

New Zealand: Police suppressed images of bodies in Pike River mine

By Tom Peters
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On June 19, TV3's Newshub aired more footage taken inside the Pike River Coal mine in New Zealand's South Island, which exploded in November 2010, killing 29 men. The video, recorded in early 2011 by cameras lowered into the mine through bore-holes, shows a pair of glasses, rubber hosing and a wooden pallet.

It also clearly shows at least two intact bodies, and there are less clear images of what may be more bodies. These images have not been made public but have been viewed by the families and reporters.

The video is part of several hours of footage suppressed by police for more than six years. It was released to the victims' families only after some excerpts were leaked and broadcast in April. That video showed members of Mines Rescue working inside the drift tunnel that leads into the main body of the mine. It discredits repeated National Party government claims that the mine is too dangerous to re-enter to investigate the precise cause of the explosion and to recover bodies.

The latest footage shows that the interior of the mine after the explosion was not what the families and the public were led to believe. Last December cabinet minister Judith Collins, who was the police minister at the time of the explosion, told TV3 there could be no manned re-entry because "infernos" had made the mine "a terrible mess."

Prime Minister Bill English attempted to dismiss the latest footage as "nothing new," saying the Royal Commission had examined it. He told Newshub "the implication that somehow there's been a cover-up is complete nonsense."

In fact, the government and police have worked to prevent any real investigation into the disaster and to shield Pike River Coal's management and owners from

prosecution. A Royal Commission in 2012 found that the mine had violated numerous safety regulations in order to reduce costs. It had inadequate methane gas monitoring, poor ventilation and no emergency exit.

Yet police refused to lay any charges. The government's Labour Department charged CEO Peter Whittall with breaches of health and safety laws, but the charges were dropped in 2013 in a backroom deal with Whittall's lawyers.

Echoing the government, a police spokesperson told Radio NZ that "only one body has potentially been captured in the imagery," and this had previously been reported. This refers to a much grainier image of a body that was released in 2011.

Sonya Rockhouse, whose son Ben died in the mine, told the *World Socialist Web Site* there were at least two bodies in the footage recently released to the families. She said the families "were there every day of the Royal Commission hearings and we never saw footage like that. Our lawyers had not seen it either."

"The fact that we have to fight for every little piece of information, that's what blows me away," she said. "You'd think they'd be wanting to help us find the answers, but no."

Rockhouse described the Royal Commission as "a total waste of money. When it finished I thought: Is that it? There were several people who should have been on the stand that weren't." Former Pike River CEO Gordon Ward refused to give testimony, as did other company directors. The commission had no power to hold anyone legally accountable for the disaster.

She denounced the police for refusing to charge Whittall, saying "one of the main reasons they gave for not bringing charges was that WorkSafe [the Labour Department] was going to be charging him. WorkSafe

laid charges and then they dropped them. In a perfect world you would think that the police would revisit [their decision] and place charges.”

Rockhouse and Anna Osborne, who lost her husband Milton in the mine disaster, have appealed for a judicial review of the regulator’s decision to drop charges against Whittall. Their initial appeal was rejected in February by the Court of Appeal and the case will now be heard in the Supreme Court in October.

Rockhouse said even if they are successful it would be a “symbolic victory.” Because Whittall only faced civil, not criminal, charges he cannot be extradited to New Zealand. Like other members of Pike River’s management, he has moved to Australia.

“We don’t have corporate manslaughter laws in this country,” Rockhouse said. “Our death rate for workplaces is up to 31 so far this year. We need to start making people accountable for that. There are several people that should be in jail because of Pike River and they aren’t because of our stupid laws.”

Rockhouse agreed with the WSWS that there were similarities between Pike River and the Grenfell Tower fire in London, which killed at least 79 people. In both cases, she said, there had been “a lack of a duty of care by the people who are in charge who have the money. They chose the cheapest option. I think it’s terrible, putting that cladding on the building when they knew it wasn’t up to code.”

There is widespread sympathy in the working class for the families’ demand for justice. A poll published by Newshub on June 19 found that 45 percent supported a re-entry of the mine, 35 percent were opposed and 20 percent were uncertain.

The opposition Labour Party and New Zealand First have criticised the government and promised to organise a manned re-entry of the drift tunnel if they are elected following the September 23 election. Labour leader Andrew Little told Newshub, “More and more evidence now is mounting to say there’s something in there that we haven’t been told, it’s not right, it doesn’t match up with the official story. We’ve got to get in there.”

Both parties, however, supported the deregulated environment that led to the disaster. Pike River mine was developed between 2004 and 2008, under the then-Labour government, and was allowed to open despite the many safety breaches. Labour MP Damien

O’Connor admitted in 2012 that the party had failed to act on warnings that the deregulation, including the dismantling of the specialist mining inspectorate during the 1990s, would inevitably lead to a catastrophe.

New Zealand First was a coalition partner in both Labour and National-led governments, supporting their agenda of pro-business deregulation.

The trade union bureaucracy is also deeply implicated in the disaster. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union had about 70 members at Pike River. Immediately after the disaster Little, then leader of the EPMU, defended the company, telling the media it had “a good health and safety committee” and the union was not aware of any problems in the mine.

In fact, the union was aware of the dangerous conditions in the mine, which prompted a spontaneous walkout by a group of miners on one occasion. It remained silent and did not organise any industrial action to challenge management over the health and safety issues at Pike River.

The EPMU, which was renamed E Tu in 2015, has not commented on whether it knew about the suppressed footage showing that the mine can be safely re-entered to conduct a proper investigation.

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