

Pike River film whitewashes Labour Party and union's role in New Zealand mine disaster

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Pike River, directed by Rob Sarkies and written by Fiona Samuel, was released in New Zealand last month, accompanied by a major publicity campaign and universally glowing reviews in the corporate media.

The film portrays the 2010 Pike River underground coal mine disaster, in which 29 workers lost their lives, and the fight by the families of those killed for answers, for the return of their loved ones' remains, and for justice and accountability.

Overwhelming evidence was uncovered that Pike River Coal cut corners, broke numerous health and safety laws and built a mine that was essentially a gas bomb waiting to blow up. It had no adequate emergency exit, its main ventilation unit was dangerously installed underground, and it had grossly inadequate methane gas monitoring and drainage systems.

As the film shows, a 2012 royal commission of inquiry found that the company ignored many warnings from workers about unsafe conditions because it was fixated on the pursuit of profit and production. Yet nobody has faced any charges over the tragedy, and the remains of those who died are still sealed within the mine, along with crucial evidence.

On Radio NZ's website, film-maker Gaylene Preston hailed *Pike River* as "a perfect film." The *Post's* reviewer Graeme Tuckett called it "a damn near-perfect film." Newstalk ZB's Francesca Rudkin said it was "a very uplifting film about friendship, about advocacy and what you can achieve," even while noting that there has been no justice for the victims.

The WSWs review of *Pike River* following the Sydney Film Festival noted its definite strengths, as well as its glaring omissions. There are powerful scenes, including when the grieving families confront National Party Prime Minister John Key about his broken promise to re-enter the mine and retrieve the victims' remains, and their reaction to the regulators' outrageous and unlawful decision in 2013 to drop health and safety charges against Pike River Coal chief executive Peter Whittall.

The performances of Melanie Lynskey as Anna Osborne, whose husband Milton died in the disaster, and Robyn Malcolm as Sonya Rockhouse, whose son Ben was killed, have been justly praised.

Taken as a whole, however, the film—and the publicity surrounding it—is most notable for what it conceals: namely, the complicity of the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy both in the disaster itself and in the 15-year-long cover-up. Indeed,

the final half-hour, which depicts the run-up to the 2017 election, is essentially a political advertisement for the Labour Party.

Early in the film, as the families seek answers from Whittall and health and safety manager Neville Rockhouse about why the mine exploded, there is a significant omission. There is no mention of the fact that 71 of Pike River's workers were members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) and that EPMU leader Andrew Little—who was also the president of the Labour Party at the time—publicly defended the company following the first explosion.

Asked whether he had any safety concerns about Pike River, Little told the *New Zealand Herald*: "No... [the company has] an active health and safety committee, the union is well-represented on it. There's been nothing unusual come out of that that would alert us to the sort of things that have happened here. So, there's nothing unusual about Pike River, or this mine, that we've been particularly concerned about."

This statement was completely false. Workers had raised concerns about the extremely dangerous conditions in the mine, both with management and with the EPMU. A group of workers walked out in protest over the lack of emergency equipment underground not long before the disaster. The union bureaucracy did not even issue a press statement about the incident, let alone organise industrial action to stop work until the mine was made safe. It acted as an adjunct of the company, remaining silent about the real conditions in the mine, and allowing workers to risk their lives so as not to interrupt production.

While a two-hour-long film cannot be expected to cover every detail of the disaster and its aftermath, there is no justification for the exclusion of the role of the EPMU (now called E?).

Andrew Little, who is now the mayor of Wellington, was even allowed to speak at *Pike River's* premiere screening in the city, posturing as a champion of workplace safety. Shamefully, no one involved in the film raised any objection to Little's speech or pointed out the role that he and the EPMU actually played.

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in Pike River, told the WSWs it was "bloody wrong" for Little to be given the platform, considering his record.

The explanation for these omissions is political: the filmmakers have rewritten history in order to promote Labour and the unions. This is evident throughout the film.

A pivotal moment is the decision by Rockhouse and Osborne to blockade the road to the mine in 2016, preventing it from being sealed by the National government. “We’re here for our men,” Osborne tells the media. “We were promised that they’d be brought home and we want that promise kept.” Rockhouse says: “I can’t have [Ben] buried in concrete. I want the truth for my son, and I want justice.”

