

New Zealand police to drill more boreholes at Pike River mine

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New Zealand police made the unexpected announcement on September 30 that they will drill another 10 boreholes into the abandoned underground Pike River coal mine, the scene of a series of explosions in November 2010 which killed 29 workers.

Nearly 12 years afterwards, no one from Pike River Coal has been held accountable for the extremely dangerous conditions that led to these avoidable deaths. A 2012 royal commission of inquiry found that the company's board and management had placed production ahead of workers' safety. It also faulted the government's Department of Labour (now WorkSafe) for failing to shut down the mine, despite knowing about numerous breaches of the law, including the lack of an emergency exit and grossly inadequate methane ventilation.

Successive governments, along with the police and judicial system, have so far prevented any prosecution of those responsible. Five years ago, Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party and its coalition partners, the Greens and NZ First, campaigned in the election with promises to re-enter the mine and retrieve human remains, as well as evidence to identify the precise cause of the disaster.

Late last year, however, the Ardern government permanently sealed the mine portal, after investigators had only explored the drift or entry tunnel. Minister for Pike River Re-entry Andrew Little refused to authorise the re-entry of the mine workings where the explosion happened, despite protests by the victims' families and international mining experts. All 29 bodies as well as vital evidence, including the underground ventilation unit which may have sparked the explosion, remain locked inside the mine.

While the mine was being sealed, police drilled eight boreholes and then lowered video cameras down them, collecting footage of some of the human remains.

Superintendent Peter Read declared in March that the borehole drilling was completed and police would do no further work at the mine site, but would continue a criminal investigation.

After nearly six months of silence, Read told the media last week the new boreholes were needed to gather more evidence. He said that "our experts are reasonably confident, but there's still some unanswered questions" relating to "the size of the explosion, the direction of the explosion, the fuel... how the fuel for the explosion has got from where it originated to where it exploded."

Police say the new boreholes will allow them to look at the main fan, as well as areas where a continuous miner and an alpine bolter miner were being operated. Another hole will be drilled near a collapsed roof, where some families believe any survivors of the first explosion could have gathered.

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in the explosion, told One News that the families had identified these critical areas last year, and police were "finally listening." But he added that "they're not going to get to the bottom of this until they go back into the mine."

Last year, with the support of 22 of the 29 families, Monk took legal action against the government to try and stop the mine being sealed before the police had completed their investigation. Several families and supporters also organised protests and a petition calling for the mine workings to be re-entered.

Richard Healey, an electrical engineer who has carried out independent research of the Pike River disaster, working with some of the families, told Newshub: "You can't gather DNA from a borehole, you can't take samples, you can't make accurate measurements, you can't look at the other side of

objects or shift something out of the way. In order to conclusively establish what happened at Pike River and stop a similar event happening again, the mine needs to be re-entered.”

According to Newshub, “Police refused to answer questions on whether the boreholes could have been drilled before the mine was sealed for good.”

The investigation is being dragged out for at least another eight months. The new borehole work will begin by the end of the year and is expected to be completed by April 2023. Further computer modelling and other police work will not finish until May.

The Pike River Family Reference Group, which represents the small minority of families who supported the Labour government’s decision to seal the mine without exploring the workings, issued a statement applauding the police and thanking them for “their commitment to justice and to truth.”

However, there is no guarantee whatsoever that charges will be laid. Superintendent Read told the media: “We can’t rule a prosecution out. In saying that, if we don’t get to a prosecution we want to have given it our best shot and answered every question.”

Dean Dunbar, whose son Joseph died in Pike River aged just 17, told the WSWS he was not convinced there would be “meaningful” charges laid following the investigation. He believed the purpose of the new boreholes was to create “the illusion that they’ve left no stone unturned” and “that they’ve done their absolute best, right to the bitter end.” He added: “I hope I’m wrong, but it seems to fit with what’s happened over the past 11 years.”

With an election coming up next year, Dunbar thought police and the Labour government were trying to placate the public, who support the Pike River families and are outraged at the lack of accountability for 29 avoidable deaths. “This has not gone away, it hasn’t become part of our history in that way yet. They know the amount of people following this, and it’s not a small number,” he said.

Police dropped their initial investigation into the disaster in 2013, despite the mountain of evidence against Pike River Coal uncovered by the royal commission. Police insisted that they could not lay any charges without re-entering the mine and conducting a forensic examination to establish precisely what caused the explosion. The Department of Labour laid charges

against Pike River chief executive Peter Whittall, but the case was dropped in an unlawful deal between the government and Whittall’s lawyers.

Dunbar also mentioned the irony that the government had previously claimed it was too expensive to conduct a manned re-entry of the mine workings, but now millions will be spent on 10 additional boreholes. The earlier borehole drilling program reportedly cost about \$3 million.

Minister Little falsely told Newshub on September 30 that “the safety challenges, the technical challenges, and the cost of [entering the mine workings] could not be justified.” In fact, a plan to safely re-enter the workings was drawn up by international mining experts, led by former chief inspector of mines Tony Forster, who estimated the operation would cost no more than \$7 million.

When the mine exploded, Little was the leader of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, which had about 70 members employed at Pike River. The union knew about the unsafe conditions in the mine, but covered them up and did not protest or take any industrial action. Following the first explosion, Little initially tried to defend the company, saying it had good health and safety practices and there was “nothing unusual” about the mine.

The Ardern government’s appointment of Little as minister for Pike River re-entry was a clear signal to the corporate elite that the government had no intention of holding anyone accountable for the profit-driven decisions that led to the disaster.

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*. It is available from Mehring Books Australia.



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