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Recollections of the 'Black Armada' in Brisbane

Since Boxing Day 2004, the attention of all Australians has been focussed on countries in Asia, particularly Indonesia, Sri Lanka and India. These countries were the worst affected by the devastating tsunami which struck their coastlines and other areas in the region such as Thailand, the Maldives and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Australians have been generous in their aid to assist those who survived, to help rebuild their devastated countries and their lives.

This is the second time Australians have come to the forefront in assisting the Indonesian people. Back in the 1940s Australian trade unionists were the first to respond to an appeal from Indonesian Trade Unions. This appeal was directed to the 'democratic and peaceful peoples everywhere, and especially to the working class in all countries of the world, to boycott all that is Dutch in all harbours, stores, roadways and other places throughout the world in the event of the outbreak of warfare in Indonesia'.¹

The boycott of Dutch shipping in Australia, colourfully described by journalist Rupert Lockwood as the 'Black Armada', was instrumental in preventing the return of Dutch shipping for the re-occupation of the Indies and the re-establishment of Dutch rule. It thus made way for the foundation of the Indonesian Republic. The embargo began in Brisbane and held up 559 vessels.²

The War Years: Our Indonesian Friends Prowito, Asir and Slamet



In the large, rambling house on the top of the hill in a Brisbane suburb, we welcomed many visitors during the war years. Our family consisted of my mother, two sisters and their two small children and myself. Our husbands were in the army in New Guinea, in navy small craft around the islands to the north and in the airforce in Britain. Our many visitors included Australian and American soldiers, sailors and airmen, Chinese and Indonesians.

For the two Indonesians, Prowito and Asir, with whom we became firm friends, our household, they told us, resembled their own extended households in Indonesia. To some extent, they felt welcomed and at home. Prowito often brought his wife and several children with him on his many visits and we had many talks about life as it was in Indonesia when he left there. When we met the family they

were living in a type of boarding house in New Farm. A whole lot of Indonesians were housed there in a building near what was the old Brewery in Brunswick Street. One of Prowito's children came top of New Farm school that they attended. On one occasion, Prowito came to the door when my sisters and I were at work. He asked my mother if he could use our sewing machine. He explained that he wanted to make some pyjamas for his children. 'Of course', she said, very surprised. It wasn't very common for Australian men to do the household sewing! At this time Prowito was employed by the Dutch. Asir was employed on a farm outside Brisbane but came to visit by train in the weekends. Prowito was a teacher, who had been involved in the Teachers' strike in 1926, part of an abortive uprising against Dutch colonial rule.

But what were the events which led to the arrival of these Indonesians on Australian shores? In history classes at school we were told about the 'Spice Islands' to our north where the happy Indonesian people lived under benevolent Dutch rule. But in fact I discovered later that for 350 years Indonesians had lived as a colonial country under the rule of the Dutch. The Dutch used the country's rich resources not for the benefit of the country or its people but largely for European investors. 'A rich country but her people were kept poor'.³

In 1919 a central trade union organisation was established in Indonesia and a wave of strikes followed. The PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia) was formed in 1920, and its influence spread rapidly up to 1926-1927.⁴

Following these strikes, some 13,000 arrests were made, and of those arrested an unspecified number was shot and thousands were sent to prison. Dutch autocratic law specified that 'those who can be considered by the government to disturb or have disturbed the public peace and order will be without any legal proceedings exiled for an indefinite time at a specially appointed place.'⁵ 1,300 were sent into exile to Tanah Merah (usually the 'specially appointed place') a notorious concentration camp at Boven Digul, West Irian, then part of Dutch New Guinea.⁶

In February 1942. Japan invaded the Netherlands East Indies. On 8 March all organized Dutch resistance ceased and on the 10 March a nucleus of the NEI administration was evacuated to Australia. As a result, the Australian government reluctantly became host to the Netherlands East Indies Government-in-Exile (formerly the Dutch colonial government in Indonesia). In Brisbane, their headquarters were at Wacol Army Camp and their Air Force at Amberley Air Force base.
Life in Tanah Merah

Prowito was part of the group that had been exiled after the 1926 Teachers' Strike. He was 'betrothed' (as he put it) at the time of his arrest and was given the option of taking his wife-to-be with him. She agreed, and their seven children were born in imprisonment.

