

Australian Labor Party backs coal, gas and “border protection”

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On two critical issues, climate change and the global refugee crisis, this week’s Labor Party “special platform conference” demonstrated the utter political bankruptcy of all those who have insisted for decades that Labor, a thoroughly capitalist party, can somehow be pressured in a progressive direction.

In Labor’s tightly-controlled two-day event, one of the longest sessions—lasting less than an hour—involved hand-picked trade union and party representatives paying lip service to the need for action on the environmental crisis and criticising the pro-fossil fuel policy of the Liberal-National Coalition government.

Yet the main outcomes were to abandon any carbon emissions reduction target for 2030, mirroring the government’s refusal to set such a target, and to recommit any Labor government to continuing to support the mining giants based on the lucrative extraction of the main fossil fuels—coal, gas and oil.

With these outcomes stitched up by the party and union powerbrokers behind closed doors, there was no dissent, even of a token character. Every vote was unanimous.

Because of the insatiable drive for corporate profit, global warming is accelerating. All the scientific reports have warned that unless carbon emissions and the use of fossil fuels are urgently reduced, the world is headed for average temperature rises of 3 to 5 degrees Celsius by the end of the century, producing intense heatwaves, droughts and fire, more severe tropical storms and flooding, increased acidification of oceans, accelerated permafrost melt, the thinning of ice sheets in the Arctic and Antarctica, and rising sea levels.

Despite the global nature of this crisis, Labor’s policies were recast, more explicitly than ever, in nationalist terms, in line with the conference’s overarching focus on strengthening the US military alliance, directed against China, and preparing for war.

“Labor will ensure that Australia becomes a renewable

energy superpower,” is the opening declaration of the party’s platform chapter on the environment. In moving the chapter, Labor’s energy spokesman Chris Bowen even claimed that the development of the continent’s clean energy sources would make the country a “manufacturing superpower” as well. He told the conference: “The globe’s climate emergency is Australia’s jobs opportunity.”

Alongside this promotion of “green” industries to profit from the climate crisis, an agreed amendment was adopted, proposed by Australian Workers’ Union national vice president Paul Farrow, to specifically hail the coal industry, along with the rest of the mining sector.

“Labor recognises and values the economic and employment contribution of Australia’s mining and extractive resources industries including iron ore, coal, uranium, nickel, rare earths, gold, copper, zinc, silver, gas, bauxite and others,” the amendment stated.

Another amendment, sponsored by the Construction Forestry Mining Maritime and Energy Union’s mining and energy general secretary Grahame Kelly, reiterated Labor’s backing for the highly-profitable exporting of coal, oil and gas. “Labor supports Australian industry, including agriculture, manufacturing, minerals including coal, oil and gas,” the amendment said.

That means backing the further expansion of fracking and other new gas projects, which are widely opposed in urban and regional areas alike.

Speaker after speaker from the mining-related unions insisted that these commitments were essential to give the party any hope of winning back disaffected mining workers, who deserted the party in the 2019 federal election, along with many other workers. But the essential thrust of the platform chapter is to guarantee the super-profits of the coal, oil and gas conglomerates.

To provide a figleaf for these pledges, representatives of the Labor Environmental Action Network (LEAN) were

given time to pretend that a Labor government would make a difference to the global warming disaster.

In an attempt to appease the immensely popular concern over climate change, intensified by the 2019–20 bushfire catastrophe and this year’s floods, LEAN co-convenor Felicity Wade said the conference “confirms Labor’s commitment to showing up to keep Australians safe from a disrupted future where terrifying fire and flood are just the beginning.”

An amendment by Labor MPs Ged Kearney (a former president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions) and Josh Wilson said a Labor government would recognise “a climate emergency” and adopt renewable energy “at a rapid pace.” Even this purely token gesture was couched in terms of transforming Australia into a “renewables superpower.”

In reality, that means boosting the fortunes of the mining companies, along with those of the much-hyped “green” and “clean energy” businesses that are becoming more prominent in Australian capitalism’s corporate and financial elite.

The only climate-related initiatives announced during the conference were subsidies for purchases of electric cars, which remain out of reach for working class people, and for small-scale battery storage projects to facilitate the spread of household solar panels.

These proposals, even if implemented, are dwarfed by the magnitude and global character of the climate crisis. To seriously address global warming it is necessary to carry out a major reorganisation of economic life worldwide. Energy production has to be shifted to renewables, accompanied by the genuine protection and enhancement of the lives and livelihoods of mining workers.

That involves massive international funding for infrastructure and the development of technologies, instead of pouring trillions of dollars into military spending and war preparations and the pockets of the mining magnates and other billionaires. In other words, a socialist solution is urgently required.

No time at all was allocated at Labor’s conference to the mounting global refugee disaster, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the universal closing of borders by governments. More people are fleeing persecution, violence and poverty than any time since World War II. Increasingly brutal measures are being taken against desperate asylum seekers, from the US-Mexico border to the Mediterranean Sea and Australia’s detention facilities.

For the past three decades, Labor conferences have featured set-piece “debates” on the party’s anti-refugee policies, which date back to the Keating government’s imposition of the mandatory detention of refugees in 1992. Even at the last conference, in 2018, such a charade was conducted in order for supposed opponents of the detention regime to foster illusions that a Labor government would deliver “fairness” and “compassion,” in contrast to the Liberal-National government.

No such show was conducted this time. Endorsed without debate, the platform declares unequivocal support for the effectively indefinite detention of asylum seekers on remote Pacific and Indian Ocean islands, which was re-instituted by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013, along with the denial of their basic democratic and legal right to apply for protection visas.

Cynically seeking to stoke xenophobic anti-refugee sentiment, the platform states: “To maintain Australians’ confidence and trust in the integrity of our migration system, Labor will fund and maintain robust border security measures that support the orderly processing of migration to our country and protect our national interest and our national borders.”

A “statement in detail” adds: “To support Australia’s strong border security regime, Labor will maintain: • An architecture of excised offshore places; and • The non-statutory processing on Christmas Island of persons who arrive unauthorised at an excised place, except where other arrangements are entered into under bilateral and regional arrangements.”

More than ever, Labor and the unions are seeking to divert the rising discontent in the working class over yawning social inequality and deteriorating working and living conditions in a reactionary nationalist direction, scapegoating refugees and other workers overseas.

This toxic nationalism plays into the promotion of a wartime-style anti-foreigner political climate. Against this poison, working people need to defend the right of refugees and workers to live and work in whichever country they choose, with full civil and political rights, instead of being treated like criminals.



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