CHAPTER 3
Australian Labor Party,
New South Wales Branch
Special Conference,
12-13 November 1926

Report in The Australian Worker

The 1926 Annual Conference elected a State Executive which was split between the President and some other officers, who were supporters of the Willis faction based on the Labor Council and Premier JT Lang, and an effective majority of members who were supporters of the AWU. Changes to the rules for the election of the Executive and of delegates to Conference had been demanded by all factions for a number of years, and this Special Conference was called to present the new rules for endorsement. The new rules had been drafted by a committee chaired by Albert Willis and were clearly designed to disadvantage the AWU in the election of delegates to future Conferences and therefore election to future Executives. A majority of the Executive strongly opposed the new rules, and this Conference was convened under the old rules. Nevertheless, this meeting was clearly stacked with Lang supporters. It was arranged in cooperation with Lang and his supporters in Government and Caucus, as is clear from the dominant role taken by Lang himself in the Special Conference. Lang’s message was that any new rules must provide the labour movement with a united leadership – which was code for preventing interference from the right and the left. That was not a message that the AWU wanted to hear. The new rules were presented by Willis’ committee, but were not to take effect until reviewed by leagues and unions and then approved in a subsequent Conference.

Lang introduced another important matter to the Conference – who should decide the parliamentary leadership? He had been under threat from a powerful group of MPs in Caucus who disagreed both with his alliance with industrialists in the Labor Council and his rejection of the AWU. This Special Conference confirmed Lang as Leader and Premier for the life of the current Parliament – a decision which involved temporarily stripping Caucus of its role in deposing the Leader. Both the rules and the
leadership would become central issues to be resolved at the 1927 Conference.

One of the functions served by this Conference was to canonize Lang as the saviour of the labour movement so as to put his position beyond challenge. That also had to wait for the next annual Conference before it could be achieved. Meanwhile, Lang portrayed himself as the servant of the movement: “I am here tonight not to tell you what I would like you to do, but to learn from you what you would like the Government to do”. In one sense this was an outrageous statement, completely at odds with Lang’s own monomania. In another sense, however, many delegates would have had no difficulty believing it; Lang’s legislative and administrative record during his seventeen months in office had delivered or foreshadowed many of the reforms that the industrial wing of the movement (including the AWU) had been demanding for over fifteen years. In November 1926 his Government could justly claim to be an outstanding Labor Government that compared more than favourably with the McGowen-Holman administrations that had fought against the industrialists and split the party, and the Storey-Dooley administrations that had been crippled by the lack of a clear majority.

One of the questions arising from this Special Conference is how the minority officers of the Executive were able to arrange a Conference with “more than 300 delegates” that was so compliant. The previous Annual Conference of 1926 had seen the Executive lacking a clear majority on the conference floor against the votes of the AWU added to those of the more radical wing of the industrial movement. There were delegates from both groups at this meeting – Buckland and Holloway from the AWU and Beasley from the radicals in the Labor Council – but they were completely outnumbered by Lang supporters. The best explanation seems to be that the Willis and Lang group had complete control over the ordinary branch members elected from the SECs who supported the reforms being put in place by the Government. Throughout his political career Lang was almost unique among Labor leaders in being able to appeal successfully over the heads of party and union officials to the rank and file branch membership.
ALP NSW SPECIAL CONFERENCE 1926

Special Conference of NSW ALP, November 1926

(Australian Worker, 17 November 1926)

Day 1, Friday, 12 November 1926

ALP Conference Meets. Mr Lang’s Speech. Strong Support.

The principal feature of the opening session of the special Conference of the Australian Labor party last night was a vigorous address by the Premier, Mr Lang. He said that if he continued to receive the confidence of the people of New South Wales he would not only remove the nominee House, but “imported Governors” would become a thing of the past.

