CHAPTER 15
Australian Labor Party,
New South Wales Branch
Special Conference, 22 August 1936

Report in *The Sydney Morning Herald*

The opposition to Lang and his Inner Group had reached a critical stage in 1935, with Lang politically weakened after his defeat at the recent State election. The revolt had its base in the Labor Council, and involved the support of the Socialisation Units and the unions supporting them, along with Communists inside and outside the ALP. When on 1 August 1936 the Labor Council organised a special conference of trade unions and members of the ALP hostile to Lang the Inner Group had a special committee of the State Executive prepare a report recommending expulsion of five MPs and numerous members of the party associated with disident unions. An imminent threat to the Lang machine was the likely loss of control over the Labor Daily and radio station 2KY, where Labor Council equity was crucial. The MPs included the Secretary of the Labor Council, RA King, MLC, and four Lower House members, Heffron, Lazzarini, Horsington, and Davidson. The list of unions mentioned in the Executive Report as at war with Lang was a roll call of industrial unionism in the State: “bricklayers, plumbers, breadcarters, hotel, club, and restaurant employees, sugar employees, blacksmiths, boilermakers (Sydney branch and Redfern branch), amalgamated engineers, Australasian engineers, ironworkers, stovemakers, moulders, boot employees, wool and basil workers, fire brigades, gas employees, Water Board employees, Postal employees, hairdressers, amalgamated printers, printing industry employees, railway employees, stewards, furnishing trades, Barrier District Assembly, northern miners, and western miners”. Others, such as the Barrier Miners, were in a similar situation, but were not members of the ALP at the time. The AWU, hostile to both Lang and the militants, also sat on the sidelines. Needless to say, the expulsions did not put an end to the problem for the Langites.
Special Conference of NSW ALP, 1936

(The Sydney Morning Herald, 24 August 1936)

Single Day, Saturday, 22 August 1936

Labour Party Expulsions. Mr Lang Attacks Communists.
Mr Baddeley Opposes Miners’ Federation.
Uproarious Scenes at Conference.

Addressing the special conference of the State Labour party which on Saturday expelled five members of Parliament and 16 union leaders, the leader of the Opposition (Mr Lang) made a bitter attack on the Communist party, which he blamed for the present trouble in the Labour party.

There were uproarious scenes when the deputy leader of the State Labour party (Mr Baddeley, MLA) stated that he supported Mr Lang and was opposed to the leaders of the Miners’ Federation.

Representatives of the Federation attempted to reply to Mr Baddeley, but were refused a hearing.

Mr Lang’s Speech to Conference

Mr Lang, who was loudly cheered, said that many delegates in the Labour Council were not supporters of the Labour party. They took every advantage to defeat any move which would advance the fortunes of the party. Fanned by ‘anti-Labour’ newspapers, the discussion in the Labour Council had become very bitter. Because of differences, the Labour party had no chain of wireless stations radiating from 2KY. The station’s chief purpose seemed to be to carry on a campaign of vilification against the ALP. The same sections which had opposed the wireless coordination proposal had also opposed the proposed publication of a Sunday Labour paper. The same individuals had set up an organisation which was determined to prevent the Labour party from expanding. Those individuals hoped by destroying its propaganda agencies to destroy the party itself.

“Propaganda Agencies”

Mr Lang claimed that the proposal to establish a separate Labour newspaper company, which was to produce a Sunday Labour paper, had met with a remarkable response. The ALP was the workers’ party, and the fight which was going on for the control of its propaganda agencies had been staged by the Communist party. The Miners’ Federation and its
executive officers had been responsible for the opposition to the official organ, and had recommended, as a director of the paper, a leader of the Communist party in New South Wales.

“Secret Junta”

Mr Lang caused a sensation at the conference by stating that, when the next ballot for the election of directors of the paper took place, the Communists expected to be in control of the organ. He said that Mr C Nelson, the president of the Miners’ Federation, and a leader of the Communist party, had been selected by a secret junta as the next chairman of directors of the paper. When Mr Nelson was defeated, the Labour movement would be asked to retain their confidence in those who were seeking to capture control of the Labour movement, because, if they failed this time, they would succeed next time.

“Wait”, said Mr Lang. “That is what they will tell you. But you will wait for a long time. They are only attempting to mislead you.”

Expulsion Report

The decision of the conference to impose the expulsions was reached after the submission of a report by the senior vice-president (Mr G Gibson), who was the chairman of what was described as the special investigation committee.

The committee was appointed by the State ALP executive, and was instructed to draft a report on the activities of the delegates who attended the banned conference of unions affiliated with the Labour party, which was convened by the Labour Council.

Mr Gibson had a mixed reception when he declared that officials had been merciful whenever mercy was possible. Every individual who had been expelled had merited it.

“In seeking to interrogate the position of unions concerned, the committee met with organised hostility and non-cooperation from a section of officials”, the report said. “This was designed to defeat the purpose of the committee, which was to safeguard the interests of individual members. An attempt was made to have the committee’s questionnaire answered in a negative and stereotyped manner, but this attempt failed, even some of the most hostile officials departing from the agreed form of rejoinder. We find that in no case was the question of defying the executive’s decision referred to the rank and file of the affiliated organisations.”

It was claimed in the report that those who opposed Mr Lang had attempted to cause a cleavage that would result in a schism under Communist leadership.
Mr Garden Mentioned

The findings of the committee on which the Labour Parliamentarians and union leaders were expelled were set out in the report of the investigation committee in this way:

“We reached the conclusion that the purposes of the Labour Council bogus conference were (a) to try and intimidate the State executive and the delegates to the Federal ALP conference in Adelaide to facilitate the readmission of Mr Garden to the Labour movement without his having to appeal to the annual conference in accordance with the rules; (b) to endeavour to organise a disaffected group within the party for such purposes of intimidation; (c) to secure the disaffiliation of certain groups in the interests of the Communist party.”

The following officials were specifically named in a special report to the conference, but, while it was held that they were under suspicion, it was decided that no action should be taken against them for the time being:


A feature of the report submitted by the investigation committee, in which the expulsion recommendations were contained, was an attack on the secretary of the All-Australian Council of Trades Unions (Mr C Crofts), who, it was stated, merited the strongest possible censure.

Referring to the five expelled Parliamentarians, the report said. “Their defiance of the executive was deliberate and provocative, and made with a full knowledge of the penalties involved. They were in a position of trust.”

There was a noisy scene when Mr W Cochrane made a bitter attack on the administrators of the party. He said that the Labour movement belonged to the masses, and should not be made the plaything of the executive. The last Easter conference seemed to hold out hopes of unity, but the ink on the unity terms was hardly dry when the 2KY dispute occurred. He said that 2KY was always at the disposal of the executive, but the officials of the party had not availed themselves of this opportunity of utilising the station. The executive had not even thanked the controllers of 2KY for the part which they had played in previous elections. He deplored the fact that the ALP executive had seen fit to expel giants of the Labour movement such as the secretary of the Bricklayers’ Union (Mr H Kilburn), the secretary of the Furnishing Trades...
Union (Mr O Schreiber), and the secretary of the Labour Council (Mr R King, MLC).

The adoption of the investigation committee’s report to expel the Labour Parliamentarians and union officials was carried by 67 to 24.

**Position of Unions**

The report to the conference indicated that the following unions had rendered themselves liable to expulsion, but were not disaffiliated for various reasons: bricklayers, plumbers, breadcarters, hotel, club, and restaurant employees, sugar employees, blacksmiths, boilermakers (Sydney branch and Redfern branch), amalgamated engineers, Australasian engineers, ironworkers, stovemakers, moulders, boot employees, wool and basil workers, fire brigades, gas employees, Water Board employees, Postal employees, hairdressers, amalgamated printers, printing industry employees, railway employees, stewards, furnishing trades, Barrier District Assembly, northern miners, and western miners.

