

An Australian 're-visits' Indonesia Calling.

revisit

AUS

BY JOHN HUGHES

JOHN HUGHES' WORK ON JORIS IVENS IN AUSTRALIA IS EXPECTED TO PREMIER AT THE MELBOURNE FILM FESTIVAL IN AUGUST 2009.1

'We sent the film to Poland to have it judged by Joris Ivens.'

Keith Gow, Waterside Workers Federation Film Unit, Australia (1953-'58)

Joris Ivens' time in Australia and the context of his *Indonesia Calling* (22 minutes, 1946, Australia), is concerned with a complex historical moment of de-colonization. The Netherlands East Indies, occupied during the war by Japan, was soon to be free of Japanese occupation and its colonial past. The Netherlands, Australia, Britain, the US, and the Indonesians, were all divided in a variety of ways about how this might be achieved. When Sukarno and Hatta proclaimed Indonesia's independence on August 17, 1945, Joris Ivens -with his American, Australian and Indonesian collaborators- began to forge, what was to become, as Ivens himself said at the time, 'Australia's first labour film'.

This moment of 'independence' was fought out in several registers. There was the challenge for an Australian

government to stand up in support of their close northern neighbour against wartime allies and major Western powers. There was an opportunity for the Australian people to reject a culture of racial discrimination and collaborate with Indians, Chinese and Indonesians. And there was the necessity for a film to be made independently of government and corporate interests. Joris Ivens film, in one way and another, engaged productively with each of these, and had lasting effects.

For Australian film culture *Indonesia Calling* demonstrated to an Australian trade union leadership how effective a film could be in contentious political debate. It was Ivens' precedent that created a fertile environment for the initiative of the WWF unit's Norma Disher, Keith Gow and Jock Levy who went on to produce an important body of 'progressive' film work for the unions from 1953-'58.

When Joris Ivens became President of the Jury at the World Festival of Youth and Students in Warsaw in 1955 he awarded a Gold Medal to an Australian film *The Hungry Miles* (WWF Film Unit, 25 minutes, 1954)². During a film I made about this WWF units' work in the late 1970s I asked veteran Australian filmmaker Keith Gow how *The*

Hungry Miles was first received by the union leadership. He was a little reticent about it. He said the leadership were 'surprised', and even 'disappointed'. They thought they were getting a film 'about a particular strike, a particular struggle'. But *The Hungry Miles* has a much broader canvas; it constructs a history of dockworkers' activism including startling recreations of the 1930s depression on the wharves. The union leadership decided they would put the film aside as 'it shouldn't perhaps be widely shown immediately', as Keith delicately put it. He went on: 'however when the film won a gold medal in Poland and had been received well at screenings for the rank and file... the leadership then saw that it must have some value.'³

The Waterside Workers Federation film unit went on to make about a dozen films; the filmmakers' unique position, supported by the most militant and strategic union in the country, allowed their work to be sustained when others were blacklisted, or severely constrained in government agencies under conservative governments. We remain appreciative of Joris Ivens' commitment.

John Hughes

John Hughes, *Filmstill Indonesia Calling: Joris Ivens in Australia.*

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