More than 300 delegates from all parts of the State were present. There was also present the Premier (Mr Lang), the Lord Mayer, (Ald Stokes), the Chief Secretary (Mr Lazzarini), the Minister for Health, (Mr Cann), the Minister for Justice (Mr McKell), the Vice-President of the Legislative Council (Mr Willis), Mr J West, MP, Senator J Grant, Messrs W Ely, F Burke, W Ratcliffe, J Tully, M Gosling, Horsington, Scully, MsLA. Mr WH Seale, president of the ALP, occupied the chair. A large crowd waited outside the large social hall on the ground floor, where the Conference was held. Considerable impatience was displayed by a section of the crowd at the delay in starting. They manifested their disapproval by banging loudly on the iron doors of the hall. The rules were drafted by a committee elected at the last Conference consisting of Mr AC Willis, MLC, (chairman), E Voigt, EC Magrath, J Mostyn, M Webster, J Kilburn.

Shortly after the delegates had taken their seats Mr Lang entered the hall, and was given a rousing reception. The first business was the election of a timekeeper, the two following nominations being received: A Moate (Stewards) and WJ Butler (St George). Mr Moate was elected to the position by 182 votes to 91. There were two nominees for the post of minute secretary: Messrs E Voigt (N Sydney) and J Comans (Botany), resulting in a win for Mr Voigt by 152 to 139. Mr J Bird (Miners) submitted the report of the credentials committee. He said that the Conference was a unique one, inasmuch as not one delegate had been debarred from taking his seat. Several protests had been received, but they were not upheld. After the report had been adopted Mr Bird admitted, in reply to a delegate, that certain delegates from the Bathurst district assembly had been excluded, and this caused an uproar. A motion was passed for the recommittal of the report, and Mr Bird then
explained that seven delegates had presented themselves for admission. Three were elected by the Bathurst electorate council, and four by the recently-formed Bathurst district assembly. Certain of them had been excluded.

Mr H Hamilton Knight (Lithgow) moved for the admission of the delegates who were excluded. Mr O’Reilly seconded the motion, which was carried unanimously.

It was decided that the Conference should sit all day Saturday, on Sunday, and the following days if necessary.

President’s Address

The president pointed out that the Conference had been convened to discuss the differences which had arisen respecting the report of the rules revision. Any differences of opinion should be sunk in the interests of the movement. The enemies of Labor were directing their attack against the trade unions. They were held up as a menace to the movement. This was a most cowardly thing, and should be ignored. It was designed to create discord in the movement, and to discredit it. There had been an attempt to establish a blind prejudice against the unions, and he resented it. There was never better feeling between the political and the industrial side of the movement than existed today. This feeling should be fostered so that Labor could be placed in an impregnable position. Personal differences should not be allowed to prejudice the movement or the present Government under any circumstances. Now was the time for them to prove that they were big men. Unless they acted in unison, the movement would not be a movement worth talking about.

Mr Lang’s Speech

The Premier, whose speech was punctuated with applause, said that although for the moment, they were “up against it” in this State, he assured delegates that if he continued to receive the confidence of the people of New South Wales, they would not only remove the nominee house, but imported Governors would become a thing of the past. Both belonged to a bygone age, and both were relics of a system utterly incompatible with democratic institutions. The fight was on, and it was going to be a fight to a finish. The abolition of the Legislative Council plank of the Labor platform had been left too long in abeyance, but he was convinced that it was much nearer realisation today than it had ever been.
The Leadership

“Now”, said Mr Lang, “I come to the delicate matter of the recent contest for the leadership, and I do so mainly to thank the unions and leagues for the splendid way in which they rallied round the man who led them to victory at the last election, and who has endeavoured, with the assistance of his colleagues and party, to keep his pledges to the country. Under the present rules any member of the caucus can contest the leadership at any pre-sessional meeting of the party, and no member can be charged with disloyalty to the movement merely because he has seen fit to aspire to leadership. At present the Parliamentary party presents a united front to the enemy, and, although there are differences on minor issues, I believe that commonsense will prevail. I am prepared to do my best in the interests of the great cause, which I feel we all have at heart. Disruption spells ruin, so I would urge all sections of the movement to pull together and sink their differences, but where treachery and disloyalty to the movement are clearly proven, to apply the axe without mercy.”

