

Indonesia Calling, in Australian Accents

The Waterside Workers' Federation, the Seamen's Union and 13 other Australian waterfront and maritime unions sponsored a film, *Indonesia Calling*, which played a role in defeating the Dutch censorship and by getting the story of Australian trade union aid to the Republic to vast numbers of Indonesians.

Indonesia Calling was produced by a famous Dutch maker of documentary films, Joris Ivens. He came to Australia as Film Commissioner of the Netherlands Indies Government-in-Exile; his main task was to film the Dutch reoccupation of the Indies. Immediately the Indonesian Republic was proclaimed Ivens breached his contract with the NEI Government and, illegally using its equipment, put on film the chronicle of Australian boycotts and demonstrations and Indonesian and Indian seamen's mutinies. Ivens' chief assistant, as camera-operator, editor and production manager, was an American girl, Marion Michelle. Harry Watt, the well known British producer, was in Australia at the time, filming *The Overlanders*, starring Chips Rafferty. Harry Watt shot some of the scenes for *Indonesia Calling*. The commentary was written by Catherine Duncan, an Australian actress. Peter Finch, later one of the world's most renowned actors, was commentator. Mr Edmund Allison, now Manager of Quality Films, Sydney, headed the Austral-Asia Syndicate, formed for the express purpose of making *Indonesia Calling*. Bondan, one of the leaders of the Central Committee of Indonesian Independence at Brisbane, who returned to Java to write a book on experiences in Australia, was the Indonesian representative on the Syndicate.

A Commonwealth Film Censor's ban on *Indonesia Calling* for export, on the grounds that it would offend a friendly nation, the Dutch, was a setback to the Republic in its propaganda battle abroad. Abroad, propaganda odds were heavily weighted in favor of the Dutch in most countries.

WWF General Secretary James Healy made representations to the Chifley-Evatt Government: Prime Minister Chifley, along with other Ministers, saw a screening and on 5 November 1946 announced that his Customs Minister, Senator J.M. Fraser, "had overruled the decision of the Commonwealth Film Censor". The film was shown to millions throughout the world and to Indonesians, despite the Dutch ban.

It was probably not unknown to Mr Chifley that *Indonesia Calling* was carried to Java aboard a repatriation ship and smuggled through the Dutch lines at Batavia. The film gave a boost to Indonesian morale. Republican areas were rather isolated from the world; communications were hampered seriously by the Dutch who spread suggestions that the Republic was virtually without friends in the world. *Indonesia Calling* was given publicity in the Republican press and by Antara news agency. According to Marion Michelle, the camera girl, the film was shown in village after village of Republican Java on open-air screens.²² Javanese watching Joris Ivens' exciting portrayal of Australians as standard-bearers of Indonesian liberation could have been forgiven some bewilderment. Australia was never a land of interest to them, except for its complicity in subjection of neighbours to alien rule and rigid exclusion of people with pigmentation like theirs. Australia was the pallidly pliant extension of Great Britain in this South-East Asian environment, an imperial echoland. Why had all this changed, almost overnight? The Australian Government, formed of a party that once ranted apocalyptically about the looming descent of Asian hordes and demanded the shield of the white men's battleships, was the dynamic ally of Asians whittling down the European power. Australian trade unionists, often given to repellent obsessions about "coloured labor" were the first white volunteers in the battle of brown men against white overlords, denying passage to colonialist ships and munitions of war. The boycott of Dutch ships and the Chifley-Evatt Government's rising resistance to Dutch, British and American efforts to bring down the Indonesian Republic meant that Labor Party foreign policy could never be pushed back into the old furrows, despite aberrations over West Irian.