

NZ government's "Working with Survivors" continues cover-up of Pike River mine disaster

Tom Peters
6 September 2022

On August 30, the New Zealand Labour Party government unveiled an 11-page document entitled "Working with Survivors," outlining "minimum expectations" for state agencies dealing with survivors of "large-scale catastrophic events," including "both natural disasters and those caused by people."

Public Service Commissioner Peter Hughes developed the guidelines in collaboration with a minority of the families of the 29 workers killed in the 2010 Pike River coal mine disaster. The authors also sought input from some survivors of the 2019 White Island volcanic eruption (in which 22 people died), the 2011 CTV building collapse in Christchurch (115 deaths), the 1995 Cave Creek scenic viewing platform collapse (14 deaths), the 1990 Aramoana mass shooting (14 killed) and the 2019 far-right terror attack in Christchurch (51 killed).

Those who took part in this consultation clearly feel strongly that something must change. While the circumstances of these events vary, in many cases the victims' families have been disempowered, kept in the dark about official investigations, given inadequate financial and mental and physical health support, and frequently misled and lied to by those in power.

"Working with Survivors", however, will not lead to any fundamental improvement, regardless of the hopes of those who made submissions. It is a product of the Labour-led government of Jacinda Ardern—a government dedicated to the defence of big business, in opposition to the interests of the working class, including the survivors of industrial and other disasters.

The document sets out three "key elements" to guide the response of state agencies to disasters: "Empower survivors," "Be upfront" and "Work together." These slogans are vaguely defined and open to interpretation.

Under the heading "Be upfront," for example, the call for "open and honest communication" with survivors is qualified by the statement: "Where it is not possible to provide certainty or to answer questions that have been asked, survivors are provided with an explanation and reasonable expectations are set." Of course, it is the government agencies which decide whether it is "possible" to release information and what

constitutes "reasonable expectations" of transparency.

The fact that Labour presents its handling of the Pike River victims' families, in particular, as the model for future cases, should be taken as a warning by all workers. It exposes the hollowness of the government's claims to be guided by the interests of survivors.

For nearly 12 years, the previous National Party government and current Labour Party government have buried crucial evidence in the underground mine and prevented the prosecution of the company leaders who placed profit ahead of workers' safety and turned the mine into a death trap.

This was an entirely preventable disaster. A 2012 royal commission determined that it was caused by the company's pursuit of profit ahead of workers' safety, and the regulators' refusal to shut down the mine, despite numerous warnings about breaches of health and safety rules. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) played a critical role in paving the way for the underground explosion: it refused to call strike action or even to speak publicly about the appalling conditions underground.

In the 2017 election, the Labour Party and its allies—the Greens, NZ First, the Maori Party—all promised to re-enter Pike River mine to recover human remains and to look for evidence that could be used in criminal prosecutions. Late last year, however, the re-entry was aborted after workers had only explored the drift, or entry tunnel. The mine workings, where there is crucial evidence and bodies, have not been re-entered.

Minister for Pike River Re-entry Andrew Little gave the main speech at the official launch of "Working with Survivors." Little was the EPMU leader at the time of the explosion in November 2010, and his initial response was to cover up the company's safety record, saying there was "nothing unusual" about the mine.

Little falsely declared in his speech: "A fundamental purpose of the Pike River re-entry was to give the survivors closure and promote accountability. That required every part of the project to be conducted in partnership with the Stand With Pike Families Reference Group (FRG) and the wider families."

In fact, nobody has been held to account and the families and

wider working class have not received any “closure,” thanks to the actions of Little and his government in sealing the mine. The Minister ran roughshod over the objections of 22 of the 29 families, backed by international mining experts, who insisted that the mine workings should have been re-entered to examine the underground fan, suspected of sparking the first explosion, and to find human remains.

The “Working with Survivors” document falsely states that the FRG, established as part of the Pike River Recovery Agency, is an example of “share[d] decision-making” between the families and the government. This echoes Labour’s fraudulent 2017 election promise that the families would be consulted on every decision relating to the re-entry.

In reality, the FRG represented only a small minority of the Pike River families. It was led by three family members—Anna Osborne, Sonya Rockhouse and Rowdy Durbridge—plus two state-appointed advisors. When the FRG announced in March last year that “families accept” the government’s decision not to re-enter the mine workings, the majority of the families immediately objected to this anti-democratic decision.

The most outspoken family members, who campaigned against the government’s decision and sought to challenge it in the High Court, were not consulted on the development of the “Working with Survivors” framework. They include Carol Rose, whose son Stu died in Pike River mine, Dean Dunbar, whose son Joseph was killed, and Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in the disaster.

“We were totally excluded,” Rose told the WSWS. “So how can they base this on the Pike River families when only a select few of them have been chosen to take part?”

Rose said she “laughed out loud” when she read an FRG email saying that the new standards “will empower survivors by allowing them to walk alongside government agencies... [and] the person leading or in control of the disaster will be straight up and honest.”

“Yeah, of course they will! Especially if they’ve got a shitload of stuff to hide,” Rose said. She summed up “Working with Survivors” as “lip service” and the government “patting each other on the back.”

In response to Little’s statements, Monk said: “The reason we took Andrew Little to court was he did not come to us to consult about sealing up the mine. Little put the FRG in place so he could use them as a tool to cover up what the government were trying to do.”

Dunbar told the WSWS: “It needs to be said that Andrew Little does not speak on behalf of the majority of the Pike River families, nor do Anna [Osborne] and Sonya [Rockhouse].” There was a “deal made behind the backs of the majority of the families” to “pull the pin” on the re-entry of Pike River, he explained, and warned that this “speaks volumes about what to expect” in future disasters. “Anybody that got in the way of the sealing of that mine were absolutely ostracised, in every way, shape and form,” Dunbar said. “Every bit of information was

cut off.”

“The Labour government used the Pike River families as pawns in the 2017 election,” he said, adding that this is continuing today. After sealing the mine, the government was now “trying to create an atmosphere of: ‘We did our absolute best, we care about people, no stone was left unturned, etc.’”

At the launch of “Working with Survivors,” Prime Minister Ardern declared that “while we can’t always prevent catastrophic events, we can reduce the risks, and we must, and we can better support those who navigate a recovery after them.”

The reality is that far from doing anything to “reduce the risks” to workers, the Ardern government has done the opposite. In the COVID-19 pandemic, it enormously increased the level of severe disease, hospitalisation and death by removing public health restrictions and allowing the virus to spread. About 2,000 people have died since the government abandoned its COVID elimination policy late last year, at the behest of big business, and adopted the “let it rip” agenda that has killed more than 20 million people worldwide.

As for industrial disasters, the “Working with Survivors” document takes for granted that there will be more events similar to Pike River, White Island and the CTV building collapse. The root cause of such events is the capitalist system and its intensifying drive for profit, at any cost, which is defended by all the parliamentary parties. The only issue for the state is how to suppress the anger that such events trigger, not only among survivors, but the working class more broadly.

A full account of the Pike River disaster and the campaign waged by the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand in collaboration with the families of the miners killed is published as a book “Pike River: The Crime and Cover-up” available from Mehring Books Australia at <https://mehring.com.au/product/pike-river-the-crime-and-cover-up>.



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