

New Zealand: 29 miners still missing after underground explosion

By Tom Peters
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Three days after an explosion ripped through the Pike River Coal (PRC) mine in the Paparoa ranges on New Zealand's West Coast, 29 miners remain trapped inside. There has been no communication with the men and it is not known whether any survived the November 19 blast. They are believed to be about two kilometres along the mine tunnel and 150 metres below the surface.

The trapped miners include 24 New Zealanders, two Australians, two Britons and one South African. The youngest is just 17 years old and the eldest 62. Sixteen are employed by PRC, while the other 13 are local contractors.

The rescue operation has been delayed due to the high levels of poisonous and explosive methane gas and carbon monoxide that have been detected in the mine. On Sunday, tests indicated that there was also a fire underground. One ventilation shaft is reportedly in operation and is pumping fresh air into the mine, but rescue coordinators do not know when it will be safe to enter.

On Sunday evening, work began on drilling a hole 150 metres deep and 15cm wide, to reach one of the mine's open areas, in order to better test the air quality and attempt to contact any survivors trapped below. PRC officials said the drilling would take 16 to 24 hours.

A Red Cross centre has been set up in the nearby town of Greymouth, where many of the miners' families live, to provide updates on the rescue operation. PRC refused to allow family members to access the remote mine site until Sunday, when the company organised a bus visit. Some family members are angry about the delayed rescue effort and distrust the explanations given by the company and other officials. Lawrie Drew, the father of one of the miners,

told *Sunday Star-Times*: "We... listen to what they tell us and it's just the same old run-around. Excuses for why things can't be done." Another man said: "They are telling us it's too dangerous, but it's our families and mates down there. I think they think there's no hurry because they are dead."

While the exact cause of the explosion on Friday is not yet known, it was most likely the result of a build-up of volatile coal dust or methane gas. The PRC mine runs through the Hawea fault line, which is a conduit for potentially dangerous quantities of methane.

New Zealand's media and political establishment has rushed to defend Pike River Coal. The conservative National Party government's Energy Minister, Gerry Brownlee, told TVNZ's *Q and A* program yesterday that the company had "an absolute focus on health and safety". Asked whether there would be an official inquiry into the explosion, Brownlee said such an inquiry would be necessary because the company itself did not know what had caused the blast. However, he denounced calls for an investigation as a "diversion," saying that in a "highly charged emotional environment" one should not "start pointing fingers".

An opposition Labour Party MP, Damien O'Connor, described the explosion as "one of these things that the West Coast unfortunately has had to get used to over the years". He told TVNZ that "from time to time... in spite of our best efforts, sometimes these disasters happen." In fact, an inquiry into the last mine explosion on the West Coast—the 1967 disaster at the state-owned Strongman mine in Runanga, which killed 19 people—found that it was caused by two breaches of safety regulations. The government was forced to pay compensation to the victims' families.

O'Connor's statement was echoed by the *Otago Daily*

Times, whose editors declared today that “by its nature mining is an extremely dangerous occupation”, adding that PRC’s mine had been “built to exacting safety and environmental standards”.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which collects dues from 71 of PRC’s 140 employees, also defended the company’s safety record. Its national secretary Andrew Little, who is president of the Labour Party, told the *New Zealand Herald* yesterday there was “nothing unusual about Pike River or this mine that we’ve been particularly concerned about”.

Despite these attempts to portray the explosion as a purely natural disaster, comments by mining experts suggest that PRC’s safety procedures for preventing a build-up of methane were grossly inadequate. An Australian gas drainage engineer, who visited the site last year, told the *Herald on Sunday* that operating standards were “extremely poor” and workers had “severe concerns about safety”. The *Herald* reported the unnamed expert as saying there had been “a number of incidents where the methane content had reached high levels over the last 12 months”. Only three weeks ago, ventilation fans had stopped working, causing the mine to be flooded with gas for 20 hours, he said.

According to the *Herald*, the engineer “claimed miners had bored through ‘high flow methane holes’ without any risk assessment conducted or procedure on how to manage gas flow from the hole in place”. He also said “a piece of equipment had a safety circuit fault but was put back into operation within hours of being tagged out of commission without necessary repair work done”.

Another unnamed expert from New Zealand told the *Herald* that the disaster should never have happened. He compared it to the April 5 explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine in West Virginia, which killed 29 miners, the result of numerous safety violations by the mine owner Massey Energy. “In developed countries like the United States and New Zealand we shouldn’t be having these kinds of accidents,” he said.

The *Herald* quoted Gerry Morris of Greymouth, who used to work for *Coal* magazine, saying he had “heard regularly” from contractors at the mine “over the last two or three years that this mine is unsafe, there’s far too much gas, there’s going to be a disaster here one

very”.

The experts’ comments strongly suggest that PRC sacrificed workers’ safety for the sake of extracting coal as fast as possible. The company has been under considerable pressure to boost its revenue. It only began making shipments of coking coal to India this year, after production was beset with delays due to faulty equipment. In February 2009, PRC had to raise NZ\$45 million (US\$35 million) to repair a ventilation shaft that had been damaged by fractured rock, and to cover the cost of a subsequent eight month production delay.

Last month PRC’s new chief executive Peter Whittall was forced to halve production forecasts for the June 2011 year, to between 320,000 and 360,000 tonnes. The *Sunday Star-Times* reports that PRC “had recorded cumulative net losses after tax for the period July 2006 to June 2010 totalling [NZ]\$54.1 million”. The paper noted that last month some shareholders of New Zealand Oil & Gas—which owns 30 percent of PRC—had “questioned the board’s retention of Pike shares”. PRC has NZ\$25 million in short-term funding from NZ Oil & Gas that is due to be repaid next month.

Far from being a random or natural catastrophe, the information that is emerging points to the explosion at the Pike River Coal mine, like recent mine disasters in the US, Chile and China, being the result of entirely man-made factors: the compromising and sacrifice of miners’ health and safety on the altar of corporate profit.

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