The continuing ALP crisis

Coming State and Federal A.L.P. conferences have the opportunity to frame a united working-class policy to defeat Holt.

The near-unanimous decision of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party to clarify its policies on the war in Vietnam and conscription represents a decisive consolidation of the forces in the Labor movement who seek a peaceful solution to international differences.

When the Labor Party drastically overhauled its foreign policy at the Hobart Conference in 1955 a few people envisaged that it would lead to an end to the bi-partisan approach to foreign policy that had characterised Australian politics in the National Parliament.

Since 1955, the Australian Labor Party has moved steadily forward in its search for an independent foreign policy, although there are considerable forces in its leadership that still cling to the fallacy that Australia must still rely on the United States for an effective defence system.

The policy of the Labor Party is now broadly in accord with that of the popularly-based peace movement and is in contrast to the attitudes of the Liberal Government, the D.L.P., the N.C.C. and the main sections of the bourgeois press.

It is a direct rebuff to those elements in the Labor movement who have been working to change the leadership of the Labor Party in the vain hope that it could lead to a change in the policies of the Labor Party.

For a considerable period the rightwing, egged on by the most reactionary sections of the bourgeoisie and its
press, have been seeking to supplant Calwell by a new leader. These forces which include the bureaucratic and undemocratic A.W.U., chose Mr. Whitlam, the present Deputy, to be the new leader.

Mr. Whitlam is known to be less enthusiastic about withdrawing Australian troops from Vietnam and less emphatic in his opposition to conscription. He is fairly close to the American point of view on foreign policy.

It is now history how Mr. Whitlam failed in his leadership bid. His television attacks on Labor Party personalities upset even some of his supporters. Last year he tried to seize upon "unity tickets" to advance his leadership claims. Trade union leaders, moderate and left-wing, were described as "men without honour" because they refused to make their trade union ballots "political."

Mr. Whitlam was found guilty by his Federal Labor Party Executive of "gross disloyalty" and was within an ace of being expelled from the Labor Party. However, the special Federal Party Conference which met in March of this year decided to severely reprimand him, after he had abjectly apologised for his attitudes and his attacks on Labor policy and Labor leaders.

Despite his own statement "I am destined to be leader of the Labor Party," Mr. Whitlam did not have the courage to make his own challenge inside the Parliamentary Party. He left it to an obscure N.S.W. Senator, Mr. Mulvihill, to make the running. The Caucus decisively rejected his leadership bid by 49 votes to 24.

Even sections of the right-wing refused to support him, while a large number of the moderate element remained with the pro-Calwell forces. The left forces supported the present leader because he has shown himself on foreign policy matters to have a better understanding of world events and is prepared to espouse the correct policy, even if some of the electors, at this stage, do not see the issues clearly.

Thus yet another of the recurring crises in the Labor Party has temporarily subsided.

Since the Labor Party's formation in 1891 schisms, splits and divisions and rank treachery have been commonplace. The first major division took place in the anti-conscription struggles during World War I.
During the 1930s another major split took place which had its origins in the personal and parliamentary dictatorship of the NSW A.L.P. machine by the then Premier J. T. Lang. It was only when the trade union movement, through the Sydney Trades and Labor Council, took on the Lang groups that democracy was restored in the Labor Party.

When Dr. Evatt blasted "The Movement" in 1954, he did so because the political movement, as expressed in the A.L.P. Industrial Groups, was seeking to subvert the trade unions to outside influence. "The Movement", which had been formed in 1944 by B. A. Santamaria, was an extreme right-wing organisation based entirely on anti-communism and designed to weaken the leadership of the trade union movement.

By 1952 it had achieved some success. The militant leadership in the Ironworkers' Union and the Clerks' Union, as well as the Postal Workers' in N.S.W., and several others, had passed into the hands of "Movement" members or supporters. It soon became evident to the Labor Party leaders that if this trend continued, its effect on the Labor Party would be tremendous. Sooner than later the A.L.P. would fall under the domination of Mr. Santamaria.

The trend was reversed when the A.L.P. Federal Conference in 1954 withdrew official recognition of the Industrial Groups, reconstituted the Victorian A.L.P. Branch and re-wrote the Labor Party's foreign policy. Since then the extreme right-wing elements have been checked both politically and industrially.

In the years since 1954 however, Labor Governments in Victoria, Western Australia and Queensland were smashed by the political representatives of the Industrial Groups, who voted with the Liberal and Country Party politicians to defeat the Labor Governments.

The D.L.P. was formed by the former Industrial Group members and later "The Movement" was reformed into the National Civic Council.

Both these bodies have tried to interfere in trade union ballots without much success. Politically however they have worked successfully to date, to defeat the Labor Party at Federal and State Elections.

These two anti-labor bodies have, in every election, given their preferences to the Liberal or Country Party
candidates. This has defeated the Labor Party federally and in Victoria, N.S.W., Western Australia and Queensland has kept Labor from office in the State Parliaments.

The D.L.P. and the N.C.C. hope to blackmail the Labor Party into changing its policy and its leaders. They initiated the slogan "Get rid of Evatt," and, in 1960, aided and abetted by the mouthpieces of big business and the press, succeeded in getting Evatt removed from the leadership of the Labor Party.

Mr. Calwell became the new leader. The ruling class were elated. The stage was now set, they thought, for a reconciliation with the D.L.P. Dr. Evatt, the stumbling block for unity with the D.L.P. was gone. Editorially the press heaped praise on the new leader.

If Mr. Calwell was prepared now to work for a bipartisan arrangement with the Liberal Government on foreign policy, fight the Communists in the trade union movement, the main hurdles for an eventual union with the rightist D.L.P., then the emerging left in the labor movement would be contained and the bourgeoisie's "two-party" system of tweedle-dum and tweedle-dee would again be working satisfactorily.