During the long years of imprisonment in this strange land across the seas, far from their homeland, the prisoners managed to carry out the tasks of daily life. The place was unhealthy, surrounded by mosquito-infested swamps. Many prisoners contracted malaria and other illnesses; the jungle country was reputed to be inhabited by head hunting natives, and the perils of the crocodile infested Digul River were a deterrent to any would-be escapees.

But a few prisoners did escape in 1929. Prowito told us that he knew of the escape and had heard of their remarkable journey to Thursday Island where the escapees were handed back to the Dutch for re-imprisonment.⁷ Whilst in Tanah Merah, Prowito continued his teaching, and when we decided to learn Malay, he again became a teacher for a small group in our home. I don't think we were particularly good students!

Arrival in Australia

Prowito and his family remained in Tanah Merah until June 1943 when the Dutch Government-in-Exile transferred the surviving 500 political prisoners and their families to Australia on the steamship Both. The Indonesians were completely isolated during their imprisonment in Tanah Merah. They obtained some information about the world from any new prisoners who might be brought there. Prowito told us that until he reached Australia, he had no knowledge of the war and he was shocked to learn of the development of Nazism in Germany and Japan.

The Indonesian political prisoners arrived in Bowen, then continued to Sydney where they were eventually transported by train to military prison camps. They were held and guarded by Australian military personnel. With great daring and initiative, the prisoners made their plight known to Australian rail and waterside workers. They threw notes to workers on the Bowen wharf and from the train to rail

workers on the lines explaining their presence and their predicament.

Prowito told me the harrowing story of the train journey in Australia with his very sick child. He attempted, with limited English, to get medical attention from a train guard. I asked him how he did this – and he said – “I spoke to the guard and I told him that my little boy had a 'pine in his billy'.” (He had obviously heard some Australians speaking.) Understanding was eventually reached with a sympathetic guard who gave him assistance.

In December 1943. pressure was exerted on the government, principally by Australian trade unions and civil liberty organisations, to secure the release of Indonesian prisoners and their families. Eventually, after his release, Prowito accepted service with the Dutch government in Australia, not only to help the anti-Japanese war effort in Australia, but he told us, to sabotage Dutch re-occupation of his country. Ban on Dutch ships –the Indonesian Independence Committee

After the proclamation of the Indonesian Republic on 1 September 1945, the Central Committee for Indonesian Independence (CENKIM) in Brisbane called on all Indonesians in Australia to mutiny and asked for Australian support for the nationalist cause.



On the weekend 22-23 September 1945 in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne, Indonesian merchant seamen walked off Dutch ships that were being loaded with supplies for Dutch re-occupation of the East Indies. The walk-off marked the beginning of the renowned Dutch shipping ban, which held Dutch ships in Australia for four long years.

Prowito and Slamet were to play a significant role in Australia in the Independence struggle. They were the two members of the Indonesian Independence Committee who accompanied Ted Englart and Alby Graham (officials of the Waterside Workers' Union), an organiser of the Building Workers Union (Archie Nichol) and Mick Healy (Secretary, Trades & Labor Council when they met with representatives of seamen on Dutch ships in Brisbane. At this meeting tactics were finalised for the seamen's walk-off in support of wage demands linked with demands for non-interference by the Dutch government with the newly proclaimed republic.

The five hundred Indonesian seamen who walked off the ships were housed in the top floor of the Trades Hall (the dance floor) for three weeks. Blankets were provided from American stores by Chinese working for the Americans at Bulimba, and meals were brought from Chinese restaurants. Many of the Chinese met at the long table in the dining room at our house on the hill and their leader Albert was the only one, to my knowledge, who spoke English. They were delighted when my mother and we three girls waited on them with tea and cakes. On one occasion Albert took us down to their Bulimba

camp where we were surprised to see that the Chinese seemed to run the camp!

