

Police locate more bodies in New Zealand's Pike River mine

Tom Peters
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Last Friday, New Zealand Police Superintendent Darryl Sweeney announced that investigators had located the remains of “two, maybe three” of the workers who died in the Pike River coal mine disaster nearly 13 years ago.

Twenty-nine mine workers died in a series of underground explosions in November 2010. Their bodies have never been recovered.

According to reports, as many as 12 bodies have now been located by police since they began drilling boreholes and lowering cameras into the mine workings in late 2021. The bodies have not been formally identified, however, and Superintendent Sweeney said police had no way of identifying the latest human remains.

More than a decade on, no one has been held accountable for the disaster, despite the damning findings of a 2012 royal commission of inquiry which established that Pike River Coal's leadership placed profit ahead of safety.

The mine had no functional emergency exit, as required by law. Its methane gas monitoring and ventilation systems were grossly inadequate, and gas levels in the mine frequently reached explosive levels. Pike River's main fan was installed underground, something that is rarely done and is banned in some countries because of the risk that it could break down or spark an explosion.

Successive National and Labour Party governments, along with the state regulators, police and judicial system, have protected those responsible for turning the mine into a death trap.

The recovery of the 29 men and a proper forensic examination of the underground fan and other equipment were blocked by the Labour Party-led government in 2021. Despite Labour's 2017 election

promise to conduct a manned re-entry of the mine, only the drift, or entry tunnel, was explored.

Minister for Pike River Re-entry Andrew Little rejected mining experts' advice that the mine workings could be safely re-entered and ignored a petition by the majority of the victims' families calling for this. At the end of 2021 the government placed a permanent concrete seal on the mine entrance.

The conduct of the investigation raises disturbing questions. Police have never explained why they only undertook the borehole drilling operation 11 years after the mine exploded and after the mine had been sealed. Every few months since November 2021 police have announced the discovery of more human remains, only to tell the families that these cannot be recovered because the mine cannot be entered.

Police have now removed all equipment from the mine site and the 18 boreholes have all been sealed. Sweeney reiterated that police would continue “working through witness statements, facts and evidence and working with various experts related to the mine disaster,” until the end of the year. He did not say why police are not continuing efforts to locate the remaining bodies.

None of the reporters at the police media conference on Friday asked why the investigation has dragged on for so long. Conveniently for the government, the time frame means that police will make no announcement prior to the October 14 election about whether or not they will prosecute anyone.

The last thing that Labour, the opposition National Party and their allies want is for questions to be raised during the election campaign about why there is still no justice for the Pike River 29. Since sealing the mine, the government has barely said anything about the matter. The Pike River Recovery Agency was

disestablished in July 2022 along with Andrew Little’s ministerial portfolio.

Nor was Sweeney asked to explain how the underground footage, without a proper forensic examination of equipment such as the fan, would help to build a case for prosecutions. Police dropped their initial investigation into the disaster in July 2013, declaring that they could not lay charges without obtaining physical evidence to show precisely what sparked the first explosion in the mine.

Later that year, the Department of Labour (now called WorkSafe) decided not to proceed with charges against Pike River chief executive Peter Whittall for breaches of health and safety legislation. This followed an unlawful agreement reached by the state regulator with Whittall’s lawyer, whereby an unsolicited one-off payment was made to the families in exchange for the charges being dropped.

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael was killed in the disaster, told the World Socialist Web Site that the latest police announcement of human remains confirmed, once again, that the mine workings is a stable environment that could be safely entered and explored. “They should be going in to get them,” he said.

He noted that police have also located a driftrunner—a vehicle used to transport workers in and out of the mine—partially buried under a coal fall. If the manned re-entry had proceeded just 50-odd metres beyond the drift and into the mine workings, “they would have come across the drift runner,” he said.

Monk said the police were giving the appearance of a thorough investigation “so the public will say: ‘what are [the families] going on about? What more do they want?’” He added that the Pike River Recovery Agency, set up to oversee the re-entry, had “wasted” a lot of money and that its chief executive David Gawn (former chief of the NZ Army) “knew nothing about mining; he was a mouthpiece for the government.”

He questioned the assertions made in the media that all 29 men died instantly in the first explosion. An image taken inside the mine in 2011 showed that a box containing self-rescue breathing devices had been opened, indicating that there may have been some survivors—raising questions about whether a rescue could have been attempted. He asked why police had apparently not drilled a borehole immediately next to a

coal fall and a broken fresh air pipe at the entry to the mine workings, where survivors might have gathered.

Monk asked: “Where is Andrew Little now? Why isn’t he coming back to us and apologising, saying that we were right [about conditions in the mine workings]?” He noted that “world-renowned chief mines inspector” Tony Forster and other experts had designed the re-entry plan, which the government rejected.

Little, who oversaw the sealing of the mine, was appointed as Minister for Pike River Re-entry despite being deeply implicated in the conditions that led up to the 2010 disaster. As leader of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), Little ought to have been aware of the unsafe conditions in the mine, which several union members had protested about. The EPMU, however, made no public criticism of Pike River Coal and immediately after the first explosion Little defended the company, falsely saying that it had good safety standards.



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