

Australian Labor government backs indefinite gas mining

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The Albanese Labor government this month demonstrated its commitment to the fossil fuel industries that form the backbone of Australian capitalism. It released a “Future Gas Strategy,” promising to increase the extraction of natural gas through to “2050 and beyond,” including expansions of large gas projects in Western Australia, run by companies like Chevron and Woodside.

Despite claims by the government that gas needs to be used as a bridging fuel to get to net-zero carbon emissions, climate scientists have warned that this approach would lock in around 3 degrees Celsius of global warming, leading to catastrophic worldwide consequences.

More than 80 percent of the gas mined in Australia is exported. The country is already one of the largest exporters of liquefied natural gas—around \$85 billion worth in 2023—accounting for about 20 percent of the world market, as well as being a giant coal exporter. This makes corporations operating in Australia some of the biggest contributors to global warming.

Although the Labor government claims it is committed to ensuring that the carbon emissions associated with gas will be “abated and offset,” the strategy is deliberately vague on how this will be accomplished. There are mentions of reforms to the pro-business “Safeguard Mechanism” put in place in 2016 by the previous Liberal-National Coalition government, which failed to reduce emissions, as well as “decarbonisation” plans.

However, these schemes do not have the scope to counteract the devastating effects that the increased gas emissions will have on the climate. In fact, Labor’s version of the “Safeguard Mechanism” allows the country’s 215 biggest polluting companies to buy carbon credits to supposedly offset their emissions and

gives them years to do so.

The gas announcement was condemned by environmental organisations, such as the Climate Council and the Australian Conservation Foundation. On the other hand, it was warmly embraced by the gas industry and the corporate media. An article in the *Australian* described the strategy as “a step in the right direction.”

This is not an isolated betrayal from a government otherwise committed to climate action. On the contrary, it is the latest in a string of such decisions by Labor and its environment minister Tanya Plibersek.

Plibersek last month revealed that the government’s long-promised reforms to the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act would be put on hold.

This legislation, introduced by the Howard Coalition government in 1999, is Australia’s principal environmental protection law. It is woefully deficient, even according to official inquiries.

A 2021 report by Professor Graeme Samuel—after a 10-year review of the Act—described it as “ineffective” and “not fit to address current or future environmental challenges.” Among its many weaknesses is that it does not mention climate change—the primary threat to ecological functioning in the 21st century—as an issue that must be considered before allowing mining and other projects to proceed.

Samuel’s recommendations were limited to changes such as disclosure of fossil fuel emissions for development proposals. But even this was too much for the mining conglomerates and the Albanese government.

As recently as December 2022, Plibersek said the government would deliver a reform package for the “broken” laws in 2023, yet any changes have now been

delayed to an unspecified time in the future.

Plibersek has tried to distract attention from the government's actions by proposing a national Environment Protection Agency (EPA). However, even this limited proposal allows her or any future environment minister to veto any EPA decisions, in the "national interest"—that is, in the interest of Australian capitalism.

Under the existing EPBC laws, successive federal governments have approved at least 740 fossil fuel projects. The Albanese government has not bucked this trend at all. In her role as environment minister since May 2022, Plibersek has given the green light for a number of fossil fuel projects. These include four new coal mines, which are estimated to produce a total of 156 million tonnes of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions during their lifetime, as well as a Santos gas fracking project in 2023.

Plibersek has also refused requests to assess climate impacts under the EPBC Act for three coal mines or projects, which combined are estimated to produce a lifetime total of 1,457 million tonnes of GHG emissions.

Even under the current EPBC laws, Plibersek could reject such projects by citing their damage to ecosystems such as the Great Barrier Reef. She is choosing not to.

Instead, Plibersek has used her powers to reject the construction of some renewable energy projects, citing concerns for the damage they would do to wetland ecosystems and the species that rely on them. This is totally hypocritical. The biodiversity risk caused by the increased emissions of the coal plants she has approved apparently does not count.

Furthermore, the government's recent budget demonstrated a complete lack of concern for the biodiversity crisis, with spending devoted to it representing less than 0.1 percent of the total budget.

Albanese himself promised to deliver "ambitious action on climate change" shortly after taking office in May 2022. But a 2023 analysis by the Australian Conservation Foundation showed that his government will be responsible for producing seven times more coal and gas emissions than it is set to cut by 2030. That is, for every tonne of emissions Albanese's government is projected to reduce, it will add seven more tonnes to the atmosphere through its support of

coal, oil, and gas.

This analysis found that "16 fossil fuel projects have received some kind of approval or other material support during the term of the Albanese government," the lifetime emissions of which will be equivalent to "the annual pollution from every car, truck and bus currently driven in Australia for nearly 75 years."

This demonstrates the bankruptcy of hoping to achieve genuine climate action by voting for Labor. No less than the Coalition, it serves the interests of mining conglomerates.

The Greens, while criticising aspects of Labor's actions, promote the illusion that by voting for them, Labor can be pressured to take meaningful action on climate change. But the Greens backed the pro-business emissions targets set by Labor in 2022, which are far short of what is necessary to keep global warming below 2 degrees Celsius.

The Greens' pact with Labor is in line with their general messaging that somehow the capitalist profit system can be reformed to prevent ecological disaster. In reality, capitalism is fundamentally incapable of solving the problems it has created, including disastrous climate change, along with war and soaring social inequality. Only a socialist reorganisation of society that overturns the profit system can seriously address the climate crisis.



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