

Australia: Labor's environment minister approves decades of continued coal mining operations

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In another demonstration of its commitment to big business, Australia's Labor government has given three major coal mine companies approval to extend their operations for between 8 and 22 years. Together, these coal mines will produce over 1.3 billion tonnes of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in their remaining lifetime.

The extension of these fossil fuel projects is in complete contradiction to the scientific consensus that GHG emissions must be drastically and swiftly cut to prevent further catastrophic global warming. They represent a further demonstration of Labor's fraudulent posturing as a party committed to effective climate action.

All three mines are located in the state of New South Wales. They are MACH Energy's Mount Pleasant Optimisation project, Glencore's Ravensworth Underground Mine and Whitehaven Coal's Narrabri Underground Mine. Labor's Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek approved them to continue operations until 2048, 2032 and 2044, respectively.

Plibersek exploited a Federal Court ruling about four months ago which stated that the environment minister is not required to consider the climate impact of fossil fuel emissions before approving coal and gas projects. Plibersek joined hands with both Whitehaven Coal and MACH Energy to oppose the court challenge brought by the Environmental Council of Central Queensland (ECoCeQ).

Among the arguments she used to defend her allegiance to fossil fuel expansions was the so-called 'drug-dealer's defence.' Essentially, Plibersek stated that if Australia did not produce this coal, the supply chain would result in someone else doing it anyway. In her words, speaking of the coal mine extensions, "if the proposed action does not proceed, the prospective buyers will purchase an equivalent amount of coal from a supplier other than the proponent, which would result in an equivalent amount of greenhouse gas emissions."

Such claims have been refuted by the International Energy

Agency, who stated that in light of expected drops in global demand for coal "no new coal mines or mine extensions are required." It has also been argued by economists such as Professor John Quiggin of the University of Queensland's School of Economics that the 'drug dealer defence' conflicts with basic economic principles. Referring to coal production, he stated: "if one producer withdraws from the market or reduces output, it is highly unlikely to be replaced by an identical-cost producer."

Speaking on behalf of ECoCeQ after the ruling, Ashleigh Wyles said: "We're afraid this decision will open the floodgates for the minister to approve dozens of new coal and gas projects currently on her desk." It did not take long for this warning to be borne out.

Plibersek was not bound by law to approve these three projects, but she chose to do so. As Julia Dehm of the La Trobe University Law School explained: "The minister can, under the current laws, take into account the impact of climate change... She's not required to by the law, but she's able to."

Plibersek tried to deflect criticism by saying that these were "not new projects" but only renewals. This is doubly misleading. Firstly, it does not matter if the GHG emissions that Plibersek has green-lighted come from new or existing projects. The coal produced will still continue to warm the planet to dangerous levels.

Secondly, Plibersek has already approved the construction of at least four new coal plants, as well as a new gas fracking project in 2023. These projects include the Gregory Crinum Coal Mine in Queensland's Bowen Basin, to run until 2073, the Isaac River Coal Mine, the Star Coal Mine and the Ensham Coal Mine.

In an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Plibersek absurdly declared: "I have approved ten times more renewable energy projects than coal projects." This is a deliberate obfuscation of Labor's climate record. First of all, what must be counted is the total number

of coal, oil and gas projects that the Labor government has either approved or given material support to.

That number, according to a 2023 Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) analysis, was 16. That did not include the Ravensworth mine, nor the more than 120 gas wells Plibersek approved for Senex Energy in Queensland, nor the permits given to companies such as Woodside and Chevron to begin exploring new offshore gas fields.

Even if Plibersek's claim was taken at face value, the number of renewable energy projects approved is not, by itself, a relevant indicator of climate action. What really matters is how much those projects allow for fossil fuels to be phased out, and hence reduce GHG emissions. Labor's continued funding and approval for fossil fuel projects will result in seven times as many greenhouse gas emissions as it is responsible for supposedly avoiding, according to the ACF analysis.

Plibersek also insisted that extending the life of coal mines was consistent with Labor's target of 43 percent emissions reduction by 2030. Not only is it increasingly unlikely that this will be met but the target itself is totally inadequate (see: "*Australian climate policy debate exposes Labor's bogus emissions targets*"). It was set with the support of the Greens, who are just as committed to maintaining the capitalist profit system. Multiple scientific analyses have shown that a target of 67-75 percent is required to keep warming below a global average of 1.5° higher than pre-industrial levels, which is regarded as a critical trigger point.

What is exposed more fundamentally though, is the bankruptcy of even attempting to tackle the climate crisis within a nationalist framework. The 43 percent target only addresses domestic emissions; that is, the emissions produced by fossil fuels burned in Australia. It does not address fossil fuel exports, which accounts for 78 percent of total GHG emissions attributable to Australian corporations.

Indeed, virtually all the coal produced at the three mines recently approved are exported according to the companies that own them. Whitehaven Coal describes its mines, including the Narrabri underground mine, as producing "high-quality metallurgical and thermal coal for export to advanced and developing economies across North and South East Asia." Glencore also notes on its website that the Ravensworth mine "produces thermal and metallurgical coal for export," while MACH Energy states "Mount Pleasant coal will be loaded onto trains for transportation to coal terminals in Newcastle for shipping to international customers."

What this all means is that essentially all the coal produced by these mines in the next several decades will be burnt overseas. In other words, the 1.3 billion tonnes of GHG emissions expected from the burning of this coal will not

even factor into Labor's domestic 43 percent target anyway. No Australian government, Labor or otherwise, has even begun to address climate change from the perspective of fossil fuel exports.

The climate crisis is an international problem and cannot be resolved within the capitalist nation-state system. Nor can any of its representatives in government be counted on to take action that will protect the millions of people around the world—especially the working class and poor—who are the most vulnerable to the disastrous effects of global warming. As the actions of the Australian Labor government demonstrate, they are bound to represent first and foremost the profit interests of the big business ruling class.

Australia, Indonesia and Russia are by far the largest exporters of coal in the world. According to the Statista website, Australia was the largest exporter, accounting for 33.9 percent or one third of the world's total exports of coal, well ahead of both Indonesia and Russia.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* previously concluded: "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."

The environmentally destructive path on which the corporate elite and all its political servants have placed the planet is an expression, together with the plunge into war, of the crisis of capitalism and its inability to provide a sustainable future for humanity. It poses ever more starkly the necessity for a revolutionary and socialist strategy to reverse climate change and prevent a global catastrophe.



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