Unionization and Indonesian Workers in 1930s Australia

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Introduction

This paper considers the connection between Indonesian workers and Australian unionism in 1930s Australia, focusing on indentured workers in Darwin’s pearling industry. The pearling industry began in Australia’s northern waters in the 1860s. With its multi-ethnic workforce, it was one of the areas of concern for White Australian unionists. The 1920s and 1930s, however, were particularly significant in that for the first time a tentative connection was formed between the Australian labour movement and the indentured Asian workforce, it was one of the areas of concern for White Australian unionists. According to Michael Quinlan and Constance Lever-Tracy, it was in the 1930s that unionists first questioned the old axiom that ‘Asiatics’ were innately servile and a threat to the labour movement.

Rupert Lockwood’s Black Armada examines Australian trade unionist support for Indonesian seamen in their 1945 protest against Dutch colonial rule. Given the exclusionist character of White Australia, both Lockwood and the Dutch government were somewhat sceptical over this sudden development of international solidarity. I would argue, however, that the solidarity displayed in 1945 needs to be understood in historical context. To my knowledge, there has been no study of early twentieth-century contact between Indonesian and Australian workers, despite the fact that Indonesian seamen and pearling crews were regular visitors to Australian ports. This gap in labour history is surprising given the continued importance of Australian relations with Indonesia. Previous studies on Asian workers in Australia, such as those in Who Are Our Enemies?, have focused on the racism of Australian unionists and their rejection of Asian workers. More needs to be heard, however, of the Asian workers themselves, and their role in developing common cause with Australian unionists.

Workers in the Dutch East Indies

Thus far, I have used the term ‘Indonesian’, but of course this is an anachronism. During the 1930s, Indonesian nationalism was in its infancy, and the region remained under the control of the Dutch colonial government. Australia chose to import indentured pearling crews from the Dutch East Indies precisely because its colonial government still condoned the practice of indenture and were prepared to supply the pearling industry with their ‘natives’ as ‘cheap labour’. The Indonesian indentured workers were brought to Darwin from the ports of Kupang in western Timor and Dobo in the Aru Islands. They were usually referred to as Malays, Dutch Malays, Koepangers or Aru Islanders, though these terms were loosely applied. The matter of categorisation was quite confusing, especially as the workers imported from Singapore were also referred to as Malays.

Before considering the Australian context, it is necessary to appreciate the extent of unionism in Indonesia itself, and the influence of communist and anti-colonial movements in this period. It is difficult to gain specific information regarding the eastern islands of Indonesia as this region tended to be regarded as the outer limit of Indonesian territory. Nevertheless, John Ingleson’s study of unionism in colonial Java, gives a sense of the impact of communist leadership on Indonesian workers and we can only presume that something of the communist message had filtered through to the islands of Timor and Aru. Ingleson describes the communist struggle to arouse class consciousness ‘in a society where vertical cleavages of ethnicity, kinship, patronage and religion were dominant.’ According to Ingleson, Dutch managers regarded Indonesian workers with attitudes of paternalism which were reinforced by their belief in the superiority of European culture and their perceptions of Java as a feudalistic society.

Nevertheless, such attitudes did not go unquestioned. The period from the First World War until 1921, was ‘characterised by strikes and militant unionism’. In 1925, however, the Dutch government suppressed the union movement and by 1926 the workers were giving their support to anti-Dutch nationalist parties. In 1926 and 1927 there were communist revolts in both Java and Sumatra which served to intensify government repression and put end to the liberalisation program of the Dutch administration. Thus, the 1930s was a period in which the growing sense of rebellion amongst Indonesian workers was held in check by an increasingly dictatorial Dutch government.

Regulating indentured labour

Darwin’s pearling industry in 1920 was relatively insignificant, employing only a few indentured workers. By the late 1920s, however, the industry began to revive as pearling masters from Thursday Island and Broome brought their luggers to Darwin. The new luggers employed crew members and the majority of these were Indonesians. According to the contract signed in 1928 with the Dutch authorities, the indentured crew imported from the port of Kupang were to be paid a set wage of 25 shillings per month and keep. Such low wages led the Darwin North Australian Workers’ Union to dub them ‘cooie’ or ‘cheap’ labour. Their wages were only slightly better than those of Aboriginal workers at that time, who were paid five shillings a week and keep.

It is difficult to give precise numbers of Indonesians employed as the figures include Singaporean workers, but on average approximately 40 workers were employed each year throughout the 1930s, with the highest number being in 1935 when 188 Malay and Koepangers were employed by seven pearling masters. The majority of these were employed as crew members, but a few had also been chosen for the more lucrative, but dangerous profession of diver.

The Australian federal government strictly regulated the employment of indentured labour in keeping with the precepts of the ‘White Australia’ policy. Pearling masters were to be obliged to pay a bond for each indentured worker. The bond was £250 for up to 10 men and could only be returned after the indent was back in his country of origin. Each indent was required to have a medical certificate and a identity card with two thumbprints and two photographs. These regulations were intended to address two of the main preoccupations of White Australia: that Asian workers might introduce contagious diseases, and that they might attempt to remain as permanent residents.

