

Australian climate policy debate exposes Labor's bogus emissions targets

Mark Wilson
1 July 2024

The inadequacy and failure of the Australian Labor government's 2030 carbon emissions reductions targets have been highlighted by Liberal-National Coalition proposals to scrap them, and yet supposedly reach net-zero by 2050 by building nuclear power stations instead.

Labor's 2022 Climate Change Bill set a target of just a 43 percent reduction (relative to a 2005 baseline) of Australian greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. The legislation was backed by the Greens as well as the Teal independent members of parliament, despite this target bearing no relationship whatsoever to the scientifically required emission cuts necessary to halt rapid climate change and the developing ecological catastrophes.

Estimations by the Climate Council from 2021 suggested that Australia's contribution to keeping global temperatures below 1.5 degrees Celsius, a critical tipping point for global warming, would necessitate a 75 percent reduction in emissions by 2030.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in 2022, the bill, "was a fraud from beginning to end. This is not least because it contained no actual mechanisms whatsoever for reducing emissions and did not impose any costs or mandates on the fossil fuel corporations that are responsible for the bulk of Australia's contribution to climate change."

Seizing on the reality that even this 2030 target will not be met, the Coalition has now vowed to abandon it. Opposition leader Peter Dutton stated, "there's no sense signing up to targets you don't have any prospect of achieving."

The Labor government has claimed it is on track for the 43 percent target by 2030. But independent climate science experts, such as Dr Gordon Weiss, have

disputed this. Weiss authored a paper in March 2024 titled, "Why Australia is not on track to achieve a 43 percent emissions reduction by 2030."

A vital component of the Labor government's emissions target is its stated goal to boost renewable energy to 82 percent of the National Electricity Market (NEM)—which provides around 80 percent of Australia's power—by 2030. But that goal is off track. Weiss's paper concluded it was "highly unlikely Australia will achieve the 82 percent renewable energy penetration."

A recent analysis estimated that on the current trajectory, the NEM is likely to be only 60 percent based on renewable energy by 2030. That is actually lower than the baseline of 68 percent of renewables by 2030 without any additional policies—an indication that the Albanese government may well have reversed progress on this goal.

This failure has been known by the government since at least last year, when the Australian Energy Market Operator warned that 82 percent target could be too ambitious, due to lags in building renewable energy and transmission infrastructure. It said the total renewable energy share could be as low as 63 percent by 2030.

Far from being a "lesser evil" on climate change, the Labor government has demonstrated that it is fundamentally no different to the Coalition. Its recently-unveiled "Future Gas Strategy" promises an indefinite expansion of natural gas projects, thus prolonging the corporate exploitation of fossil fuels.

Labor's Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek also has used her powers since coming into office to halt numbers of renewable energy projects, while approving more coal plants. These coal projects include the Gregory Crinum Coal Mine in the Bowen Basin, to run until 2073, the Isaac River Coal Mine, the Star Coal

Mine and the Ensham Coal Mine.

In addition, the government has given initial go-aheads for two major coal mine expansions. One of the proposed developments, MACH Energy's planned expansion of its Mount Pleasant operations in New South Wales (NSW), could become one of Australia's biggest coalmines based on coal volume if it reached the proposed production capacity of 21 million tonnes of run-of-mine coal each year.

The other is Whitehaven Coal's proposed extension of its Narrabri underground coal project in NSW, which would extend the life of the mine by 13 years to 2044.

Last December, the international initiative known as the Climate Action Tracker designated Australian action on climate change as "insufficient." It reported: "The government continues to endorse the expansion of the fossil fuel industry by supporting new carbon-intensive offshore gas field developments, permitting fracking, approving new coal mines, and creating regulations for CO2 sequestration beyond its borders, in contradiction with its stated climate goals."

Whatever Labor's rhetoric on the importance of renewable energy, its concern is not the threat that climate change poses to the countless millions who will be affected by it globally, but rather on trying to shore up the fortunes of Australian capitalism by attracting investment in "green" industries.

Prominent business leaders have opposed the Coalition's plan to drop the 2030 target. Business Council of Australia chief executive Bran Black, representing the largest companies operating in the country, told *the Australian Financial Review* (AFR): "Significant investment from private capital will be required for Australia to successfully transition to a net-zero economy and already announced and legislated targets should remain in place."

In its latest budget, Labor allocated \$13.7 billion in tax credits for corporations involved in green hydrogen projects, as well as critical minerals mining. The AFR reported that those who would primarily benefit from this funding included "billionaire Chris Ellison's Mineral Resources, Pilbara Minerals, Wesfarmers, IGO Limited and the Gina Rinehart-backed Liontown Resources."

The article added that "the additional \$8 billion in funding for green hydrogen is a win for wealthy companies such as billionaire Andrew Forrest's

Fortescue Metals and Woodside," a large gas and oil producing company.

The Labor government's policies would deliver a disastrous 3C of global warming if enacted universally around the world. The fact that the planet is currently on track for that amount of warming is an indictment of the entire global capitalist system.

In 2022, the WSWS concluded that the "Greens-backed Labor government's initiatives, in other words, represent no break whatsoever from the long record of state-backed corporate criminality on climate policy."

In the almost two years since the passage of the 2022 Climate Change Bill, this analysis has proven entirely correct. The crucial lesson to be drawn from these experiences is that no capitalist party or politicians—not the Coalition, Labor, the Greens nor the Teals—can provide a solution to the unfolding ecological disaster caused by the corporate profit system.

This failure is occurring around the world. Despite soaring global temperatures, capitalist governments and corporations are moving to abandon their meagre and insufficient climate pledges altogether. Only the intervention of the working class to seize political power on a socialist basis can prevent climate change worsening into catastrophic proportions.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact