Jacinda Ardern's

Labour government's decision, backed by the unions, to abandon any pretence of eliminating the virus, more than 10 people are dying each day with COVID. Boddy said this was the equivalent of "a Pike River level of preventable death," every three days.

Tom Peters outlined the timeline of the disaster and the cover-up, and spoke about the political lessons of these painful experiences. His presentation was a devastating indictment of the entire political establishment, the justice system, state regulators and the police, as well as the unions.

He focused on the role of the Ardern government and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), now called E t?. Labour campaigned in the 2017 election with a promise to re-enter Pike River mine and search for human remains and vital evidence, in order to lay charges over the disaster. Peters said the families' hopes were "cruelly betrayed," as the government last year permanently sealed the mine after only exploring the drift (entry tunnel), without entering the mine workings where the men died and crucial evidence is located.

Peters drew attention to the record of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which warned that the Ardern government would continue to protect the company. The appointment of Andrew Little as the minister for Pike River re-entry was a blatant conflict of interest, since he had defended Pike River Coal in 2010 when he was the leader of the EPMU.

The union knew about the dangers at Pike River, but did not protect the workers. Immediately after the disaster, Little defended the company's safety record. Peters said Pike River demonstrated the need for workers to break politically from the Labour Party,

adopt a socialist perspective, and to build rank-and-file committees independent of the unions, in order to protect their basic interests, including safety.

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in Pike River at the age of just 23, also addressed the book launch. Commenting on the failure to hold anyone accountable over the past decade, Monk said: “It’s all about money.”

Monk criticised the official investigation into the disaster, calling it “a huge cover-up.” Police were refusing to cooperate or share information with the families, and had lost or destroyed evidence, he said. Monk and Dean Dunbar, whose son Joseph died at the age of 17 in Pike River, have worked with Richard Healey, an electrical engineer who has independently investigated the circumstances of the disaster—including whether anyone could have survived the first explosion.

The meeting also heard from Malcolm Bray, a former mineworker and supporter of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain. Bray compared the cover-up of the Pike River disaster with the ongoing inquiry into the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in London, which killed 72 people. Despite the large amount of evidence that the apartment building was a death trap, no one responsible has been charged.

Bray also spoke powerfully about the 1984–85 miners’ strike, which he took part in. Thousands of miners fought against the Thatcher government and the police, and thousands were arrested and jailed, but the strike was isolated and betrayed by the unions and the Labour Party.

The last speaker, Terry Cook, from the Socialist Equality Party in Australia, spoke of the “string of similar mining disasters” in that country, which, as with Pike River, have been followed by inquiries whose purpose is to protect the companies responsible.

The SEP’s investigations into the 1994 Moura mine disaster, in which Cook played a major role, exposed “the pivotal role of the mining unions, not only in the cover-ups, but also in creating the highly unsafe conditions across the mining industry,” he said.

Cook discussed the 2020 Grosvenor mine disaster, which left five workers with horrific injuries. Cook said the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union was well aware of the dangerous conditions underground, but took no action to protect workers, acting as an arm of the company. Despite an

official inquiry hearing damning evidence against Anglo American, the state refused to prosecute anyone.

The speeches were followed by about an hour of questions and animated discussion.



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