

Introduction to new book *Pike River: The Crime and Cover-up*

Tom Peters
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Mehring Books is pleased to announce the publication of *Pike River: The Crime and Cover-up* by Tom Peters.

The introduction is posted below. The book can be ordered from Mehring Books' Australian website. Readers in New Zealand can order it directly from the Socialist Equality Group; for details email socialistequalitynz@gmail.com.

The Pike River underground coal mine, located in the Paparoa mountain ranges on the West Coast of New Zealand's South Island, exploded on November 19, 2010. Thirty-one workers were underground at the time and only two escaped with their lives. Three more explosions tore through the mine on November 24, 26, and 28, leaving no hope of any more survivors. The bodies of 28 men and one 17-year-old boy have never been recovered.

The disaster, and the revelations that followed about conditions in the mine, profoundly shocked working people throughout New Zealand and the world. Despite initial attempts by politicians, the media and union bureaucrats to claim that there was "nothing unusual" about the mine, it soon became clear that the 29 deaths were preventable and were the outcome of profit-driven corporate decisions. Yet, to this day, no one has been held to account.

Pike River was New Zealand's first major private coal mine developed in the 21st century to supply the world market, in particular the burgeoning Asian steel industry. It was the flag-bearer for privatising the coal industry, and marketing it globally, and had been set up to break the dominance of the state-owned mining company, Solid Energy. Before a shovel of coal had been dug, it had become the best performer on the stock exchange, listing as one of the country's 50 largest corporations with a market capitalization of \$NZ400 million. Under pressure from shareholders and creditors to speed up its operation, Pike River Coal (PRC) began production before the mine had been properly commissioned, cut costs on safety, and gambled with the lives of its workers.

This book analyses the causes of the disaster, including the pro-business deregulation of safety by successive

governments, and the complicity of state agencies, regulators, and the trade union bureaucracy. The unions functioned as an accomplice to PRC, ensuring that the mine continued to operate despite the company's illegal and life-threatening practices. The book also explains how governments and the judicial system shielded PRC's managers and board members and sought to prevent a proper investigation of the mine.

The material reprinted here is part of the campaign waged by the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) and the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) to mobilise the working class, in New Zealand and internationally, to join the fight to uncover the full truth about what happened at Pike River. The SEG supported the majority of the families of the Pike River victims, who opposed the Labour Party-led government's decision in 2021 to shut down the manned re-entry of the mine.

The families' determined struggle for truth brought them into conflict with the entire political establishment, as well as the union bureaucracy. Most of the media and the government's upper middle class, pseudo-left supporters sought to bury the issue of Pike River.

By the end of 2021, Jacinda Ardern's government had permanently sealed the mine, preventing the recovery of human remains and the examination of forensic evidence. This was done in the face of growing opposition from working people in New Zealand and internationally.

In November 2010, the WSWS responded immediately to the disaster. An article published three days after the first explosion opposed the united efforts of the National Party government, opposition Labour MPs, media pundits, and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union to whitewash Pike River's safety record. The WSWS stated: "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."

The WSWS held a public meeting at Victoria University of Wellington on December 16, 2010, to discuss the political lessons of Pike River. It placed the events in the context of the deepening crisis of the global capitalist system, following three decades of pro-business deregulation, culminating in the financial crisis of 2008, which intensified the cut-throat competition for raw materials and markets. SEG member and WSWS writer John Braddock argued that Pike River and similar disasters showed the urgent need for a socialist party capable of uniting workers internationally to end capitalism. This had become “literally a life and death question for the working class.”

The truth of this statement was tragically confirmed again in the February 22, 2011, Christchurch earthquake, in which 115 people lost their lives in the collapse of the cheaply and unlawfully constructed CTV building. This book includes an article written for the 10th anniversary of this horrific event, for which, as with Pike River, no one has been held accountable.

The sacrifice of workers’ lives for profit has reached horrifying proportions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 20 million people have died worldwide (according to the *Economist’s* April 2022 estimate) because capitalist governments refused to implement the public health measures necessary to eliminate the deadly virus.

The Ardern government abandoned its elimination policy in October 2021, to the dismay of scientists and ordinary people in NZ and throughout the world. Bowing to the demands of big business, New Zealand’s Labour-Greens coalition joined other governments in insisting that the virus must be allowed to circulate throughout the country, and that the population must accept more deaths and severe illnesses as inevitable.

The unions have enforced the reopening of schools and nonessential businesses. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people have been infected with the Omicron variant, and severely underfunded hospitals are being forced to cut back on other services to accommodate COVID patients. By April 2022, there were more than 350 COVID-related deaths, up from 59 at the end of 2021. [The death toll has now soared above 680.]

With millions of workers now exposed to a potentially lethal virus because of deliberate and criminal policy decisions, the lessons of Pike River have a burning relevance. This book argues that workers can only defend their safety and their lives by building new organisations: rank-and-file safety committees, controlled by workers themselves and independent of the pro-capitalist unions. This task is inseparable from the struggle to establish the political independence of the working class from Labour and its allies, by building a new party based on the socialist and

internationalist perspective and principles of Trotskyism—the New Zealand section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

This book contains articles originally published on the WSWS, and three speeches delivered at a public webinar organised by the SEG on May 8, 2021. For this publication, many of these pieces have been edited; some shortened, to minimise repetition, and others significantly expanded. The analysis draws upon dozens of articles published by the WSWS since November 2010, including interviews with members of the victims’ families.

There are also contributions from Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in the mine, and Michael’s sister Olivia Monk, both of whom demand that the underground investigation continue.

A speech by Terry Cook, a writer for the WSWS and member of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia, reviews the 1994 Moura mine disaster and its aftermath. Cook’s speech, delivered at the May 2021 webinar, underscores that the experience of Pike River is not exceptional but was part of a chain of similar disasters internationally.

The Appendices include: a statement from the E t? union making clear its support for the Ardern government’s sealing of Pike River; letters from WSWS readers in support of the Pike River families’ fight for truth; and a letter from UK mines rescue expert Brian Robinson addressed to the NZ government’s Pike River Recovery Agency, denouncing the sealing of the mine. Two earlier WSWS articles are also included: an initial response to the findings of the Pike River royal commission in November 2012, and a report on the October 2017 Supreme Court hearing where families sought a judicial review of the decision not to charge PRC chief executive Peter Whittall.



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