

Pike River movie undermined by glaring omissions

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This year's Sydney Film Festival hosted the world premiere of *Pike River*, a 138-minute drama about the Pike River disaster, which killed 29 miners in November 2010 when a series of methane gas explosions struck the South Island coal mine.

Almost 15 years later it remains New Zealand's worst industrial accident—one for which no one has been prosecuted, despite overwhelming evidence of criminal breaches of workplace safety laws, mishandling and suppression of evidence, and unprecedented legal efforts to protect those responsible.

Directed by Robert Sarkies (*Out of the Blue* [2006], *Consent: The Louise Nicholas Story* [2014]), the movie portrays the devastating impact on the small working-class community as it battles the lies and obfuscation of mining company managers, Department of Labour bureaucrats, the police, and bogus promises from the National Party government that it would recover the miners' bodies.

Pike River begins just before the first explosion at the privately owned underground mine—the country's largest—located in the rugged mountains of the Paparoa Range near Greymouth, on the isolated west of the South Island.

Management is demanding increased production to fulfil a lucrative export order when the explosion occurs. While two miners escape, 29 others remain trapped, including a young man on his first underground shift just one day after his 17th birthday. Their shocked and desperate families demand that management find a way to rescue them.

Pike River CEO Peter Whittall (Jonathon Hendry) tells the families: "We know where they are, and we're hopeful. They've got water and an air pipeline; all they need to do is turn it on. There's enough air to last for several days, but we'll have them back before then."

One angry family member responds: "Don't you fork-tongue me. Your mouth is telling one story and your eyes another. We need the truth."

Whittall's assurances were, of course, a pack of lies, as the families were soon to discover. There were no air pipelines or water supplies. Safety shelters were not functioning—management had decommissioned them—and warnings of dangerous methane levels had been repeatedly

ignored in the lead-up to the disaster. Whittall publicly admitted months later that he had never been inside the mine.

Five days later, after an even larger explosion, officials tell a meeting of the distraught families that the miners are all dead and no rescue mission possible. "There'll be nothing but ash," they are told.

Local publican Bernie Monk (Tim Gordon), whose son Michael was trapped in the mine, angrily denounces mine management and the police. He calls on the families to walk out of the meeting, form their own committee, and begin fighting for the truth. The committee resolves to seek legal support and to take up the struggle.

Pike River focuses on two members of the committee: Sonya Rockhouse (Robyn Malcolm) and Anna Osborne (Melanie Lynskey). Sonya's 21-year-old son Ben, and Anna's husband Milton, were both killed in the disaster.

The film convincingly portrays the crushing impact on the two women's lives and families, and their shared grief and anger in response to what followed—including the 2012 Royal Commission, which revealed the mining company had violated numerous work safety violations, which were ignored by regulators. The Royal Commission concluded that the disaster was entirely preventable.

The film shows New Zealand Prime Minister John Key (Daniel Cleary) assuring families that his government was "absolutely committed" to recovering the dead miners. "Anyone who tells you we are not committed is playing with your emotions," he says.

These assurances are cruelly shattered in 2013, when the Department of Labour drops all 12 health and safety charges against Whittall following a sordid legal deal involving an "unsolicited" \$3.4 million payment to the miners' families.

Shocked and outraged by the deal, Rockhouse, Osborne, and other families realise that the cover-up has reached a higher level and decide to mount a legal appeal.

Rubbing salt into the wound, the National Party government strikes another blow, announcing that it will seal off the mine, permanently entombing the miners and blocking access to additional incriminating evidence.

In one powerful scene, Bernie Monk and Anna Osborne confront Prime Minister Key, who says the mine is unsafe to

enter. His government wants to make the area part of the national park, with a walking and biking trail.

This, he tells them, will be “an asset to the community” and will “honour your men and the miners.”

Osborne angrily responds: “You lot have played us like a f...ing violin. I’m not going to let you tell me I should be happy that thousands of people are going to walk over my husband’s grave. I will never accept it. Shame on you.”

Key ignores her. In late 2016, his government again attempts to have the mine sealed but is forced to back off after Osborne, Rockhouse, other mining families, and their supporters picket the mine road, gaining widespread working-class support and media coverage. These scenes include original protest footage.

Osborne phones the concrete contracting company and leaves a message urging it not to proceed with the job. The company replies by email that it will not cross the picket line.

Buoyed by this response—and then by Key’s sudden resignation as prime minister a few weeks later—Osborne, Rockhouse, and others travel to Wellington, where they met Jacinda Ardern and win support from Labour and other opposition parties. During the 2017 election campaign, Labour promises that if it wins government, the mine will be re-entered, the dead miners recovered, and the site fully investigated.

Pike River ends with Labour winning government, which is misleadingly presented as a victory for the families. In fact, Labour never had any intention of keeping its promises. In a memorial ceremony soon after, the two women walk a short distance into the mine entrance to honour the miners killed in the disaster. One of the film’s closing titles states that the families hope to eventually win justice for their loved ones.

According to the New Zealand Film Commission, director Robert Sarkies collaborated closely with all the families during production. In fact, several families were not involved, and will no doubt have something to say when the movie is released in New Zealand later this year.

Notwithstanding the film’s realistic dramatisation of the tragedy—and there are some strong moments—it must be judged not just by what the filmmakers have focused on but what they omit.

As the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand and the *World Socialist Web Site* have meticulously documented, Pike River was a disaster waiting to happen—the result of the systematic dismantling of industrial safety over decades by successive Labour and National governments, with the active assistance of the trade unions. By 2010, the Department of Labour’s specialist mines inspectorate had just two inspectors.

While *Pike River* is a drama and is not obliged to review all this history, it refuses to acknowledge, let alone hint at what the incoming Labour Party-led government did to maintain the official cover-up. In 2021 it aborted the re-entry of the mine and sealed it, preventing the recovery of bodies and crucial evidence of what caused the explosions.

The movie makes no mention of Andrew Little, who in 2010, as head of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union defended the mining company, telling the media there was “nothing unusual” about Pike River, which had “a good health and safety committee that’s been very active.”

The union did not organise any strikes on health and safety and kept quiet about dangerous conditions at the mine—even after a group of miners protested the lack of underground emergency gear.

Andrew Little later became a Labour MP and was appointed Minister Responsible for Pike River Re-entry in 2017. In 2021, he aborted re-entry efforts, falsely claiming it was unsafe and too expensive, and ordered the mine to be sealed.

This decision was opposed by Bernie Monk and most other family members, supported by international mining experts and workers in New Zealand and internationally, who demanded that the underground investigation continue. Pickets were again organised on the road to the mine site.

Osborne and Rockhouse, however, now representing a minority of the families, echoed the Labour government’s claims that there was no alternative to sealing the mine.

The Labour-led government (which included the Green Party and NZ First) succeeded in dividing the families. It was assisted by the union bureaucracy, which endorsed the sealing of the mine and isolated those families who continue to fight to expose the full truth about the disaster.

Bernie Monk summed up these bitter experiences with the National and Labour governments in a recent *World Socialist Web Site* interview:

“We were promised truth, instead we were given silence. We were told the system would protect us, but all we’ve seen is delay, denial, and deliberate obstruction. We waited not just for accountability, but for the truth—and every year the truth has been withheld is another year our boys were buried, not just by coal, but by a cover-up.”

A full and meaningful film about the decade-and-a-half struggle waged by the Pike River families—and one animated by these sentiments and a commitment to tell the whole story—is yet to be made.



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