

'INDONESIA CALLING' - THE BACKGROUND TO THE 1946 FILM AND THE PREMIERE OF A FILM BASED ON THESE HISTORIC EVENTS AT THE MELBOURNE FILM FESTIVAL IN JULY 2009.

In the closing days of World War II, a film entitled 'Indonesia Calling' about the birth of Indonesian Independence, was produced in Australia, tracing events in Sydney Harbour that changed the path of history. The 22 minute film, detailing effective shipping bans by Australian workers, was directed by a Dutchman and bankrolled by Asian seamen.....quite an eclectic combination!

It was made in 1945 by a famous Dutch film director Joris Ivens, who was sent to Australia by the Netherlands Indies Colonial/Civil Administration to document the end of Japanese occupation and its return to Colonial Rule. However, this transition proved to be not as smooth as expected, when Indonesian Independence was declared in August 17, 1945. In Sydney, Ivens witnessed the ban by Sydney's Waterside Workers and Seamen's Unions on NICA ship, that carried soldiers, arms and ammunition. Daring to bite the hand that fed him, Ivens decided to make a film of this shipping ban, reflecting his support for the Independence and an end to Colonial Rule.

The finance, for the production came mainly from the Chinese Seamen Union, was acknowledged in one scene where Chinese seamen are shown carrying bundles of money and their Union Secretary, Arthur Chang gives the final address to workers in Walsh Bay. This is followed by remarkable images of soldiers, workers and sailors marching in a show of unity, across the Sydney Harbour Bridge, to the rousing tune of Indonesia Raya, the Indonesian national anthem.

Another scene of particular interest is an Independence Day Ball held at Paddington Town Hall with Indonesian traditional dancers. This would have to be one of the first Australia Indonesia Association functions, held 65 years ago! And the present Australia Indonesia Association patron, Charlotte Maramis, was there as a young girl chaperoned by her mother.

The film was completed in August 1946 with the voiceover provided by famous Australian actor, Peter Finch. It was shown to packed audiences at the King's Cross Newsreel Cinema. However, the press and the Opposition Party, led by Robert Menzies and Harold Holt, demanded a ban on the film. The then Labour Prime Minister, Ben Chifley, after viewing the footage, refused to comply. In fact, his Foreign Minister, Herbert Evatt and the Australian UN representative Tom Critchley, spoke up for the Indonesian people and the fledgling republican leadership in the United Nations and went on to a negotiated peace agreement and an independent Indonesia in 1949. This remarkable and historic sequence of events had an immediate and dramatic effect on the fight for independence, in that it shortened the armed struggle, thereby avoiding a major conflict and further loss of life on both sides:

An Indonesian version of the film was smuggled through the NICA blockade into Yogya by Ted Roach of the Waterside Workers Federation. One can well imagine the response of the Indonesian people and their leaders, when they realised that Australian workers won them valuable time to consolidate their political hold on the new republic.

In yet another memorable scene, a ship, the Patras, managed to escape the ban, manned by an Indian crew and actually sailed outside the Sydney Heads, but due to a determined effort by Australian and Asian seamen in a small, vulnerable boat armed only with loud hailer, persuaded the crew to turn back the ship. The deserting Indian sailors, who defied armed guards, were received with loud cheers at Dawes Point, below the Sydney Harbour Bridge at the Rocks. This showed the world how the unity among Australian and Asian seamen and workers could achieve victory, the victory of passive resistance over military force, an event worth remembering!

Further exploration of these historic events come from a new 90 minute film of the same name directed by John Hughes, 'Indonesia Calling; Joris Ivens in Australia'. This film had its premiere at the Melbourne Film Festival in July 25th 2009 and was also screened at the

Brisbane Film Festival on August 9th 2009. The Sydney screening was at Fox Studios on September 17, 2009. ABC TV, the film's sponsors, has also expressed interest in screening an edited version nationwide, a one hour version of this film, that tells of a little-known event, that took place in Sydney Harbour, and that changed the course of history for Indonesia.

In this new film the producers stated that 'Two weeks after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Indonesian Independence leaders proclaimed - Indonesia Merdeka – the end of Dutch colonial rule over the Netherlands East Indies and the beginning of the Republic of Indonesia.

Internationally renowned Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens, here in Australia as Film Commissioner for the Netherlands East Indies government in exile, resigned his position in protest against Dutch policy, and in collaboration with Indonesian activists, Chinese, Indian and Australian trade unionists, and local artists and filmmakers, made Indonesia Calling a film documenting the crucial role of Australian trade union support in the establishment of the new Indonesian Republic.

The film, Indonesia Calling: Joris Ivens in Australia, recalls the birth of Indonesia, and the impact of a small film, made at a moment of crisis, on Australia's relations with its northern neighbour and it's legacy for Australian documentary film culture'.

ANTHONY LIEM
UPDATED NOVEMBER 2009