

The lessons of New Zealand's Pike River mine disaster for workers internationally

Tom Peters

24 November 2025

November 19 marked 15 years since an explosion ripped through the underground Pike River Coal mine on the remote West Coast of New Zealand's South Island. Twenty-nine workers were trapped in the mine.

For five days, the company management, police and government officials told the families and the public that a rescue operation was being planned. Then, on November 24 there was a second underground explosion and police declared that there was no longer any chance of finding survivors.

The disaster shocked the world: a mine in a supposedly developed country had proven to be a death trap. A royal commission of inquiry found in 2012 that Pike River Coal, which was deep in debt and desperate to start producing coal, had flouted basic health and safety regulations. There was no suitable emergency exit and the main fan had been installed underground, despite the well-known risks of doing so in a gassy underground mine.

Methane gas levels were not properly monitored and the ventilation was grossly inadequate. Warnings of an impending disaster were ignored. In the 48 days leading up to the first explosion, deputies using hand-held detectors reported on 21 occasions that gas concentrations had gone above 5 percent, the level at which methane gas becomes explosive; on 48 occasions, gas concentrations went above 2 percent, the level at which a mine should be evacuated.

Government regulators from the Department of Labour (now WorkSafe) knew about the conditions at Pike River but did not shut it down. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU, since renamed E t?) also knew, but it kept quiet and allowed workers to continue to enter the mine day after day, risking their lives.

In response to the royal commission's findings, then prime minister John Key, who had previously defended Pike River Coal, was forced to admit in an interview with TV3 on November 5, 2012, that "the company essentially put its profits and its production ahead of the safety and lives of those 29 workers."

Yet, despite the overwhelming evidence against the company, 15 years after the disaster no one has been held accountable. Pike River's major shareholder NZ Oil & Gas (now called Echelon Resources) received an insurance payout of \$38.3 million, while the mine's creditor the Bank of New Zealand got \$23.2 million.

WorkSafe initially planned to bring charges against Pike River chief executive Peter Whittall for breaches of health and safety laws, but the regulator dropped the prosecution in 2013 in an unlawful backroom deal with Whittall's lawyers. An unsolicited payment of \$3.41 million was made through an insurance company to the 29 families of the victims, many of whom denounced it as "blood money" and "chequebook justice."

These bitter experiences—the disaster itself and the decade-and-a-half-long cover-up under successive National and Labour Party governments—contain vital lessons for working people, not only in New Zealand, but in every country. The last 15 years has demonstrated that the institutions of the state—the judicial system, the regulators, the police—are

not impartial: they exist to protect the interests of big business and the rich. The same is true of the union bureaucracy and all the capitalist parties.

To defend their interests, including their safety and their very lives, workers need new organisations: rank-and-file committees must be built, democratically controlled by workers themselves and completely independent of, and opposed to the political establishment and the union apparatus.

Pike River and the worldwide industrial slaughterhouse

The cost-cutting and deregulation that led to the Pike River disaster are not an exception, but the norm. In response to the worsening global economic downturn, corporations and governments are scrapping workplace safety protections in order to extract greater profits from workers. They are doing so with the collaboration of the corrupt, pro-capitalist union bureaucracies.

The result is a sharp increase in workplace deaths and horrific industrial disasters worldwide. Recent tragedies include: 67 deaths in a school building collapse in Indonesia in September; at least 16 workers, including a number of teenagers, killed in a garment factory fire in Bangladesh on October 14; and an explosion at a glue factory in Pakistan last Friday that killed at least 18 workers.

The extremely unsafe, unregulated conditions that prevail in so-called developing countries are increasingly common in more advanced capitalist countries. In the United States on November 4, a UPS cargo plane crashed and exploded shortly after taking off from Louisville airport, killing 14 people. UPS workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that planes were not being properly maintained due to the company's relentless cost-cutting.

