

Australia: Mass arrests of protesters at Newcastle coal port

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Over 8,000 people from across Australia attended the “People’s Blockade” in Newcastle, New South Wales (NSW) over the weekend of November 27 to December 2, voicing hostility to the escalating climate catastrophe and the refusal of successive governments to curb Australia’s vast coal and gas exports.

Australia is the world’s second-largest exporter of thermal coal and a major LNG producer, with Newcastle hosting the largest coal port in the world in terms of export volume.

Participants were motivated by the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events attributed to rising greenhouse emissions including soaring temperatures, intensifying bushfires and storms. Under these conditions, coal and gas companies enjoy tens of billions in revenue with some paying virtually zero tax according to experts.

Taking to kayaks and other small craft over the weekend, protesters blocked three coal ships and rescheduled 10 according to organisers, crossing a “maritime exclusion zone” imposed by the NSW Police. On Sunday around 2 p.m., the port authority was compelled to announce the cancellation of all shipping movements.

Over this time, police carried out a coordinated crackdown on protesters arresting 181 people. Sixteen of these were detained on Monday morning, including one juvenile, for entering the restricted areas of the coal terminal nearby and chaining themselves to coal loaders and conveyor belts for three and a half hours.

The police operation included marine units, drones, rapid-response teams and mounted patrols aimed at preventing even symbolic interference with the movement of coal ships. While draconian anti-protest laws were not formally invoked, which can carry up to two years’ imprisonment for disrupting major economic activities, police relied upon the exclusion zone to carry out the detentions.

Whilst many in attendance were genuinely opposed to the actions of the Labor government, the politics that lead the “protestival,” of appealing to the government to change course, are bankrupt.

This is the third year that the People’s Blockade by

“Rising Tide” has run, and the response of both the state and federal Labor governments has been to solidarize with the coal and gas giants whose operations dominate the Hunter region (where Newcastle is based).

NSW government ministers, including Premier Chris Minns, denounced the latest protest as “reckless” and “dangerous,” parroting police claims that the blockade threatened “public safety.” In reality, the only “danger” posed by the flotilla of kayaks and swimmers was to the uninterrupted flow of corporate profits.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his ministers have routinely defended fossil-fuel exports as essential to “national economic security,” ignoring the scientific consensus that such exports must rapidly cease to avert catastrophic warming. Labor’s 2024 and 2025 budgets entrenched subsidies, tax concessions and infrastructure support for the industry. Since taking office in 2022, the Albanese government has approved new coal, oil and gas developments.

The claim that climate change can be addressed through parliament has also proven to be a sham. At one global forum after another, including the COP30 climate summit in November, governments, each representing their own corporate interests, refuse to take anything approaching the measures required to halt or even slow the environmental crisis. They have largely abandoned such pretences.

Just last week, Labor passed legislation which fast tracks the approval of mining and war-related projects. This is pursuant to the minerals agreement reached with the fascistic US President Donald Trump in October, in which Labor pledged to deregulate and “streamline” the existing environmental approvals process, reducing time and opportunity for public challenge or review.

It is significant that while environmental groups have described the legislation as “the largest deregulation of environmental law in 20 years,” it was passed with the active support of the Greens, who were praised in the financial press for their assistance.

Contained within are new powers for the environment

minister to unilaterally set or disregard environmental standards on the grounds of a “national emergency”. Additionally, there will be an expansion of “critical infrastructure protection,” enabling police/authorities to more easily block or disperse protests at ports, energy facilities, pipelines, and more.

Greens leader Larissa Waters was warmly promoted by event organisers and spoke on Saturday. Waters began her speech with faux moral outrage and solidarity with participants, cynically stating: “coal and gas corporations... get approvals handed out like confetti.”

She then stated, “But we did manage to have a win this week... the best that we could get is to stop the government’s plan to process coal and gas projects even faster.” Waters was referring to the fact that the Greens joined with Labor to pass its regressive environmental legislation, providing the votes necessary.

Her depiction of the bills was a complete fraud. As even Waters’ comment hinted at, the legislation provides no obstacles to the establishment of new coal and gas projects, which will continue to be approved by Labor. The supposed Greens’ victory was to remove a provision for those to be fast-tracked.

Feigning confusion with Labor, Waters raised, “What is going on in these people’s minds? They promised they’d be better and different from the last bozo,” but were now “breaking all of our hearts.”

Such remarks are designed to cultivate illusions in Labor, a party of the corporate elite, which represents the largest businesses, including the mining giants. Waters was covering over this basic class reality, while suggesting that moral appeals would compel Labor to shift course.

Waters could not square her lament with the fact that she had joined hands with Labor to pass its environmental laws just days before. In reality, the aspiration of the Greens, which was at the centre of their May, 2025 election campaign, is to form a de facto or actual coalition with Labor, in line with their character as a pro-capitalist party of the parliamentary establishment.

Roughly an hour after Waters spoke, Emma Norton, an organiser with the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and a member of pseudo-left Socialist Alternative, addressed the crowd during a segment dubbed “Paddle for Palestine.” Norton hailed the recent general strike in Italy opposing the Gaza genocide, urging that the “Italian spirit of ‘block everything’” be brought to Australia.

This was noisy bluster aimed at concealing the political issues confronting workers in the fight against the climate catastrophe and more broadly.

In the first instance, Norton said nothing about the role of the Greens. The pseudo-left groups collaborate with the

Greens and like its representatives promote the fraud that protest politics can pressure governments to the left.

The union bureaucracies, moreover, are the chief obstacle to any industrial and political action by the working class, a fact that Norton did not mention. Thoroughly corporatised entities, they collaborate on a daily basis with governments and the major employers, driving down the jobs, wages and conditions of workers.

The suppression of industrial action extends to every major political issue. The unions rejected demands, including for the members, for stoppages to oppose the Australian Labor government’s complicity in the Gaza genocide. Over the course of the mass slaughter, not a single day has been lost to industrial action called to defend the Palestinians.

Similarly, during the youth climate strikes of 2019 and 2023, unions warned members not to participate during work hours, declaring any stoppage “unlawful” under the Fair Work Act, introduced by a Labor government with the active involvement of the union bureaucracies.

The pseudo-left covers up these issues, because they are themselves increasingly integrated into the union bureaucracy. They defend it by insisting that workers cannot take any action, outside the framework of the bureaucracy.

While the Newcastle event pointed to growing anger over the climate crisis, definite political lessons must be drawn. The environmental catastrophe will not be halted through yet more appeals to capitalist governments, or protest stunts aimed at placing pressure on them.

Climate change is a product of capitalism, an outmoded social order hurtling to catastrophe, including the threat of a nuclear war. The climate crisis cannot be resolved under conditions where society’s resources and productive capacity by a tiny corporate and financial elite. It is, moreover, an inherently global issue which cannot be addressed within the framework of rival capitalist nation-states, each representing their own capitalist class.

What is required is the development of an international movement of the working class, completely independent of the governments and political establishments responsible for the climate crisis. Such a movement must be socialist, aiming at nothing less than the reorganisation of society from top to bottom on a world scale, so that the immense resources that exist can be harnessed to address social need, including by addressing the climate catastrophe, not the accumulation of vast private profit.



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