Local concrete companies decide to support the families and refuse to seal the mine.

At about this point, a certain Rob Egan volunteers to be a “social media manager” for the families, setting up the Facebook page “Stand With Pike” to promote the protest. The film does not explain that Egan is a highly experienced political operative, a former advisor to at least two Labour Party leaders and co-owner of the public relations firm Piko Consulting.

Egan suggests to Rockhouse and Osborne that the families should help elect a Labour Party-led government. They travel to Wellington, along with Bernie Monk, and secure a pledge from Labour and its allies—the Greens and the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party—to re-enter the mine, recover the bodies and gain the evidence necessary for criminal prosecutions.

Labour leader Jacinda Ardern, playing herself in the film, greets the families’ representatives, beaming from ear to ear, and says “Of course we’ll sign” the commitment.

The film ends soon afterwards with Rockhouse, Osborne, Egan and others celebrating the formation of a Labour-Greens-NZ First coalition government in October 2017. This is depicted as a momentous victory for the Pike River families.

The text that appears on the screen misleadingly states that the Ardern government re-entered the mine. A video is shown of Rockhouse and Osborne walking a few metres inside the drift (entrance tunnel).

In fact, in 2021 the Labour-led government shut down the re-entry operation and refused to allow investigators to enter the mine workings, where the most important evidence is located, including the underground fan, a possible ignition source for the first explosion.

The Labour government was able to achieve what the National Party had failed to do, placing a concrete seal on the mine portal. Andrew Little, as the minister for Pike River re-entry, continued the role he had played as EPMU leader, covering up on behalf of the business interests responsible for the disaster.

The government established a so-called Pike River Recovery Authority, including a Family Reference Group (FRG) that included Osborne and Rockhouse, as well as Rob Egan and Tony Sutorius (a documentary film-maker close to the unions, who is also depicted positively in *Pike River*). Monk resigned from the FRG in 2019 after refusing to sign a confidentiality agreement that would have prevented him from speaking publicly about information relating to the re-entry.

The FRG issued a statement in March 2021 which falsely stated: “Families accept, with heartbreak, Andrew Little’s advice that there will be no more government money to expand the [re-entry] project at this time.”

In fact, the majority of the families opposed the shutdown of the re-entry operation and the sealing of the mine. The FRG “made the

call without coming to the families,” Monk told the WSW. “They never came to the families and asked us. They got told by Little they weren’t going to go into the mine,” and they went along with the government.

The families were backed by thousands of people across New Zealand and internationally, including world-renowned mining experts led by Tony Forster, the former chief inspector of mines, who produced a plan for the recovery of the mine workings. Minister Little rejected the plan, claiming that it was too difficult and too expensive to enter the mine workings safely—the same unsubstantiated claims made by former Prime Minister John Key.

The entire political establishment, the unions and the media all backed the Labour government’s decision. The “Stand With Pike” Facebook page administered by the FRG refused to allow posts opposing the termination of the underground investigation.

Commenting on the film *Pike River*, Monk told the WSWS it went some way to showing what the families “had to go through and how the politicians [in the Key government] covered things up and shat on them all the way through.” But he added that the Labour Party, having used the families to “get back into power” in 2017, “didn’t do any better than the National Party.”

Monk and other families and supporters are still fighting to reveal the full truth about the disaster and to expose those complicit in the 2013 dropping of charges against Whittall.

Monk hoped that the film would “put the pressure on the police to make a decision on whether they are going to bring charges or not bring charges.” The criminal investigation into the Pike River disaster is technically ongoing, but there is no guarantee that anyone will be charged. An initial police investigation following the disaster was dropped in 2013, on the pretext that forensic evidence buried in the mine could not be examined.

Those seeking a full account of the Pike River disaster and the 15-year cover-up—including the role of all the capitalist parties and the union bureaucracy in shielding the company—are encouraged to consult the extensive archive of the WSWS and the book *Pike River: The Crime and Cover-up*.



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