On October 10, a huge explosion destroyed the Accurate Energetic Systems (AES) explosives factory in rural Tennessee, taking the lives of 16 workers. Like Pike River mine, the plant had been allowed to self-regulate with virtually no oversight. State health and safety officers inspected AES only once in 20 years, resulting in a paltry \$7,200 fine for chemical exposure that caused employees to suffer seizures.

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael was killed in the Pike River mine, wrote a letter to the families of the Tennessee explosion victims, published on the WSWS. He stated: "We know the shock, the pain, and the disbelief that come with such a loss. We also know what happens after the cameras leave and the authorities take over. That is when the truth becomes hard to find.

"I want to warn you from my experience. Do not put your trust in the government or company management. From the first day, demand honesty. Keep your own records. Ask questions. Do not let them control

the story. We were told to be patient, to let the process work. Fifteen years later, we are still fighting for truth and justice.

“You will hear promises of transparency and accountability. You will be told there will be inquiries and reviews. But without constant pressure, they will protect themselves before they protect you. Stay united. Stand together. The strength of your families will be your greatest power.”

Monk also wrote to the families of two workers killed and a third injured in the October 27 explosion at Endeavor underground mine in Cobar, Australia. “We know that justice is never easy, but we urge you to stay strong and pursue answers and accountability,” Monk wrote.

The company Polymetals rushed to reopen the Cobar mine, before the cause of the explosion had been identified. While a secretive investigation is being carried out by the industry regulator, the company has ordered workers not to speak publicly about the disaster or conditions in the mine. The Australian mining unions have not criticised the reckless reopening or the blatantly anti-democratic gag order.

Monk told the WSWS: “The same thing is happening [in Cobar] as happened at Pike River, and they’re getting away with it. All they’re worried about is how much money they can get.”

Labour, the unions and the Pike River cover-up

The 15th anniversary of the Pike River disaster has once again revealed profound anger in the working class. Thousands of people have commented on social media over the past week demanding justice for the victims. Unsafe working conditions, particularly in understaffed public hospitals, were a major issue in the October 23 mass strike by more than 100,000 healthcare workers and teachers—New Zealand’s biggest strike in more than 40 years.

As part of its brutal austerity drive, the current National Party-led government has cut hundreds of jobs from WorkSafe and is seeking to further weaken the regulator’s enforcement powers. New Zealand recorded 70 workplace deaths last year and the country’s rate of industrial deaths per capita, which has not changed since 2010, is twice as high as that of Australia and four times that of the UK.

Many people have watched the recent film *Pike River*, which highlights the glaring lack of accountability for the 29 preventable deaths but whitewashes the role of the unions and the Labour Party.

Labour and its allies are seeking to channel outrage over the tragedy into support for their campaign in next year’s election. This will be a political trap for the working class. Labour and the unions are complicit both in the conditions that led to the disaster and in the 15-year cover-up.

The EPMU remained silent about the life-threatening conditions in the mine, even after a group of workers had walked out of the mine earlier in 2010 to protest the lack of emergency equipment. Immediately after the disaster, EPMU national secretary Andrew Little—who was also the Labour Party president—defended Pike River Coal, telling the media that it had a “good health and safety committee that’s been very active” and that there had been “nothing unusual” about its operations.

When the Labour Party formed a coalition government after the 2017 election with NZ First and the Greens, all three parties pledged to re-enter Pike River mine to recover the 29 bodies and gather evidence to determine the precise cause of the 2010 explosions. Police had refused to lay any charges over the Pike River disaster without physical evidence from inside the mine to determine exactly what sparked the explosion.

The families hoped the re-entry and the opening of a new police investigation would finally lead to prosecutions. The WSWS warned, however, that “the government’s pledges cannot be trusted.” Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s appointment of Andrew Little as minister

responsible for Pike River re-entry was a blatant conflict of interest and a clear indication that Labour would continue the cover-up on behalf of corporate interests.

A trial of chief executive Whittall or other top company officials would raise questions about the union bureaucracy’s collaboration with Pike River Coal against the interests of the workers it purported to represent.