Calwell almost won the 1961 Federal elections. The Menzies-McEwen Government won only by one seat. Soon after Mr. Calwell publicly called for a nuclear-free zone in the Southern Hemisphere. He expressed opposition to the US base in Western Australia and attacked the Government on its foreign policy.

The press changed its tune. Soon the "News-Weekly" -- official organ of the National Civic Council, "Vision" -- mouthpiece for certain right-wing Catholics in the N.S.W. Labor Party, and the daily press began the campaign "Labor cannot win with Calwell."

By 1966 this white-anting campaign had had some effect. The N.S.W. Labor Party, the centre of the right-wing in the Labor Party at this stage, persuaded Mr. Whitlam to make his run.

Mr. Whitlam publicly challenged the right of the Labor Party rank and file, through its Federal Executive, to interpret Labor policy. Mr. Whitlam wanted the Parliamentary Party to have more say in the policy-making bodies of the A.L.P. This has been the crux of all previous Labor Party schisms.

Since the formation of the Labor Party 70-odd years
ago the struggle of the rank and file for a working-class policy as opposed to a purely class-collaboration policy of the political wing has continued. Every 10 or 15 years this struggle erupts when the political wing—as expressed often by the Parliamentary Party seek to impose its views on the Labor movement.

This was the issue upon which Mr. Whitlam made his challenge. He chose State Aid for denominational schools as an emotional question that might attract to him influential sections of Catholic opinion. He posed too, the reformation of the Labor Party on the so-called Wyndham proposals.

These proposals envisage a stronger national Labor Party, less reliance on State Branches, more power to the parliamentary parties, particularly the parliamentary leaders, in the day-to-day political questions. All these manoeuvres are designed to turn back recent developments in the Labor Party which are leading towards a more socialist orientation.

The Labor Party left is a strong and developing force. It has successfully resisted attempts to change the A.L.P. foreign policy to suit the “hard line” policies in Washington. It has defeated the attempts to change the leadership of the Labor Party in order to arrest the leftward trends.

The unity of the Labor movement has grown considerably in recent years. The Labor movement is united on Vietnam, conscription, nuclear tests, the need for higher wages, for action against the growth of monopolies and many other questions. The policies of the D.L.P. and the N.C.C. have little support in the Labor movement.

But the ruling class and their supporters in the Labor movement have not given up the fight. They have many tricks up their sleeves. The most effective issue they have to divide the Labor movement today is aid to denominational schools.

The current difficulties of education in Australia are not confined to the State education system. The Catholic education system is, for a variety of reasons, undergoing an acute financial crisis. The extreme right-wing hope to use the State Aid issue to influence changes in A.L.P. policies. Already they have succeeded in arranging for another special Federal A.L.P. Conference in July.
They are hoping to bring about a defeat of the left-wing A.L.P. leadership on this issue, trying to capitalise on the real difficulties many Catholic parents are having in educating their children at private schools.

Already, the Tasmanian branch of the Labor Party has held its annual conference. During mid-June, N.S.W., Victoria and South Australia will hold their annual Labor conferences. In Tasmania, the conference agreed to limited support for state aid for private schools.

However, the conference gave overwhelming support to the fighting stand on conscription given by Labor Leader Calwell. The Conference rejected a plea by Harridine (Clerks' Union) not to discuss the issue. There was considerable enthusiasm for the stand taken by Calwell on Vietnam and Conscription.

The right-wing will endeavor to make the State Aid issue the main question at the Conference in the other three State and is already at work trying to play down the more important questions of foreign policy. The F.I.A. is reported to be seeking to change the Labor Party's attitude on conscription and Vietnam and to put the Labor Party on to a negative anti-communist line.

The Labor Party's Education Advisory Committee, according to press reports, will not make any drastic recommendations to change present A.L.P. policy on aid to denominational schools. It would appear that there may be some modification to the present policy, but these modifications seem to favor aid to the student rather than the institution.

The right-wing, particularly in N.S.W., may therefore seek to challenge the recommendations of the Federal Education Committee and try to use this issue to bring about dissatisfaction with the present Federal leadership of the Labor Party. These tactics may succeed in N.S.W., but there is every justification for believing that they will be defeated in Victoria and South Australia.

But, regardless of the outcome of these three State Labor conferences, the rebuff to the right-wing moves to change the leadership of the A.L.P. and the near-unanimous decision of the parliamentary Party to stand firm on its foreign policy all show that the conditions exist for a united campaign to defeat the Holt Government later this year.
The labor movement must take advantage of these favorable conditions. New forces, from the Churches and intellectual fields are joining in the fight, against Government policies in Vietnam. Even the official white-collar unions are critical of the Government. And some sections of the bourgeois press have misgivings about the involvement of America and Australia in the Vietnam war.

The developments in the Labor Party, the growth of the left forces, the isolation of the extreme right, gives the working class movement its best opportunity, yet to defeat the Federal Government.

For a long time reaction has held the initiative in Australian politics. The parties of monopoly have reigned in Canberra for nearly 17 years. There are signs now, however, that this era is coming to an end. Opinion polls show that there is no longer majority support for the Government’s foreign policies.

Public rallies, “teach-ins”, demonstrations, all point to a growing public awareness of the folly of Government policy. As well, higher prices, higher profits, inflation, increased war expenditure, and the continual difficulties in public works and education are causing concern to more and more people.

Small businessmen are feeling the inroads of monopoly, and more voices are being raised against the extent of foreign capital in our economy.

The conditions are thus becoming more favorable for united mass actions against all facets of Government policy. Try as it may, Labor’s right-wing cannot arrest the processes of mass action. Thus the Australian people, led by a resolute working class, can effect a change in Government later this year.