

Inquiry into nuclear power generation in Australia

Submission of The Australian Workers' Union

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The Australian Workers' Union (AWU) is one of Australia's largest and most diverse unions. We represent over 76,000 workers across the length of the country and breadth of the economy. Tens of thousands of our members are highly exposed to the historic shifts underway in our energy systems. In the manufacturing sector, the AWU represents the workforce of Australia's largest energy users, as well as workers in emerging industries whose products will help enable the transition. In energy itself, our membership extends across the gas supply chain: From extraction and processing through to transportation and export. In civil construction, the buildout of renewables, firming and other infrastructure that the transition demands will be delivered by AWU members. Further upstream, the metalliferous mining and minerals processing where many of these activities begin is also done by AWU workers.

The AWU is thus an energy union to its core. With so many of our members' working lives depending on it, we maintain a deep interest in supporting a fair, effective and prosperous energy transition. We do not have the luxury of treating this as a space for political game-playing or the pursuit of ideological positions. Rather, we require energy policy that ensures affordable, reliable energy for all users throughout the transition, supports industry and workers to grasp the economic opportunities presented by decarbonisation, and is consistent with Australia's abatement commitments under domestic and international law.

This outlook leads us to view the current prominence of the Coalition's nuclear power proposal in the national conversation with dismay. The proposal cannot be called serious-minded public policy. It is a half-baked fantasy intended to support political talking points rather than secure a positive future for energy-dependent workers and industry.

The Coalition appears to propose to upend Australia's energy transition and market, and to do so at gargantuan expense. Costs would come in the form of massive taxpayer investment, higher electricity bills, long-term delays and uncertainty for major electricity producers and users, and almost certainly damage to Australia's emissions abatement trajectory. Allocating enormous public resources only to disrupt the energy transition and increase prices could well be catastrophic. Yet, in advancing a policy that would seem to put Australia on such a path, the Coalition has not seen fit to produce more than four and a half pages of rationale. Even this prominently consists of rhetoric, unclear commitments and questionable assertions. The case, simply put, is not made out.

In our view, ensuring reliable and affordable electricity throughout the transition means increasing the pace and scale at which firmed renewable energy, backed up by gas peaking plants, is deployed. Delivered effectively - and in conjunction with high labour standards and support for the energy needs of major users

beyond electricity - this can facilitate an effective energy transition. Such policy will also leverage Australian comparative advantage in energy and, with particular ambition, can enable the nation's transition to a clean manufacturing superpower.

While we continue to call for increased policy support and investment from the Commonwealth, the AWU commends the Albanese Labor Government for putting Australia on a path towards such outcomes. After nearly a decade of energy stasis and sophistry under the Coalition, and amid manifold disruptions to global energy supply chains, this is no small achievement.

Indeed, assessing the Coalition's nuclear power proposal against the record of the Abbott-Turnbull-Morrison government is revealing. The former government pursued, in effect, a policy of inaction disguised by multitudes of ineffective and or abandoned policies. It never treated these profoundly serious issues with the gravity that those depending on good policy deserve. Its current plan is a continuation of that tradition. It may well be seen to advance political goals for the Liberal and National parties. But it evinces no legitimate interest in solving real energy challenges faced by workers and industry today.

Energy is not a political football: For AWU members, it's our livelihoods. Workers, industries and the community deserve much better than the Coalition's nuclear power proposal.