

The Australian bushfires and the climate change “debate”

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A political row over climate change policy has erupted in Australia amid ongoing bushfires that have devastated parts of New South Wales. The government has denied any connection between the fires and global warming, while the Greens have accused Prime Minister Tony Abbott of endangering people's lives by moving to abolish the carbon tax.

The so-called debate involves empty posturing by all sides involved—reflecting the fact that none of the parliamentary parties, including the Greens, propose to reduce carbon emissions by the degree necessary to avert dangerous climate change.

On October 17, the Greens' deputy leader Adam Bandt tweeted, “Tony Abbott's plan means more bushfires for Australia,” and linked to an article he earlier wrote for the *Guardian* that was headlined, “By repealing the carbon tax, Tony Abbott is failing to protect his people.” Bandt wrote: “Donning a volunteer firefighter uniform for the media is a con if you're also helping start fires that put people's lives in danger. If our prime minister truly wants to protect the Australian people, he must help fend off dangerous global warming, the country's biggest ever threat.”

The government immediately denounced Bandt. Environment Minister Greg Hunt declared: “There has been a terrible tragedy in NSW and no one anywhere should seek to politicise any human tragedy, let alone a bushfire of this scale.”

Hunt's response was aimed at suppressing public debate over the established connection between global warming and the increased frequency and intensity of wildfires in Australia. Opposition Labor leader Bill Shorten backed the government's attack on Bandt, insisting that it was “inappropriate” to raise the issue of climate change while fire fighters were still tackling the blazes.

On Monday, UN climate chief Christiana Figueres told

CNN that, while a “direct link” between the NSW bushfires and global warming had not been established, “what is absolutely clear is the science is telling us that there are increasing heat waves in Asia, Europe, and Australia; that there these will continue; that they will continue in their intensity and in their frequency.”

Abbott accused Figueres of “talking through her hat.” He continued: “These fires are certainly not a function of climate change—they're just a function of life in Australia.” Environment Minister Hunt also denounced the UN official, drawing ridicule for citing Wikipedia to confirm that “bushfires in Australia are frequently occurring events during the hotter months of the year.” Scientific evidence contradicts the government's position that the latest bushfires, which follow the 2009 “Black Saturday” inferno that killed 173 people in Victoria, merely reflect the Australian continent's age-old weather patterns and natural vegetation.

Summarising 60 separate peer-reviewed studies on climate change and fire, a report authored by Professor Lesley Hughes of Macquarie University and Professor Will Steffen of the Australian National University, found: “While Australia has always experienced bushfires, climate change is increasing the probability of extreme fire weather days. Climate change is making hot days hotter, and heatwaves more frequent and severe … More intense and frequent hot weather, as well as dry conditions, increases the likelihood of extreme fire weather days.”

A leaked draft report from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has reportedly concluded that very high and extreme fire danger days in Australia will increase by up to 30 percent by the end of the decade, and up to 100 percent by 2050.

Abbott's attempt to deny these scientific realities reflects his continued dependence on the so-called climate sceptics within the Liberal Party who helped install him as

leader in 2009. Abbott previously declared that climate science was “crap,” though he now says he recognises that global warming is real. Significant layers within the Liberal-National government nevertheless flatly dismiss the reality of climate change, and regard even token measures to reduce carbon emissions as an unacceptable interference with the “free market.”

The Greens’ climate change policies are driven by no less politically opportunist calculations than are Abbott’s. Their grandstanding over the bushfires is based on a cynical lie—that the carbon tax introduced by the former Greens-backed minority Labor government is a step toward a solution to the climate change crisis. This is the basis of their bogus claim that Abbott’s abolition of the tax amounts to a crime against the environment. In reality, the carbon tax and the emissions trading scheme (ETS) that was due to emerge from the tax, are pro-business policies, not environmental ones.

The carbon tax involves many “inconvenient truths” for the Greens and the Labor Party—the most obvious being that the measure involves continual *increases* in Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions. While the regressive tax hikes energy bills and other living expenses for working people, annual emissions would rise from 582 million tonnes to 621 million tonnes by 2020, according to the former Labor government’s figures. A nominal 5 percent reduction in the country’s emissions was supposed to be registered through the purchase of dubious “carbon credits” on the global market that supposedly represent emissions-reducing schemes in other countries.

Even if these credits did represent real cuts in carbon emissions, it would amount to a drop in the bucket compared to what is required. The last major survey of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in 2007, concluded that advanced economies had to cut emissions by 25 to 40 percent of their 1990 levels by 2020, merely to see a 50-50 likelihood of keeping average global warming below the 2 degrees Celsius mark. Most climate scientists now consider this a gross underestimate, with some also warning that the 2-degree threshold is far too high. Average temperatures are now just 0.8 degrees above pre-industrial levels, yet the Arctic is in crisis, extreme weather events are more common around the world, and sea levels are rising. Several prominent climate scientists, such as Columbia University’s James Hansen, have concluded that immediate and sharp reductions in global emissions are required.

The carbon tax and the ETS were legislated by Labor and the Greens not to resolve the climate change crisis,

but to boost the international competitiveness of Australian capitalism and promote definite corporate interests. Pricing carbon was designed to reduce the economy’s dependence on coal-fired electricity generators, while the transition to the ETS was pitched to finance capital, which stood to reap enormous profits from the new global commodity, carbon. The Greens also developed close connections with non-fossil fuel based energy corporations, which have received lucrative subsidies via carbon tax revenues. These subsidies are now threatened by the Abbott government’s abolition of the carbon tax—which accounts for the Greens’ outrage over the proposed abolition of the impost.

The government’s “direct action” policy is based on the same emissions target promoted by the former government—a 5 percent reduction by 2020—but favours different business interests. At the heart of Abbott’s plan is a \$3 billion slush fund for the major corporate polluters, with the coal-fired power generating companies expected to reap a substantial portion of the windfall.

None of the parliamentary parties offer any realistic solution to address the climate change crisis because this is impossible within the framework of the profit system. Immediate and drastic emissions reductions require the planned and rational reorganisation of the global economy, investing substantial resources and applying scientific know-how to energy generation, urban planning, transport, agriculture and industry. Under capitalism, this is stymied at every turn by the corporate sabotage of any measure that threatens profits, and by the destructive division of the world into rival nation-states, which makes impossible a globally integrated plan to effectively reduce emissions.



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