Shipping Industry

“Had the differences between the Commonwealth Shipping Board and the seamen not been adjusted last year by the government in conference with Sir William Clarkson and the union representatives”, continued Mr Lang, “the biggest industrial upheaval in the history of Australia would have taken place, hundreds of thousands of families would have been paralysed, Federal and State revenues seriously affected, and at least £50,000,000 of industrial production lost to the Australian nation. It is authoritatively stated that the coal strike in England has cost that country about £500,000,000. A general strike throughout Australia, and that is what the shipping combine was aiming at in order to force down the wage standard of seamen, would have been a calamity of the first order. We prevented that by fixing up an agreement between the Commonwealth Shipping Board and the seamen; and the big shipping combine, stripped for battle in the background, found itself beaten by strategy, and compelled to fall into line with the Commonwealth Shipping Board. The men in that case were mainly in the right, but the adjustment was a compromise acceptable to both Sir William Clarkson and the seamen.”

The Government’s Record

“Since the Conference last met”, proceeded Mr Lang, “the Government has established a State Insurance Office, which we intend to develop into a monopoly in the interests of the community. Already the State office has been instrumental in substantially reducing the rates under the Workers’ Compensation Act, and we feel confident that still further
reductions will be made. We have also passed an amendment to the Local Government Act, giving substantial and effective preference to Australian manufacturers.”

**Deportation Board**

Mr Lang said that the Deportation Court was declared unconstitutional by the High Court, and one of the most ridiculous, inefficient, and partisan tribunals ever created passed out amidst universal contempt and execration.

**Producers’ Conference**

“I am here tonight”, said Mr Lang, “not to tell you what I would like you to do, but to learn from you what you would like the Government to do. A few weeks ago we convened a conference of consumers, producers, and wage-earners, to learn at first hand what the man on the land most required, and how his requirements could best be expressed in legislative and administrative performance. The fruits of that conference will be found in legislation now ready for Parliament, and in such administrative acts as the government deems wise and desirable. I understand that the conference had one marked effect – it brought the industrialists of the city and the man on the land into close association, and the effect was to make these delegates, representing many diverse interests, understand and respect each other’s point of view. I am told on excellent authority that two of the most popular men at the conference were the representatives of the Trades and Labor Council.”

**Mr Lang’s Position**

Mr O Schrieber (Furnishing Trades) then moved the following resolution: “That this Conference has complete confidence in the leadership of John T Lang, Premier of New South Wales, and hereby confirms him in the leadership of the Parliamentary Labor party for the period of the present Parliament, and recognizing that unity is essential to the successful carrying out of the platform and policy of the Labor party, the Premier is hereby authorised in the event of circumstances arising, which in his opinion imperil the unity, to do all things and exercise such powers as he deems necessary in the interests of the movement”. He said they had come to the parting of the ways. They had to decide whether they would stand idly by and see treachery and intrigue get the upper hand. The Premier had made the boldest possible bid to translate the platform of the party to the Statute Book of the State.

Mr Rutherford (Saddlers) seconded the motion.
Mr Buckland (AWU) moved as an amendment: “That this Conference places the utmost confidence in Mr Lang, the Labor Government, and the members of the Labor party, and we confirm the right of the party to elect its own leader and officers in accordance with the by-laws and rules of the ALP”.

His organisation, he said, was behind the Labor Government and fully realised the good it had done. The leader had rendered yeoman service, but they should not forget that credit was due to other Ministers, and to the rank and file. If the resolution were carried they would be censuring the Labor party. He remembered the time when they had made gods of other Premiers in the past. Where was Holman? Where was Hughes? He did not suggest that Mr Lang would go the same way, but there was the possibility if they gave a man unlimited power.

Mr T Holloway (AWU), in seconding the amendment, said that if the motion was carried the control of the movement would be handed over to one man. “You will hamstring yourselves”, said Mr Holloway.

Mr J Beasley, president of the Labor Council, supported the resolution.

Mr McNulty said there was more progress and less unemployment today than there had ever been in the history of the State.

