

New Zealand police extend investigation into Pike River mine disaster until the end of 2023

Tom Peters
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On May 12, New Zealand police announced that they have taken more images of possible human remains inside the Pike River coal mine as part of their investigation into the causes of the November 2010 disaster in which 29 workers were killed in a series of underground explosions.

Detective Superintendent Darryl Sweeney said pathologists could not say “definitively” that the images show bodies, but there was “clothing and equipment” that indicated miners were there. “Pathologists are rightly conservative because they can’t get into the mine to access that particular area,” he said.

Police have taken several images with cameras lowered down boreholes drilled into the mine since late 2021, when the Labour Party-led government decided not to allow a manned re-entry of the mine workings. The mine was permanently sealed, preventing investigators from accessing the areas where the 29 bodies are located along with the main underground fan, which may have sparked the first explosion.

The government rejected a petition by the majority of the victims’ families against the sealing of the mine. The families were backed by thousands of ordinary people and by international mining experts, who published a plan demonstrating how the mine workings could be safely entered to conduct a forensic investigation.

Successive governments have ensured that no one has been held accountable for the disaster, despite a 2012 royal commission of inquiry finding that Pike River Coal’s board and senior management had prioritised production and profit over workers’ health and safety. The mine was a gas bomb waiting to go off. It had no adequate emergency exit, grossly ineffective ventilation and methane gas monitoring, and other faulty

equipment, but the operation had been allowed to continue by the state’s regulators and by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU, now called E t?).

The Labour Party formed a coalition government in late 2017 promising to re-enter the mine and gather forensic evidence to prosecute those responsible for turning it into a death trap. Nearly six years later, however, no charges have been laid.

The police investigation is now being dragged out beyond this year’s October 14 election. Sweeney declared that police work at the mine site would be finished by the end of May, but “we’ll continue with the investigation for the rest of this year.” Asked whether he expected to make any arrests, Sweeney said he could not say.

Sweeney did not explain why police had only begun the borehole drilling operation after the mine had been sealed, preventing any possibility of a forensic examination of vital evidence. Nor did he explain why the drilling has taken almost two years or why a further six months are needed to review the evidence and finish the investigation.

In March 2022, Detective Superintendent Peter Read announced that borehole drilling had been completed and police would make a decision about prosecutions in a matter of “months, rather than years.” In September, after nearly six months of silence, Read unexpectedly declared that more boreholes were needed to get more information from the mine. He has since stepped aside from the Pike River investigation, after leading it for more than a decade.

There is a political explanation for the endless delays. The last thing Labour and its allies, including the union bureaucracy, want is for Pike River to again become an election issue.

If the police conclude their investigation and declare, as they did in 2013, that there is not enough physical evidence to lay criminal charges against anyone, this would immediately raise uncomfortable questions for the government.

These include: why did Pike River Re-entry Minister Andrew Little reject expert advice that the mine workings could be safely entered to gather evidence? Why did the Labour government fail to keep its promise to do everything possible to retrieve the bodies? Why did the government steamroll the objections of the majority of the families to sealing the mine? What is the government trying to bury in Pike River mine and who is it protecting?

Questions would also be raised about why Minister Little was put in charge of the re-entry in the first place, given his clear conflict of interest. Little was the leader of the EPMU in 2010; the union knew about unsafe conditions in the mine but remained silent, allowing Pike River to continue operating. Following the first explosion, Little defended the company, saying there was nothing wrong with its operations and it had a good health and safety committee.

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in Pike River, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he has written to Little and Labour MP Damien O'Connor saying: "We seem to be getting lip service now and then only to make us feel happy... You used us in one election [in 2017] to get in, and now you've dropped us."

He accused both major parties, Labour and National, of hampering the investigation and said the further delay was politically motivated. "Don't forget, they've had 13 years," he said, adding that police had "lost evidence" during that time.

Monk believed the borehole operation was an attempt to prove the police theory that the men all died in the first explosion on November 19, 2010. The 2012 royal commission saw images taken underground in 2011, including a box of self-rescue devices that had been opened, suggesting there may have been survivors, who died after a second explosion five days later.

The cause of the second explosion, however, was not investigated by the commission. Electrical engineer Richard Healey has suggested it may have been sparked by a conveyor belt into the mine being switched on by police as part of a botched rescue attempt. Police admit that they discussed potentially making such an attempt,

but say they decided against it and did not turn on the conveyor.

Meanwhile, Monk and Dean Dunbar, whose son Joseph died in the disaster, are still waiting to see legal correspondence and court records relating to Worksafe's decision in 2013 to drop charges against Pike River chief executive Peter Whittall for breaches of health and safety laws. In 2017 the Supreme Court ruled that the back-room deal between the state and the mine boss was unlawful, but the charges were not reinstated and no one has been held accountable for this miscarriage of justice. The Wellington High Court ruled in March this year that the families would be allowed to access privileged material relating to the decision.



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