

Australian Labor government approves 4 more coal mine projects

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In the last week before Christmas, without any announcement, the Albanese Labor government approved four significant coal mine expansions, while hypocritically claiming it had approved no new coal projects in 2024.

These approvals are just the most recent in a series of decisions that completely contradict Labor's supposed commitment to take "more ambitious action on climate change."

The first three expansions are at the Boggabri coal mine owned by Idemitsu in New South Wales (NSW), and, in Queensland, the Caval Ridge Horse Pit owned by BHP Mitsubishi Alliance and the Lake Vermont Meadowbrook mine owned by Bowen Basin Coal.

Together, the production output from these mines could total 350 million tonnes of coal. The lifetime climate emissions of the three mines are estimated at approximately the equivalent of 936 million tonnes (Mt) of CO₂, which is worth over two years of total annual Australian domestic emissions.

That brings the number of coal mine approvals by the Albanese government since taking office in May 2022 to ten. These include the previous approvals for four entirely new coal mines, and expansions to three NSW mines in October. Collectively, the ten approvals will result in an estimated equivalence of 2,449 Mt of CO₂ emissions over their lifetime.

About a week before the three approvals, Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek also issued a recommendation letter for the approval of the Vitrinite-owned Vulcan South mine in the Bowen Basin. If the approval proceeds as expected, it will bring the total number of coal mine approvals by the Labor government to 11.

Vitrinite itself stated in a report that the Vulcan South mine "is not part of a staged development and is not part of a larger project," further discrediting Plibersek's claim of approving no "new" coal mines.

Vitrinite is also currently under criminal investigation for clearing, without federal approval, at least 47 hectares of habitat for the threatened koala species, to make way for the proposed mine. That exposes Labor's fraudulent claim upon coming into office that it would ensure "no new extinctions" of vulnerable species.

Nevertheless, Plibersek declared in a social media post—on the same day the three projects were approved—that in 2024 "Labor has approved 0 new coal mines."

Plibersek's claim relies upon a dishonest separation of "new mines" vs "expansions" to existing mines. In either case, as environmental organisations pointed out, the emissions will hasten the disastrous impacts of climate change.

As Jenny Brown, representing the Queensland Conservation Council, objected: "Climate change does not care about technicalities, or whether this is an extension or a new mine—they have the same implications for the country, the environment and our wildlife."

In the case of the Lake Vermont mine, the claim is blatantly untrue. The project includes the construction of "a new satellite open-cut pit" within the facility of the existing mining operation. It is, in all but name, a new coal mine.

The approval of the three projects came less than two months after the release of the State of the Climate report published in October by the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO).

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote on the findings of that report:

Among the future impacts for Australia that the report forecasts are increased heat extremes, longer drought times, a longer fire season for the

southeast, continued warming and acidification of the oceans surrounding Australia, more frequent and severe coral bleaching events, and fewer but more intense tropical cyclones. All these impacts have the potential to cause catastrophic damage and loss of life.

The report concludes, in line with the vast body of scientific literature on the subject, that there must be a substantial and urgent reduction of global GHG [greenhouse gas] emissions if temperatures are to be stabilised at 1.5°, and the worst of those future impacts mitigated.

Soon after the report's publication, Labor claimed to "welcome" it and said it would implement "real policies" accordingly. But the further mine expansion approvals at this late stage of the climate crisis are utterly incompatible with efforts to limit warming to 1.5°, and further expose Labor's role in upholding corporate profits at the expense of the environment.

Nor do Plibersek's other efforts to justify the approvals stand up to scrutiny. She claimed that the three expanded mines will primarily be used for metallurgical coal, that is, coal for steelmaking, as opposed to thermal coal for energy production.

This is not true. The project documents for the Boggabri mine, for example, state that of the estimated 56 million tonnes of coal it will produce over the course of its lifetime, around 32 million tonnes will be for power station coal, with the remainder slated for steelmaking.

More fundamentally, the burning of coal contributes to the climate crisis, regardless of the use of that coal. The scientific necessity of keeping coal in the ground to mitigate climate change does not exclude metallurgical coal.

Plibersek claimed that there are "currently no feasible renewable alternatives for making steel." Yet production methods exist, including to recycle steel. The technology is still in early development, but it demonstrates that coal use for steel production should be declining.

The Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis pointed out in March 2024: "[T]he increasing steel technology shift away from coal means that, though steel will be needed, metallurgical coal will be required in declining volumes. The accelerating shift towards [direct reduced iron] and [electric arc furnace]-based steelmaking means that coal can no longer be considered critical for steelmaking."

The International Energy Agency, ~~import~~ report 2021, stated:

"No new coal mines or extensions of existing ones are needed in the [Net-Zero Emissions by 2050 Scenario] as coal demand declines precipitously. Demand for coking coal falls at a slightly slower rate than for steam coal, but existing sources of production are sufficient to cover demand through to 2050."

Plibersek's other claim, that the coal mine approvals will comply with existing climate targets, is similarly deceptive for two reasons.

Firstly, the targets themselves are completely inadequate to limit warming to 1.5 C. This was most recently pointed out by the Climate Action Tracker report from November.

Established in 2022 with the support of the Greens, Labor's climate targets call for a 43 percent reduction of emissions (relative to 2005 levels) by 2030, far short of the 67-75 percent reduction target recommended by a number of scientific reports.

Secondly, the vast majority of the emissions from these approved projects would originate from overseas, since the coal will largely be exported. Those emissions therefore, will not even be counted under Labor's climate targets.

Despite Plibersek's attempts to greenwash Labor's climate record, these developments have demonstrated that the necessary and urgent fight against climate change will not come from the Albanese government. Nor will it come from any other party of the political establishment.

That includes the Greens, who have supported Labor's token "Nature Positive" legislation, primarily creating a toothless Environmental Protection Agency, and are pleading to form a coalition with a minority Labor government after the next election, due by mid-May.

No less than Labor, the Greens are thoroughly committed to propping up the capitalist profit system, the root cause of environmental destruction. There is only one force that can end the climate disaster. That is the international working class, on the basis of a socialist perspective aimed at overturning the obsolete and destructive capitalist system.



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