Eventually complaints from Trades Hall office staff and the Health Department led to the removal of the Indonesians by trade union officials, who transported them to different stations along the Ipswich line and put them on the Ipswich bound train. They then walked in to the Dutch Wacol camp in small groups, and the Dutch authorities, taken by surprise, were forced to accommodate and feed them. Later the Dutch government asked the Australian government to accept responsibility for them and they were then housed at a CCC (Civil Construction Corp) camp at Chermside. Mick and I were invited to a wonderful dinner and concert organised by the Indonesians at the Wacol Army camp some time in 1945. After the dinner, there was singing and dancing and an Indonesian play. We went back stage after the play to be introduced to the players – to my surprise the very beautiful young women in the play were our Indonesian friends! And of course I learned that as part of their traditions women were not permitted to take part in public displays of this nature and were represented by men dressed in women's costumes.

Prowito and fellow Indonesians return home

Australian trade unions and the Council for Civil Liberties had continually exerted pressure on the Federal government to repatriate the striking seamen and other striking Indonesians from the Dutch army (including Tanah Merah deportees) and successfully force the Dutch government to grant them political amnesty on their arrival in Indonesia.

Prowito left Brisbane, along with hundreds of other Indonesian men, women and children and Australian born wives (about 800 in all) on the steamship *Manoora*⁸ in February 1946. The HMAS *Manoora* was an Adelaide Steamship Company coastal passenger ship converted to a landing-craft carrier. Mick Healy (who had come to know many of the Indonesians well) and a few more trade union officials went down to where the ship was berthed at a little used wharf across the river from Hamilton to see them off.

After leaving Brisbane, the ship called at Mackay to take other Indonesians aboard, most of them Tanah Merah survivors for whom Mackay had been a main centre. Mick also went to Mackay to say farewell to the 80 Indonesians who joined the ship there. On arrival at Tanjong Priok in Java, defying Dutch demands that Indonesian repatriates be handed over, the repatriated Indonesians were escorted by Gurkhas, at Australian Captain Cousin's request to Republican territory, about 60 miles from Batavia. Women and children were escorted ashore later.⁹

For Prowito and his family it was a sad homecoming. He had complained of stomach problems for some time whilst in Australia. Sadly he died shortly after his arrival in Indonesia. He had spoken proudly of his eldest son who had studied in Melbourne to become an Aircraftsman. The young man also died fighting in the Indonesian Air Force against the Dutch. We heard of their deaths in a letter from a fellow Indonesian who had been in Australia. At least they reached the shores of the land that they loved so well. I do not know the fate of Asir, a simple countryman, whose dream was an Indonesia, free from Dutch rule.



Mick Healy and Ted Roach attend SOBSI

In May 1946 the Central organisation of the All-Indonesian Trade Unions (SOBSI) invited Mick Healy (Secretary Trades & Labor Council) and Ted Roach (Assistant Secretary of the Waterside Workers' Federation) to attend its first conference since the Republic was proclaimed. The conference was held in Malang, Java, and, according to Mick, they received a tremendous reception similar to those accorded to other Australian visitors at the time. For example, Sir Richard Kirby, who played a leading role in mediation efforts, recalled that when visiting Yogyakarta in July 1946 with Republican Prime Minister Sutan Sjahrir, 'they were greeted by cheering crowds who were shouting "Australia, Australia" and showering them with flower petals.'¹⁰ The Australian delegates Ted Roach and Mick Healy went from Jakarta by train to Malang with Indonesian trade unionists and interpreters. About 600 to 800 delegates, including two Dutch trade union representatives from Holland, attended the conference. Most delegates came from Java but oil workers from Borneo, sugar and tobacco workers from Sumatra, were also present. A humorous incident occurred on the train. One of the Indonesians asked Mick if

he could come back to Australia as his house-servant. Mick had great difficulty in convincing him that he didn't have a house – just a flat – and couldn't afford a servant even if he wanted one! Women workers, including school teachers and cane basket makers, also attended the conference.