In 2021, while the drift (entrance tunnel) was still being explored, Little announced that the government would not allow investigators into the mine workings, where the human remains and the main ventilation unit and other equipment was located. The Labour government pulled investigators out of the drift and installed a thick concrete seal on the mine portal, burying the evidence and the bodies.

The majority of the 29 families opposed the shutdown of the mine re-entry and they were supported by mining experts as well as thousands of ordinary people, in New Zealand and internationally. But they were isolated by the union bureaucracy, the media and the political establishment, which supported the Labour government’s decision.

As well as providing evidence against Pike River Coal and other companies involved in the mine, the exploration of the mine workings and examination of bodies could have established whether any of the 29 workers survived the initial November 19 explosion, and whether an opportunity to rescue them was missed. Decisions made by police and others in the five days before the second explosion would be subjected to further scrutiny.

The initial police investigation was marred by the unexplained disappearance of vital evidence, including part of a control panel door blown out of the mine’s ventilation shaft. If tested, it could have provided important information about the cause of the explosions. Police also admitted in 2019 to destroying evidence, including items of clothing and breathing apparatus that may have belonged to some of the trapped men.

Winston Peters, the foreign minister in the current coalition government and leader of NZ First, recently described the mine as a “murder scene,” after remaining virtually silent about Pike River for the past two years. Peters told Radio NZ on November 19, “The police have come up with an opinion [regarding potential prosecutions] and they’ve been sitting on it for a whole year now.” Police, however, have made no public statements and the investigation has been subject to endless, unexplained delays.

NZ First, a right-wing nationalist party, is positioning itself for the 2026 election. The party’s rhetoric is completely hollow: it has been part of successive governments, led by Labour and National, that deregulated the mining sector and then shielded those responsible for Pike River.

Build rank-and-file committees!

The essential lesson that must be drawn from Pike River is the urgent need for workers to establish their political independence from every capitalist party and to rebel against the union apparatus. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the Socialist Equality Group in NZ call on workers to build rank-and-file committees in every workplace, controlled democratically by workers themselves.

Rank-and-file committees are necessary to empower workers to take control of safety conditions and end the dictatorship of corporate management in the factories, mines and other workplaces. These committees must publicise the dangers that workers face, breaking the silence imposed by companies and unions, and organise strikes and other industrial actions to uphold workers’ rights to health, safety and life.

Such committees must also carry out independent workers’ inquiries into industrial disasters, including Pike River, the mine explosion in Cobar, the Tennessee factory explosion, the UPS plane crash, and the

recent deaths in the US Postal Service and at factories in Sri Lanka.

The task of investigating these tragedies cannot be entrusted to state agencies, whose job is not to uncover the truth, but to protect the corporations and the rich. Only a worker-led inquiry can lay bare the real causes, identify the organisations and individuals responsible, and draw the necessary lessons for preventing future deaths.

The International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), an initiative of the ICFI, will enable workers to share information and coordinate their struggles across different industries and internationally, overcoming the national barriers enforced by the unions. This will greatly strengthen workers in every country, who confront the same attacks on wages and conditions, often from the same multinational corporations.

Workers must be guided by the understanding that the fight for workplace safety is inseparable from the struggle against capitalism, which is plunging the world into barbarism and war. The same governments that preside over life-threatening conditions in factories and mines have normalised mass deaths in the genocide in Gaza and the war in Ukraine. US imperialism and its allies, including New Zealand, are spending unprecedented sums on the military to prepare for even more catastrophic wars, particularly against China, in order to redivide and plunder the world.

This bankrupt system must be abolished and society reorganised based on socialist principles. The wealth and resources produced by the working class must be taken out of the hands of the billionaires and placed in common ownership, in order to put an end to social inequality and the sacrifice of lives for profit, and establish a society based on human need. Those who agree with this perspective should contact the Socialist Equality Group and its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact