

Mass arrests at protest targeting Australian coal port in Newcastle

Robert Campion

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Some 173 climate change protesters were arrested during an attempted blockade of the world's largest coal port in Newcastle, a working-class regional hub several hours north of Sydney.

The roundup was directly presided over by the New South Wales (NSW) state Labor administration, which has collaborated closely with the federal Labor government in a broader assault on civil liberties.

Police reported that a total of 156 adults and 14 children (one as young as 13) were charged last Sunday. Some 138 were charged with disruption of a major facility, and 32 for not complying with a direction from an authorised officer relating to safety. Another 3 had been charged on Saturday for refusing to obey police directions in the Harbour.

If found guilty of disrupting a major facility such as ports and railways under Section 214A of the NSW Crimes Act, protesters face up to two years in prison and fines as high as \$22,000. These penalties on the right to protest were passed with the support of Labor under the then-Liberal National Coalition Government in 2022.

Their use by the NSW Labor government is a massive attack on democratic rights. It is a clear signal that the state, led by Labor, is seeking to abolish the right to demonstrate altogether.

Organised by the climate activist group "Rising Tide" for the 13th consecutive year, protesters took to the water in kayaks, sailboats and rafts within an exclusion zone near the shoreline established by NSW Police. The mass arrest began on Sunday when the flotilla of protesters broke through in unison to block a coal ship.

The Port Authority confirmed that shipping movements were paused for several hours due to safety concerns.

Protesters demanded that the Labor government cancel all new coal and gas projects and end coal exports from Newcastle by 2030. They also demanded a 78 percent tax on coal export profits to fund the transition to renewable energy and support fossil fuel workers.

Newcastle Port is the world's largest coal export port, with more than 100 million tonnes of coal annually and roughly 2000 ship movements each year. Australia is also the world second largest coal producer behind Indonesia.

Protesters pointed to alarming findings that 2023 was the hottest year on record and the role of the Labor government, which appealed to opposition to climate change in its federal election campaign of 2022, promising a 43 percent emissions reduction by

2030 and net-zero by 2050. Not only is it insufficient compared to the rate of global warming, but Labor has since approved 28 coal and gas projects.

In a follow-up protest on Wednesday, 20 "Rising Tide" protesters were arrested near Parliament House in Canberra for blocking a road and refusing to obey orders to disperse from police.

The arrests were one of the largest in recent history, following last year's blockade organised by Rising Tide which resulted in 109 detentions. Police officers were reportedly brought in from across the state with at least 5 vessels packed with officers in preparation.

These events are all the more significant that they are occurring under a state and federal Labor government. In a statement, Labor Minister for the Hunter Region Yasmin Catley praised the "outstanding" job of NSW police and "strongly condemn[ed]" the protest. Prior to the protest, the police had threatened to ban it altogether.

This is part of a broader onslaught.

Victorian Police, acting under the direction of a Labor administration in that state as well, have confirmed in recent weeks that a total of 110 people have been arrested since a protest outside the Land Forces Defence Expo at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre in September. After 89 were arrested on the spot, a further 21 people have been arrested following police interrogation of CCTV and bodycam footage.

Many of those arrested after the event were done so as part of raids in their homes, including one instance of 15 officers arresting two pro-Palestine students.

The arrests reflect concerns within the ruling elite over the growth of social opposition over a raft of issues, including climate change, social inequality and Australia's complicity in the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Some 7,000 people participated in Rising Tide's 8 day "protestival," of which the port blockade was a part. That reflects a developing politicisation, including among young people who were heavily represented.

But Rising Tide's perspective of middle-class protest politics oriented to Labor and the Greens is a bankrupt one.

That was underscored by an email from the organisers after the event, complacently describing the mass arrest as one of many "highlights" of the week. It states that the upcoming protest in Canberra would be asking "Albo" (an affectionate term for Labor

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese), “when will you stop approving new coal and gas? What will it take?”

This is a cover for the fact that Labor is an unalloyed representative of the major corporations, including the fossil fuel conglomerates and magnates. It is sowing the illusion that endless appeals will somehow produce a change of course, despite all evidence to the contrary.

The fawning attitude of the organisers to Labor was underscored by their promotion of Peter Garrett at the event. The ageing rock star won support in the 1980s for the politically critical songs of Midnight Oil. He went on to serve in a Labor government from 2010–13 as it increased Australia’s carbon emissions, while pursuing a broader agenda of militarism abroad and an offensive on the social conditions of the working class.

The Greens were heavily promoted at the event and featured several major speakers, including Greens leader Adam Bandt and Senator Mehreen Faruqi. They denounced “complicit governments for fuelling the climate collapse.”

While posturing over the environment, the social crisis and the Gaza genocide, the Greens are a capitalist party of the political establishment. They have collaborated closely with the Labor government, including by helping to ram 27 bills through parliament last Thursday, which centred on boosting the profits of the corporate elite.

That collaboration was part of a broader pitch by the Greens for a coalition with Labor after the next federal election, which must be held by May. The Greens are pursuing such an alliance, knowing that as with their last coalition with Labor in 2010–2013, it would be dominated by the interests of the corporations, including the major polluters.

The ending of the climate crisis requires a fight for socialism, which the Greens, as a capitalist party, bitterly oppose. What is needed is the independent mobilisation of the working class, in a struggle against Labor, the Greens and the entire political establishment, aimed at ending the domination of private profit over every aspect of social life. This must be part of a revolutionary struggle for world socialism. The problems confronting humanity, including war, authoritarianism and environmental catastrophe are global in scope, demanding the abolition of the whole capitalist nation-state system.

Members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) discussed this perspective with participants at the “protestival.” The IYSSE raised the connections between the climate crisis and other manifestations of the capitalist breakdown, including the genocide and the US-led drive to war against Russia and China.

Elyssa, an artist, said, “My concern about the climate crisis globally brings me here today, to the world’s largest coal port. I think climate change is a real existential threat. I’m really concerned about our health on this planet; we’re continuing with our actions to cause harm to both the human species and other forms of life.

“My personal home region, the Shoalhaven, was impacted by the 2019-2020 bushfires, so I’ve seen the consequences of this on the local area. I’ve also been working and studying abroad, and I can

see that this is a real concern for people globally.

“I think there’s a lot of reasons why governments aren’t taking action, to do with capitalism and profit. I definitely feel this. Myself as an artist, what I try to do is encapsulate these ideas in a way that can embody and identify with the shocking state of things.”

Gemma, said, “I’m here because it’s really important to support our democracy and our right to protest. Also, as first and second for coal and gas exports globally, it’s really important that Australians recognise the impact we’re having globally as well. Sticking our head in the sand doesn’t help us anyone. We’re the driest continent on earth and it’s time we had a reality check.

“I grew up rurally, I’ve seen the local extinction or decline of bird species from my area, and adaptation and mitigation is of extreme importance especially when it comes to things like the flooding that’s happened and bushfires, we are not prepared as a country, or globally. Our Pacific Island nations are going underwater, these issues are happening globally and we’re part of that struggle.

“This doesn’t just impact one place; our ecosystem is interconnected. A storm moves up from the Antarctic, it’s not just hanging out above Australia. To think that we’re separate from everyone and that the decisions we make don’t matter is short-sighted and naïve.

“We have the resources and people-power, but not enough is being done. At the global summits, at the moment, they’re looking a little bit tokenistic.

“We’re looking at 17 million trees being put in, for example, in Southern Gippsland from Victoria, and the whole ending native forest logging but still logging really, over half of that state is still being deforested. 17 million trees is nowhere near enough, considering the amount of damage we’ve done. That’s a drop in the water, it’s a pathetic first step, really.

“Governments are privatising things like Sydney’s water supply, which is really dangerous to our health and society, and letting multi-national developers knock down ecologically significant areas to build apartments. The community consultations are way too short, and it’s really not fair.”

On Biden’s recent authorisation of Ukraine to fire long-range missiles into Russia, and the danger of nuclear war, Gemma commented: “It’s completely irresponsible. And if you look at Australia and our role, we’ve been some of the first nuclear testing sites, around Woomera. No one wants to go to war. I think we’re at a point of history that those who can see beyond war and a way to peace, need to be standing up and advocating for that.”



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