



Indonesian sailors demonstrating in the streets of Sydney in support of Indonesian independence, October 1945

# Indonesia Calling

Australia and the Netherlands both have strong ties with Indonesia, as a neighbour and as a former colony.

The Indonesian fight for independence (1945-1949) put a severe strain on their bilateral relations.

Of all people, it would be a famous Dutch filmmaker who played a key role in this: Joris Ivens.

by Esther Zwinkels

Joris Ivens (1898-1989) was a Dutch filmmaker with a worldwide reputation, famous for his documentaries about China, the Soviet Union and Spain under Franco's dictatorship. Despite his leftist sympathies, the Dutch colonial government commissioned Ivens to make a film about the liberation of the Dutch East Indies from the Japanese occupying forces. Australia became his base of operations.

## Colonial Film Service

Although Australia was not occupied during the Second World War, Japanese attacks had done major damage to a number of Australian cities. Australian soldiers served in Allied campaigns against Japan

throughout all of Asia. A considerable number of them ended up in Japanese prisoner of war camps, with many spending the remainder of the war in camps in the Dutch East Indies.

Meanwhile, the Dutch East Indies government fled to Australia, where it made preparations in exile for its return to the colony in various ways. For instance, the Netherlands Indies Government Film Unit approached director Joris Ivens about making a film on the Allies' victory over Japan. The Japanese had surrendered in August 1945 and it seemed like an easy job to go to Indonesia and shoot scenes of the capitulation. While Ivens was in Australia, however, another new development captured his attention.



*Australian harbour workers on strike in Sydney in support of Indonesian independence, October 1945*

### Harbour strikes

Some 10,000 Indonesians were in Australia during the war. They were colonial officials and soldiers from the colonial army who had fled from the Japanese occupiers. There were also several hundred Indonesian nationalists who before the war had been banned to Dutch New Guinea by the Dutch East Indies colonial government for political reasons. Before the Japanese attack on Dutch New Guinea they had been brought over to Australia out of precaution and put in internment camps there.

After the Republic of Indonesia was proclaimed in August 1945 directly after the Japanese capitulation, the Indonesians in Australia asked the Australian and international communities to support their independence. The Netherlands, however, refused to recognise the Republic of Indonesia and wanted to re-establish its colonial authority. The Dutch East Indies' government in exile provisioned ships in the Australian harbours with military supplies to send to the colony.

Starting in September, the Indonesian community managed to enlist international support in taking a stand in various harbours. They convinced Australian, Indonesian and Indian sailors as well as harbour workers and unions not to provision or man Dutch ships so as to prevent them from leaving the harbours with war supplies that could be used against the fight for independence in Indonesia. The strike ultimately lasted for nine months, and then continued with interruptions until 1949. A total of more than 550 ships were held up in Australian harbours.

### Indonesia Calling

Joris Ivens, not agreeing with those opposed to Indonesian independence, sided with the Indonesians. In November 1945 he quit the Colonial Film Service

and filmed the strikes in Sydney with his small international crew. He then combined this footage with rehearsed scenes to make a 22 minute black-and-white film with the title *Indonesia Calling*. It was a protest film that threw the spotlights on the campaigns

## Despite urgent requests from the Netherlands, the Australian government saw no reason to ban the film

that Indonesians were conducting on the wharfs and over the radio. The mutiny on the steamship *Patras* played a big part in it. The ship, headed for Indonesia with Dutch weapons and supplies on board, had managed to steer clear of the boycott and leave the harbour. However, Indian crew members who supported the Indonesian fight for independence then stopped the engine and forced the ship to sail back to

*Indonesian community during Australia Day in Melbourne, 2015*





Joris Ivens  
(second from left)

Sydney's harbour. This film about 'ships that don't put out to sea' was shown at Indonesian open-air cinemas in 1946 and was extremely popular with the local population.

Despite urgent requests from the Netherlands, the Australian government saw no reason to ban the film in Australia. In doing so, the Australian government took a clear standpoint, openly abandoning their former ally in the fight against Japan in its attempt to regain colonial power. Diplomatic relations between Australia and Netherlands were further put to the test when the Dutch government intervened militarily in Indonesia.

### Aftermath

For Joris Ivens, the film only enhanced his reputation as an activist filmmaker. This, however, had negative consequences for his ties with his motherland. The Dutch government declared him persona non grata. It was not until the 1980s that the government 'rehabilitated' Ivens, with the then-minister of Welfare, Health and Culture, Elco Brinkman, declaring that history had proven Ivens more right than his adversaries.

After the transfer of sovereignty in 1949, diplomatic relations between Australia and the Netherlands greatly improved. The massive emigration of over 120,000 Dutch people to Australia in the 1950s, spurred by fervent promotion from both governments, contributed to this. Although the Netherlands was no longer a coloniser, its relation with Indonesia remained sensitive for a long time. For Australia, the intensive contacts it had maintained with Indonesians in the 1940s contributed to its becoming more closely involved with political developments in Asia and the Pacific, and in Indonesia in particular.

In 2015, an exhibition on Australian support for the Indonesian fight for independence was made in celebration of the 70th anniversary of Indonesia's independence. It was shown at the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney and the Museum Benteng Vredeburg in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, under the title *Black Armada/Armada Hitam*. During the exhibition, *Indonesia Calling* played non-stop.