They later took the Australian delegates to a small factory presenting them with little baskets which Mick brought back for our baby son. President of SOBSI (Haryono) chaired the Conference. He had been in Tanah Merah and was an expatriate from Australia.¹¹ He had been in Mackay working in sugar mills for a couple of years after his release, then came to Brisbane to work on communications for the Dutch government-in- exile at Wacol thus becoming aware of developments and future plans of the Dutch government. He was prominent in the leadership of the Indonesian Independence Committee and a leading member of the illegal, highly secret Indonesian Communist Party, of which little was known by anyone in Australia. He returned to Indonesia with the Dutch to Hollandia in West Irian and then Java.¹²

After the Congress, Ted and Mick were invited to have tea with Prime Minister Hatta who had been in Tanah Merah in earlier times. Speaking in perfect English, he discussed with them the Australian political situation. They were also entertained by Sarafuddin, Minister for Defence, and Sediadit, Minister for Railways. The latter was a Communist who during the early part of the war, as a student at a Dutch University, had participated in the resistance movement against Hitler. Both Sarafuddin and Sediadit had attended the SOBSI Congress and were interested in developing relations with Australia. They recognised the important role that Australian trade unionists could play in assisting their country's development. They hoped that under the influence of the trade unions the Australian government would be persuaded to recognise Indonesian independence.¹³ With this in mind, Haryono asked the Australian delegates to advise Australian trade unionists to continue the ban on Dutch shipping. In a letter to Australian trade unions he described the Australian unions' boycott of the Dutch as 'a deed of historic importance and an example to the world'.¹⁴ Haryono was later killed by the Soekarno Government troops at Madiun in 1948 when the left forces were crushed.¹⁵

Slamet, the Indonesian Independence Committee and the visit of Dr Oesman Sastroamidjojo¹⁶

Slamet, a member of the Indonesian Independence Committee in Brisbane, has already been mentioned. That committee worked closely with the trade union movement here and I had the opportunity to meet him as I worked for some years in the Waterside Workers Union in Brisbane. Slamet, like Prowito, was a teacher who had been in Tanah Merah. After my air force husband was killed in a wartime bombing raid over Belgium, I married Mick Healy and we set up house in Moorooka. Slamet often visited us there for friendly discussions.

On one occasion he accompanied Dr Oesman Sastroamidjojo, of the Republic's Foreign Ministry, the first Indonesian Ambassador to Australia, when he visited us in our home to discuss the Indonesian trust account funds in which a considerable sum of money had accrued. The Indonesian seamen who were in Brisbane were unable to take with them the money they had earned in Australia because of currency export regulations. They left this money in a Trust Fund in a Commonwealth Bank account under the aegis of the Trades & Labour Council with Harry Harvey, President, Frank O'Brien, Treasurer and the Secretary Mick Healy as the official trustees. A sum of about £32,000 was accumulated in this fund and the interest was paid to the account of the Indonesian Independence Committee (by agreement with all depositors) to enable the work of this committee to continue.

Dr Oesman was anxious to have control of the funds transferred to the Soekarno government and was urging immediate action on these lines. But Slamet and the Indonesian Independence Committee secretly advised against this procedure at the time. The money was finally paid over, the last payment being made in the 1950s, but not until strict arrangements had been made with the Commonwealth Bank and the Indonesian government for its final distribution. They took full responsibility for the payment of the remittances to their rightful owners, or if deceased, to their relatives.

A last farewell

After the other Indonesians had left Brisbane, Slamet and another Indonesian named Bondan and Molly, his Australian wife, stayed behind to finalise matters after the other Indonesians had left. Bondan was also a member of the Indonesian Independence Committee in Australia.