It was also announced that the following unions which were represented at the bogus Labour Council conference were outside the jurisdiction of the ALP: southern miners, postal electricians, brick, tile, and pottery employees, blind workers, engine-drivers and firemen, jewellers, and the Barrier miners.

**Federal Elections**

It was announced at the conference that the ballots for the selection of candidates in the next Federal elections would be held on November 21, and that nominations would be called for on August 24, and would close on October 2. The ballots for the executive would be conducted on or before November 30, and the nominations for the annual general conference would open on December 24.

The first decision of the conference was to carry a long resolution criticising the decision of the Government to abolish relief work. It was suggested in the resolution that a special session of Parliament should be held to review the action of the Government, and the opinion was also expressed in the resolution that the proceeds from the wages tax should be devoted exclusively for the relief of the unemployed.

**Stormy Scene**

A stormy scene developed during the debate on the relief position when Mr Matthews, MLA, claimed that the chairman of the Labour Council (Mr Pullen) had sabotaged the work of the ALP unemployment committee, of which he was a member. Objection was taken by a delegate to the right of Mr Matthews as a politician to make an attack on an
industrial leader. Mr Pullen, amid much disorder, appealed to the chairman, Mr PJ Keller, for a hearing, and said that the ALP executive and Mr Matthews particularly had misrepresented the position.

*Report in The Sydney Morning Herald, 25 August 1936*

**Labor Fight. Another Union Conference. Expelled Members Confident of Reinstatement.**

Union leaders who were expelled by the special ALP conference at the week-end have decided to convene another union conference to make the expulsions ineffective.

Union officers said that the meeting would probably be held at the end of the week, and would include union officials who were in revolt against the Lang faction. Efforts would be made to induce union officials who are supporting Mr Lang to attend the conference.

The expulsions by the Lang faction caused a sensation at the Trades Hall. The subject was the sole topic of conversation yesterday.

The expelled union officers displayed no agitation; they expressed confidence that they would be able to reinstate themselves in the Labour movement.

A curious position has developed in some unions as a result of the expulsions. In the case of the Amalgamated Printing Trade Union, the president (Mr JE Pullen) has been expelled, but the secretary (Mr THC Bell), who also attended the banned Labour Council conference, has been allowed to remain within the party. The State secretary of the Printing Industry Employees’ Union (Mr JF Wilson) has been expelled, but the Federal secretary (Mr EC Magrath, MLC) has escaped the ‘axe’.

Union secretaries regard as important the forthcoming poll of shareholders in the official Labour paper. It will be taken between September 1 and 8.

They point out that the result of the poll will probably have an important bearing on the dispute. The poll is being held to decide whether the proposals of the directors to form a new company to produce an official Sunday Labour organ should be supported.

**Mr R King’s Comments**

The secretary of the Labour Council (Mr R King, MLC), who is among the expelled union officials, said yesterday that the Lang faction was panic-stricken. The expelled men were unconcerned about the expulsions, he added.

“This is a rank and file rebellion against dictatorship by a small political oligarchy”, Mr, King said. “The expulsions of trades union officers will hasten the day of reckoning. The unions will quickly demonstrate
that the rank and file is behind the officers of their organisations. The expulsion bluff will be called.”

The decision of the conference to expel Messrs Heffron, Lazzarini, Horsington, and Davidson, MsLA, means that they will now be debarred from attending any meetings of the State Labour caucus. They will also be ineligible to hold any position in the State political movement, but they will not be debarred from attending industrial gatherings, at which they have recently taken a prominent part.

Suggestions were made yesterday that the State Labour Parliamentary party would probably hold a meeting to discuss the expulsion of the four Labour members, and that attempts would be made to persuade other State Labour members to support the rebels.

The Undercliffe branch of the State Labour party, at a meeting last night, carried a resolution disagreeing with the decision of the special conference to expel 21 Labour leaders, The opinion was expressed that the expulsions would not bring about unity.

The Cook electorate council also carried a resolution condemning the decision.