CHAPTER 9
Australian Labor Party,
New South Wales Branch, 1925

There was no Annual Conference in 1925, nor was an Executive Report presented for the previous year. Instead, an Executive Report for the combined years of 1924-25 was presented to the next Conference in 1926. In that Report can be found the official explanation for the abandonment of the 1925 Conference:

“Postponement of Conference

Because of pending State elections, and a probably early Federal election, the Executive deemed it advisable to postpone, and later annul, the 1925 Conference.

Circumstances necessitating this action were unique, and very probably will never occur again. The State elections were held on 30th May, and had the Conference been called at Easter a number of candidates for Parliament, and many officers of Councils and Branches would have had their organising work, then in full swing, interrupted. The finances of many country Branches would also have been depleted, as the cost of sending delegates to the city is heavy. The Executive felt that it could, with benefit to the Movement, postpone the date of Conference until June, but this month proved wholly unsuitable owing to the results of the State Elections not being finalised until the month was nearly out. The second half of 1925 was full of political uncertainty by reason of a dispute between the Federal Country Party, led by Mr Stewart, and the Nationalists. An election threatened early in August, but was averted after some weeks of finessing.

As the life of the Federal Parliament was nearly run it was known that an election was not far distant, and that the Nationalist Party were frantically seeking a favorable opening. This came through the shipping strike. An election campaign was immediately precipitated and the election took place on 14th November. The Christmas and New Year holidays were deemed unsuitable for many reasons.

The Executive takes this opportunity of refuting the contention that it had something to gain by not calling a Conference. Indeed, the fact that under its guidance the City Council Election and the State Election had been won should have induced it to want to meet delegates. That which was best in the interest of the Movement was done, as consideration of all the facts, and the present position of the Movement, will show.

Special Conference Requisitioned

Shortly after the 1924 Annual Conference had disbanded an agitation was started by some Unions for a Special Conference, to be held to consider the
abolition of selection ballots, and the Executive decided to hold a Conference on the 30th August, 1924. After further consideration it was resolved not to proceed with the holding of such Conference.

Your Executive decided to ascertain the authority of the Unions which had petitioned it, and after waiting some time received replies from 21 Unions. Of this number eight were satisfactory and thirteen quite unsatisfactory. In view of this condition, and also because of the fact that only one of the 25 Electorate Councils whose province it is to conduct selection ballots had supported the petition, it was apparent that there was no urgent or bona-fide need for a Conference.”

That explanation was only part of the truth. It was certainly important that 1925 was an election year for the Commonwealth and the State. However, elections had never resulted in the abandonment of an Annual Conference before this one. In 1910, for example, a very full Conference business paper was discussed while the State election was imminent and the Federal election due at any moment. The other part of the story was that the previous years had been extremely stormy in the NSW Branch of the ALP. Out of the chaos of 1923 JT Lang had been elected leader of the parliamentary party, with the support of a group of unions led by the Miners’ Federation presided over by AC Willis. Although 1924 saw some consolidation of control by that faction, there was fierce opposition from left and right. On the left, the issue of Communism was dominant, with a number of unions bitterly resentful that the ALP had banned card-holding Communists from joining the ALP. On the right, the AWU was still smarting from its replacement as the dominant faction by the Willis coalition of unions. Any Conference in 1925 would have seen very divisive issues aired on the floor. The Executive realized that Lang had a real chance of winning the 1925 election – which he did quite narrowly in May – but he certainly would not have been helped by a stormy Conference before that. It was an indication of the complete domination of the party by the faction controlling the State Executive that Conference could be so easily abandoned even after Lang had been elected.