A farewell function was held in the Trades Hall on 24 October 1947 and Mick, as Queensland Trades and Labor Council Secretary, said goodbye to Slamet and Bondan. They left Brisbane shortly after by 'plane. Two photos commemorate the farewell occasion.¹⁷

Slamet later became Chairman of a District Committee of the Communist Party in Indonesia and then a member of Parliament. He wrote to us once from Indonesia saying he had married and had a small child. It was Slamet who told us of Prowito's death. He appealed to us for help with warm clothing for his family and we sent a parcel to him. He died later in the massacres which followed the September 30 Movement of 1965 in which it has been estimated that from half to one million people were murdered.¹⁸

On my bookcase stands a stylised wood carving of an Indonesian man given to us by Slamet. It is a constant reminder to me of our very fine Indonesian friends. But sadly it also recalls the terrible fate that many great fighters for the freedom of their country from Dutch colonial rule later sustained at the hands of their own people and the Suharto regime which had ousted the Soekarno Republican government.

Indonesian Republic recognised

Although Australia, the UK and the US had given de facto recognition to the Republic, the ban imposed on Dutch Shipping on 24 September 1945 was not lifted until 26 May 1948. The decision to lift the ban was made at an ACTU Conference of Federal 8 Transport and Waterside Unions in Melbourne, which Mick Healy attended. It was temporarily reimposed but finally lifted by a decision of the Waterside Workers' Federal Council in November 1949.¹⁹

The sovereignty of the Indonesian Republican government was only finally recognized by the Dutch government in the Hague on the 27 December 1949, after protracted negotiations instigated by the Australian government on the 30 July 1947 in the Security Council of the United Nations.²⁰

Whilst the bans were initiated by Communist led unions there was widespread sympathy and support for the Indonesians throughout Australia. Opposition leader Menzies and the press denounced the boycott and claimed that the union movement was attempting to dictate foreign policy. The Worker newspaper claimed that Communists were distorting the situation to 'suit their revolutionary programme'. This attitude was supported by an element in the union movement itself, such as the Bundaberg Trades and Labor Council. And under the right-wing leadership of Secretary C.G. Fallon, the AWU called for an enquiry into funds raised for Indonesians in Australia.²¹

But these were minority views. Many Australians remembered that, as Japanese prisoners of war, they had worked alongside Indonesian forced labor, suffering the same hardships.²² In Australia, friendships sprang up between Australians and Indonesians in many small towns. The story of Indonesian friendship with Casino townspeople has been told on ABC radio. And in Mackay for example, Les Crofton, a retired official of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union, whose father was a railway worker, remembers as a child attending many social gatherings where Indonesians were present. A function hosted by the Indonesians who had provided what he described as 'sumptuous food' led to the comment by his mother Ivy that 'they must have deprived themselves to have put on such a wonderful spread'.²³ It has been said that 'the bans gained more public support than any other communist political initiative ever had'.²⁴

The political influence of the Dutch shipping bans, which had commenced in Brisbane, was far reaching. It resulted in actions of international solidarity by trade unionists worldwide. The American Longshoremen's Union (West Coast), the New Zealand Federation of Labor, the Canadian Longshoremen's Union and workers in more than fourteen countries refused to load Dutch ships or give them berthing facilities. The old colonial order that had operated in Indonesia was successfully challenged. Combined with the diplomacy of the major powers, an Indonesian Republic was finally established.



