Bernie Monk, father of Pike River disaster victim, supports Socialist Equality Group in the New Zealand election

Tom Petterson, SEG candidate for Hutt South
5 November 2026

It is nearly 16 years since a series of explosions ripped through the Pike River underground coal mine in New Zealand in November 2010, resulting in the deaths of 29 workers—one of the deadliest workplace disasters in the country's history.

The WSWS recently spoke with Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in the disaster, aged just 23, about why he was supporting the campaign of Socialist Equality Group leader Tom Petterson, who is standing in the Hutt South electorate in tomorrow's election.

Monk and other family members of the Pike 29 are still fighting for justice for their loved ones, and to uncover the full truth about the causes of the disaster.

A 2012 royal commission of inquiry found abundant evidence that the mine's board and management had placed production and profit ahead of workers' safety. The mine had no proper emergency exit, as required by law, its methane detection and ventilation systems were faulty, and its main fan was installed underground—a highly unorthodox practice because of the risk of sparks causing an explosion. To this day, however, no one has faced any accountability for actions that led to 29 avoidable deaths.

The state's Department of Labour (now Worksafe) and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union knew about the dangerous conditions in the mine, but did not publicise it and took no actions to stop Pike River's operations and force safety improvements.

Monk said that for many years Petterson and the WSWS had drawn attention to the injustice of Pike River and similar industrial disasters, "not only in New Zealand but worldwide, and you are listening to what we are actually saying. The other people [political parties] don't listen. You're the only ones that can honestly say you've [supported us] the whole way through this."

He explained that successive Labour Party and National Party governments had refused to carry out a thorough underground investigation of Pike River, to recover bodies and forensic evidence and prosecute those responsible.

"It's unbelievable. Both parties have told the country: it's not in the best interests of the country" and that it would cost too much to re-enter the mine workings and do a proper investigation. "Time and time again, I've gone to government departments, under Labour and National, and got nothing," Monk said.

In 2013, lawyers for the Department of Labour decided not to prosecute Pike River Coal chief executive Peter Whittall on charges of breaching health and safety laws, in exchange for an unsolicited payment to the families. The deal was eventually ruled to be unlawful by the Supreme Court, but the charges were never reinstated.

The 2017–2023 Labour Party-led government of Jacinda Ardern was elected with promises to re-enter the mine and gather evidence for prosecutions, but the operation was aborted and the mine was sealed before critical evidence and human remains could be recovered.

Throughout the current election season, Monk said, all the established parties had remained completely silent about the glaring lack of justice for the Pike River families. "They say to us: 'We can't say or do anything until the police make a decision.' I don't see why things can't be out in the open," he said.

A police investigation into the disaster was reopened in 2018 and has repeatedly been extended without explanation. Police have told the families that speaking publicly could hinder a future prosecution, despite the fact that a vast amount of material is already publicly available showing that Pike River was a death trap.

Monk explained that police had told him three-and-a-

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half months ago that they would be ready within a matter of weeks to announce whether or not they would lay charges, but this did not happen. “I said to them at the time: You will not make any announcement because of the election. Everyone’s scared of making a call on Pike River because it’s going to open a can of worms,” he said.

The WSWS asked Monk to comment on the Labour Party’s election policy, announced in September, to “hold negligent employers accountable for workplace deaths by introducing an offence for corporate homicide.” Labour’s workplace relations spokesperson Jan Tinetti referred to the Pike River disaster and said the victims’ families had “been waiting a long time for this.”

Monk said: “We’ve heard it all before.” Labour spoke about introducing a similar law in 2017 but did not do so during its six years in office. “We don’t have to get a new charge brought into legislation,” Monk added, saying that he believed there was enough evidence to charge those responsible under existing manslaughter laws.

He held both parties responsible for the gutting of workplace safety regulations. During the 1990s the National Party government dismantled the specialised mine safety inspectorate in the Department of Labour. “The Labour Party was in power for three terms under Helen Clark [from 1999 to 2008] and they never put it back. Then Pike River happened.” In 2010 there was only one mining inspector covering the entire country and Pike River Coal was effectively allowed to operate in breach of health and safety rules without any consequences.

“Today, we’re going down the same path,” Monk said, pointing to the landslide at Mount Maunganui Beachside Holiday Park in January, which killed six people. A recent review found that the Tauranga City Council, which owned the campground, had failed to act on multiple warnings about a potentially fatal landslide. “They knew for years that that place was a ticking time bomb,” Monk said.

Monk said he liked the sound of the SEG’s call for workers to build rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracy, to defend their safety at work. He was scathing about the role of the union bureaucracy in the Pike River disaster. He noted that workers at the mine “did walk out, they did complain” about unsafe conditions, but the union “did nothing about it.” He said after the disaster the EPMU leader Andrew Little—a senior Labour Party member and now the mayor of Wellington—“went live on the radio and TV and said this was one of the safest” mines, before later having to “backtrack.”

Little has never explained why his immediate response to the Pike River disaster was to defend the company’s safety record, despite the fact that workers had protested against conditions in the mine. As the minister for Pike River Re-entry in the Ardern government, Little made the decision to pull the plug on the underground investigation and seal the mine, burying the evidence within—thereby continuing the cover-up on behalf of the company’s leadership.

Monk said he felt as though governments and officials were “wearing us out and hoping we’ll die.” He compared the cover-up at Pike River to other preventable tragedies for which no one has been prosecuted. He said “we’re going through the same struggles” as the families impacted by the 1989 Hillsborough disaster in Britain, in which 94 people were killed; the 2017 Grenfell Tower inferno that killed 72 people; and the CTV building collapse in Christchurch in 2011, which killed 115 people. In each case, there is evidence of official negligence and cost-cutting, yet no one has faced accountability.

The Socialist Equality Group’s election campaign is aimed against all the capitalist parties, which defend a judicial system rigged in favour of the rich. Pike River and the countless other avoidable industrial disasters in New Zealand and internationally underscore the need for the working class to take power out of the hands of the corporate and financial elite, and for society to be reorganised on the basis of social need, not private profit.

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