

New Zealand authorities seeking to cover up causes of landslide disaster

Tom Peters
26 January 2026

On Sunday evening about 200 people attended a vigil in Mount Maunganui to mourn the deaths of six people in a horrific landslide at the Beachside Holiday Park at 9.30 a.m. on January 22. They were among nine people killed in landslides and flooding during extreme storms that hit New Zealand last week.

Those who died in the campground disaster include two 15-year-olds, Sharon Maccanico and Max Furse-Kee, both students at Pakuranga College in Auckland; Lisa MacLennan, 50, a literacy tutor at Morrinsville Intermediate School; friends Jacqueline Wheeler and Susan Knowles, both aged 71 and from Rotorua; and 20-year-old Swedish citizen Måns Loke Bernhardsson. Work is continuing to recover the bodies buried beneath the landslide.

Prime Minister Christopher Luxon attended the vigil alongside Emergency Services Minister Mark Mitchell and Tauranga Mayor Mahé Drysdale. Luxon told reporters: “It’s the most senseless tragedy... Kiwis [were] enjoying a classic Kiwi summer at a campground, a place of great fun, and the next minute something senseless like this happens.”

But the deaths were not simply the result of an unavoidable natural disaster. Questions have been raised about why the campground was not evacuated despite several warnings well before the deadly landslide.

MacLennan, one of the six victims, woke up several other campers around 5.00 a.m. to warn them that the torrential rain had caused instability on the hillside above the tents and caravans.

Lance Macfarlane, who escaped the campsite with his daughter, told the *New Zealand Herald*: “We could have been asleep if she didn’t wake us up. I could have been still there sleeping when the big one came down.”

Macfarlane described MacLennan as a hero, saying:

“She saved lots of people and she didn’t have to do it. She’s done it on her own will. Obviously, it wasn’t her job to be waking people up and alerting them to potential danger. Her and her partner tried the after-hours number at the camp office, but it just went through to security, and no one came.”

Eventually, Macfarlane was able to speak to the campground manager. “We told him that there were slips and eventually he came through with the council guy in his golf buggy. They’ve seen it [the slips] and carried on to the other end [of the campground]. After that, we just waited... he was supposed to come back to us, but he never did.”

Yesterday, Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ) confirmed that it had received an emergency call at 5.48 a.m.—from local resident Alister McHardy—about an earlier, smaller landslide. FENZ notified Tauranga City Council, which owns and operates the Beachside Holiday Park, but no action was taken to evacuate the site or warn those staying there.

Today, Radio NZ reported that one of the campers woken by MacLennan called the police about three hours before the fatal landslide. She alerted the police to the previous landslips and was told that someone would be sent to the campground. About 7.45 a.m. the camper saw a council vehicle driving slowly past the campground, and she assumed the slips were being looked at.

Even when the council closed walking tracks on Mount Maunganui at 8.56 a.m. because of landslides, it did not take action on the campground. Just over half an hour later, an avalanche of mud and uprooted trees smashed into tents, caravans and a toilet block, burying six people.

Asked about why the campground wasn’t evacuated, Luxon told Radio NZ yesterday that these were “very

legitimate, very good questions that need answers.” He supported Mayor Drysdale’s order for an “independent review” into the landslide. Today, Luxon said the government is also considering holding its own separate inquiry. The exact form these inquiries will take has not yet been explained.

A spokesperson for the regulatory agency WorkSafe told the media yesterday that it would investigate separately, saying: “We will be looking into the organisations that had a duty of care for everyone at the holiday park, and whether or not they were meeting their health and safety responsibilities.”

These announcements should be treated with scepticism; the function of such inquiries, first and foremost, is to protect business interests and the state. The official inquiries following the 2010 Pike River mine disaster, which killed 29 workers, and the 2011 collapse of the CTV building in Christchurch, which killed 115 people, did not lead to anyone being held accountable. This was despite overwhelming evidence of health and safety breaches at Pike River, and breaches of the building code by Alan Reay Consultants, the engineering firm which designed the CTV building.

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael was killed in the Pike River mine, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the Mount Maunganui tragedy brought back painful memories for him and his wife Kath.

He warned the families of the landslide victims to be prepared for a “whitewash” and a lack of transparency. “We’ve got disasters happening all over the place and no one wants to be held accountable,” he said.

“When you are grief-stricken you rely a hell of a lot on the authorities to do what should be done,” he said. The Pike River families learned through bitter experience that this was a mistake.

Monk urged the campground victims’ families to organise themselves independently. “What I would say to these families is: are you going to be represented in this inquiry? If not, why not? And don’t just take the person they give you [to represent you].”

Monk and other Pike River family members are still fighting, nearly 16 years later, to expose the full truth about the explosions in the mine and the subsequent cover-up—including WorkSafe’s unlawful deal to avoid prosecuting chief executive Peter Whittall.

“What do they call New Zealand? A five star justice

system. What rot!” Monk said. He noted that the 2012 royal commission into Pike River revealed that after the explosions Lesley Haines, head of the Department of Labour—later rebranded as WorkSafe—told her staff to “be seen to be doing something but in fact do nothing.” The regulatory agency had known about the dangerous conditions in the mine, including the lack of a proper emergency exit, but allowed it to keep operating.

The last Labour Party government promised to re-enter the mine to retrieve the bodies of those killed and examine crucial evidence to prosecute those responsible. But in 2021 it aborted the underground investigation and placed a permanent seal on the mine, continuing the cover-up.

Labour’s minister responsible for Pike River was Andrew Little, who as leader of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union had defended Pike River’s safety record immediately after the November 19, 2010, explosion. The union bureaucracy had kept silent about the life-threatening conditions in the mine before the disaster.

In a recent article on the lessons of Pike River, the WSWS explained that the task of investigating such tragedies cannot be left in the hands of the state agencies. Only an inquiry led by a committee of rank-and-file workers including families of the victims, and independent of all the capitalist parties and the union bureaucracy, can lay bare the real causes, identify the organisations and individuals responsible, and draw the necessary lessons for preventing future deaths. This applies just as forcefully to the Mount Maunganui landslide disaster.



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