Notes

- 1 Margo Beasley, *Wharfies. The History of the Waterside Workers' Federation*, Halstead Press in association with Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney, N.S.W, 1996, p.128. A quotation from the Minutes of the Federal Council Waterside Workers' Federation Minutes, 24th July 1947.
- 2 The 559 vessels included 36 Dutch merchant ships, passenger liners and troopships, two tankers and other oil industry craft, and 450 power and dumb barges, lighters and surf landing craft. Nine corvettes, two submarines and seven submarine chasers. Three Royal Australian Navy vessels and two British troopships, as well as aircraft and a vast land transport fleet were also caught up in the ban. See Margo Beasley, *Wharfies...*, pp.129-130.
- 3 Gerald Peel, *Hands Off Indonesia*, Current Book Distributors, Sydney, Noel Butlin Archive Centre (ANU), p.6. Indonesia was traditionally a country very rich in natural resources. According to the author, at this time it provided 92% of the world's pepper, 91% of the world's cinchona, used for making quinine, 80% of the world's bauxite, 77% of the world's kapok, 40% of the world's rubber. And very large quantities of total world requirements of tea, cocos products, tin, tow fibres, sugar and oil.
- 4 Bernard Dahm (trans by P.S. Falla), *History of Indonesia in the Twentieth Century*, Pall Mall Press, London, 1971, p.59 and Rex Mortimer in 'Studies in Indonesian History', Gen. Ed. Elaine McKay, Pitman, Australia, 1976, p.18.
- 5 Gerald Peel *Hands Off Indonesia*, Noel Butlin Archive Centre (ANU), p.8.
- 6 Malcolm Caldwell and Ernst Utrecht, *Indonesia: an Alternative History*, Alternative Publishing Co- operative Limited, Sydney, 1979, p.56.
- 7 The story of this escape has been told in a number of books. See Rupert Lockwood, *Black Armada*, Australasian Book Society, Sydney, 1975, pp. 18-19.
- 8 Rupert Lockwood, *Black Armada*, Australasian Book Society, 1975, Sydney, pp.144, 146.
- 9 Information from a talk given by Mick Healy at a function organized by Brisbane International Socialists to commemorate the boycott of Dutch Shipping on 7/8/1983. In author's possession.
- 10 Tom Critchley, in Martin O'Hare & Anthony Reid, *Australia & Indonesia's Struggle for Independence*, p.xiii.
- 11 Rupert Lockwood, *Black Armada*, p.141.
- 12 Information supplied by Mick Healy in a letter dated 9 July 1975 to Rupert Lockwood (in author's possession).
- 13 Information in a letter dated 9 July 1975 from Mick Healy to Rupert Lockwood (in author's possession)
- 14 Rupert Lockwood, *Black Armada*, pp. 141,285.
- 15 Rupert Lockwood, *Black Armada*, p.141.
- 16 Dr Oesman Sastromidjojo was sent to Australia in June 1947.
- 17 A photo published in June/July 1969 in the *Maritime Worker*, the national newspaper of the Waterside Workers' Union, depicted presentations by two leaders of the Indonesian community in Australia (Slamet and Bondan) to Mick Healy as a token of gratitude for the help rendered by the trade unions in Queensland to the cause of Indonesian independence. The second photo shows Mick saying farewell to Slamet.
- 18 Malcolm Caldwell and Ernst Utrecht, *Indonesia: an Alternative History...*, p.133. In an endnote the authors state that the number of victims killed without trial 'will presumably always remain unknown'. It has been estimated that up to 1 million people were massacred. See also *The Indonesian Killings 1965-1966. Studies from Java and Bali*, Ed. By Robert Cribb, p.5, quoting a CIA report.
- 19 R.A. Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists. Communism and the Australian Labour Movement 1920-1955*, Allen & Unwin, Syd. 1985, p.238.
- 20 Information from discussion by the author with Mick Healy.
- 21 *Worker*, 29 October 1945, p.1, 5 November 1945, pp. 1 & 4, 3 December 1945, p.1, 3 December 1945, p.4 (Editorial), 27 January 1946, p.1.
- 22 Martin O'Hare & Anthony Reid, *Australia & Indonesia's Struggle for Independence*, Jakarta:PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1995, p.6 . 6,000 Australian prisoners-of-war in Indonesia and 15,000 in Singapore were forced by the Japanese to work in building airfields and installations alongside Indonesians. About 5,000 Australian prisoners labored on the notorious Burma-Thailand railway with more than 30,000 Indonesians who were sent there as -volunteer laborers'.
- 23 Author's conversation with Les Crofton.
- 24 Margo Beasley, *Wharfies...*, p.130.