Mr Seale explained that the resolution placed a definite onus on Mr Lang. He would be answerable to the movement for any action he might take. It was not the object of the Conference to destroy the rights of the caucus. At the same time it should be remembered that the movement had the power to do so if it desired.

The amendment was lost and the motion carried almost unanimously, there being four dissentients only.

The Conference was adjourned until 10 am today.

Day 2, Saturday, 13 November 1926

ALP Conference Ends. Proposed Rules Remitted to Leagues

The special Conference of the ALP, which was concluded on Saturday, was regarded as one of the most orderly in the history of the movement. It resulted in a succession of wins for the supporters of Mr Lang.

After the adoption, by an overwhelming majority, of the resolution making Mr Lang Premier for the life of the present Government, the opponents of Mr Lang did not further attempt on the floor of the Conference hall to thwart any of his plans.

From the viewpoint of the new rules the Conference was regarded in many quarters as a failure. It was pointed out that the ALP Executive or the rules committee itself would have been quite competent to forward the rules to the various leagues and unions, and that there was no need
for the calling of a special Conference if it was only to undertake that task. Some delegates contend, however, that the action of the Conference in remitting the rules to the leagues was tantamount to an endorsement of the principle that a change in the constitution was necessary.

It was considered certain that if Mr Willis, as chairman of the rules committee, had attempted to have the rules adopted, he would have been defeated. It appears that shortly before the Conference a series of secret meetings were held between the political supporters of Mr Lang and the Industrialists. Two prominent Cabinet Ministers attended the meetings and strongly urged that no attempt should be made to have the rules adopted. The Conference is also regarded as having conclusively demonstrated that Mr Willis is still a big force to be reckoned with in ALP matters.

**Proposed New Rules**

The much discussed new rules for the Party were the principal subject for consideration on Saturday.

Among those on the platform when proceedings opened were the Premier, (Mr Lang), the Chief Secretary (Mr Lazzarini), the Attorney-General (Mr McTiernan), the Minister for Justice (Mr McKell), and the Minister for Labour and Industry (Mr Baddeley).

Mr Seale announced that Mr AC Willis, MLC, Vice-President of the Legislative Council, was the chairman of the rules committee, and would submit its report.

Mr Willis said he wished to call the attention of members at the outset to the fact that there had been a considerable amount of propaganda in the anti-Labor press concerning the rules. The impression was created that the committee had prepared some enormity which was going to create an injustice to certain sections of the movement. The committee had been appointed by the last Conference to work on the lines laid down by the Conference.

For several years, he continued, there had been an agitation for the revision of the rules. The decentralisation proposals had been drafted to the satisfaction of the country delegates on the committee. The representations of the Industrialists had also been considered by the committee. Year after year the business paper of the annual Conferences had never been discussed at those gatherings. All methods of intrigue, wire-pulling, and corruption practised by all sections in regard to the election of the Executive and the business of the movement had always been overlooked. The way to alter that state of affairs was to take the election of the Executive out of the hands of the annual Conference, and empower the component parts of the organisation to elect their proper quota of representation to the Executive.
Admission of Communists

"The enemy press has been insinuating that the rules are to be altered to admit Communists", said Mr Willis.

A voice: The Worker said it also.

Mr Willis: I do not care who said it. The Communist matter was never suggested in connection with the committee. We accepted the position that the question had been decided by the Federal Conference for the whole of the ALP movement. NSW cannot alter it if it wanted to, and still be loyal to the ALP. I want delegates to see that this particular canard was only brought forward to prejudice the judgment of delegates and help them to arrive at decisions based on bias. At present the rules provide that a two-thirds majority is required to alter the constitution.

The committee believed, said Mr Willis, that the two-third majority was not consistent with the movement if it was a democratic movement. The two-thirds majority was an old reactionary weapon typical of class legislation. If the alteration was made there would be no danger of a snap vote at future Conferences, because the new rules would provide that before a proposal was carried it would have to be adopted by the majority of the delegates credentialled to the Conference.

Mr Willis' Proposal

Mr Willis then moved the adoption of the report of the rules committee and further (1) that the proposed new rules be forwarded to the affiliated unions for their consideration, approval, or amendment; (2) that the existing rules continue to function until the proposed new rules are finalised; (3) that any amendment be submitted to the rules committee not less than six weeks before the next annual Conference, the league or union retaining the right to present such amendment to the annual Conference if it is not satisfied with the decision of the rules committee regarding the proposed amendments; further, that the next Executive be elected upon the basis of the new rules if adopted by the next annual Conference.

“Since this movement was initiated, you must remember the enormous growth of the industrial wing”, said Mr Willis. “If you lose sight of the fact you will discover that the tail cannot wag the dog – there will be no dog for the tail to wag. If the Labor movement is to live it must attack the problems of the nation if it claims the right to govern the nation.”

A delegate: It has been stated that the rules had been designed to whitewash a certain person who opposed a selected Labor candidate.

Mr Willis: The rules have not been designed to whitewash anyone. It does not affect any individual.
Annual Conferences

Mr Griffin (Bathurst), in seconding the resolution, explained that he belonged to no faction. The present numerical size of the annual Conferences made it humanly impossible for a chairman to control them. In the past thousands of pounds had been flagrantly wasted because the business for which the annual Conferences had been convened had not been dealt with. He disagreed with the proposals of Mr Willis regarding the two-thirds majority. Under the new scheme there would be 140 delegates at the annual Conferences. At the tail end of every Conference many delegates left, and the situation might arise in the future where a proposal adopted by 71 delegates – a bare majority – would be imposed on the movement. They would gradually drift back to the old undesirable state the annual Conferences were in today.

Alderman J Mostyn, a member of the committee, said that the aim of the committee was to clean up the movement.

Influence of Politicians

Mr J Kilburn (Bricklayers), a member of the rules committee; said that he was committed to every principle contained in the report, and, whether it was win, tie, wrangle, or lose, he intended to keep boxing on. Again and again the workers had been betrayed politically and industrially. The sacrifices made were made, not in Parliament, but in industry and in the life of every man, woman, and child. The workers were determined to dominate the industrial as well as the political movement. Conference after Conference had been packed by Parliamentarians, with the assistance of those who wanted to get into Parliament. He would sooner be a captain of a regiment of workers than a performer in the Parliamentary circus. Much had been said about being true to the constitution. This came well from the AWU oligarchy. There was an old saying, “Search your conscience”, but he suggested that the AWU should search for a conscience. The industrial section wanted to tighten up the rules, so that the workers would be the dominating factor.

In reply to a delegate, Mr Willis said that the new rules would not continue the life embargo placed on the advocates of conscription in 1917. They should not expect a democratic organisation to continue life sentences upon some of the men.

The motion was carried, there being only one dissentient.

Federal Unions

Mr D Clynes (Storemen and Packers) moved: “That this Conference of the ALP enters its emphatic protest against the attitude of the Federal Arbitration Court in refusing to exercise the discretionary power given to
them under Federal Arbitration Act by refusing to grant release to Federal unions whose awards had expired. We deem it not only a negation of the Act, but a deliberate attempt by the Court to exercise that control over unions that was so definitely refused by the people of the Commonwealth at the recent referendum, and we hereby call upon the Federal Executive and the Federal Parliamentary Labor party to use every means possible to have the matter dealt with by Parliament at the earliest possible moment by securing an amendment of the Act."

The motion was carried unanimously.

**Proposed State Lottery**

Mr Walsh (Waterside Workers) submitted a motion that the Government should take steps to establish a State lottery for the purpose of assisting the hospitals.

Mr Lang strongly opposed the suggestion that the hospitals should be associated with the lottery, on the ground that the proceeds from the lottery would not meet the financial requirements of the hospitals, and also because the Government was preparing a scheme which would adequately cater for the needs of the hospitals.

The motion was then withdrawn, and at 5 o’clock the Conference was adjourned *sine die*. 