The period of engagement was initially set for three years. During the first three years the indent was bonded to his employer. After that, however, he could leave his original employer, provided that he remained in the pearling industry. Officially the limit of employment was six years, but this rule was rarely adhered to. Registers were kept detailing dates of employment, number and nationality of indents, deaths and causes, and police
prosecutions. These regulations were intended to monitor and protect the working conditions of the indentants and were part of the agreement with the Dutch East Indies government. The recording of criminal prosecutions, however, was there to allay the fears of the 'white' community. At the first sign of criminal activity the indent could be deported. Racial stereotyping of Malays encouraged the notion that they posed a potential threat to public safety.

Of course the most important issue for the labour movement was the supposed threat of competition from 'cheap' labour. In order to allay the union's fears, indentants who lived ashore during the lay-up season, from December to March, were only permitted to engage in work connected with the maintenance of their luggers, such as overhauling and painting. Nevertheless, the Pearlers insisted on employing the crews in other jobs such as unloading, weighing, sorting and packing shell. There was a constant battle between the NAWU and the pearlers over this encroachment of union territory. The existence of Indonesian worker activism in Australia appears as an unlikely phenomenon. These workers were under a contract of indenture which fixed the terms and conditions of their employment. Nevertheless the crew members were forced to employ unionists in order to simply ensure that these basic contracts were fulfilled.

The first case occurred in February 1928 when two crew members, Mateas Lili and Martin Bela, were brought to Darwin from Kupang in Timor. On arrival they were asked to work on a lugger carrying mail and stores to the Cape Don lighthouse. They argued that they had signed on to engage in the pearling industry and not to carry cargo, and subsequently refused to work. They were prosecuted under Section 390 of the Navigation Act and sentenced to 28 days imprisonment. They were released, however, after negotiations with Don McKinnon, editor of the union newspaper, the Northern Standard. Once released, the two men went to live in the camp of Mahoney who was a well-known communist in the NAWU. Finally, a year after their arrival, the two were declared 'prohibited immigrants' and deported under the Immigration Restriction Act.

Their employer Clark, who had been forced to pay for their passage was unimpressed with this show of resistance. He asked the federal government to grant him permission to replace his Koepanger divers with Papuans, arguing that they were regularly employed at Thursday Island. He was refused permission after the Governor at Port Moresby reported his concern that the 'natives' there might be infected with malaria. Clark was clearly unwilling to employ Indonesian workers if they were planning to engage in unionist activity and it was only by government intervention that he was forced to continue.

In 1931 there was another incident in which three Singaporeans approached the union asking for advice on wages owing to them. They were to be repatriated but had not yet been paid their full wages. The NAWU Secretary, Toupein took the matter up with the Customs and Fisheries Office and approached Ulrich, Gregory and Co.'s manager. During the negotiations it was revealed that their wages were £3 per month, which was substantially more than the 25 shillings quoted in 1928 for Indonesian workers. According to master pearler, Captain Gregory the wages for crews were adjusted according to the experience and ethnicity of the workers. He stated that he employed Malays, Javanese, Timorese, and Aru Islanders and that the highest wage for crew members was £7 per month, which was a very reasonable wage. By way of comparison, the Indonesian seamen who went on strike in Australia in 1945 were being paid a wage of £2 per month.

Indonesian activists

The men used are mostly Malays, and it may be said in passing, that they are used for shore work, very much against their will. When they join a pearling lugger, their wages are fixed at 25/- per month, and they are given to understand that they have only to work on the boat. They are told that the Australian law does not allow them to work on shore, but they are soon disillusioned when the boat reaches Darwin. Under threats of being sent to Fanny Bay gaol, they are compelled to load the shell on to lorries, and unload it when they reach the sheds.

McDonald described them as 'sweated alien labour' and commented that 'This is taking place in a country that prides itself on its "White Australia Policy."' McDonald clearly did not blame the Indonesians and wrote: 'They know that they are being exploited and have no other way of seeking redress.'
Workers in Darwin. Their living conditions were also threatened by Segregation. Wages and rations were not the only source of concern for Indonesian the so-called 'white' community. In 1928, steps were taken to segregate them in camps on the foreshores of Darwin where the pearling lugger moored. It was decided that only Japanese would be allowed to live in the town centre. As their numbers increased, however, even these restrictions were regarded as insufficient as they were still allowed to come into town for entertainment purposes. A complaint was lodged by Sergeant Koop who was of the opinion that their freedom of the town should be curtailed. He wrote:

... the Malay and Koepang divers and crews freely patronise the hotels and become very arrogant and upnish towards other members of the civilian community. It is almost certain that serious affrays will eventuate unless steps are taken to curtail the freedom of the Malay and Koepang indents and to keep them out of the town. During the last week a group of Malays came into conflict with two white men and, it is reported, an ugly clash was narrowly averted. On Friday evening last Cavenagh Street was crowded by bands of Malays and others who were in an excited condition and who had to be forcibly pushed off the footpath and street corners, by me, to permit women and others to pass along the street. ... I am strongly of the opinion that Compounds, for the housing of these indentured labourers, should be established and that they be only allowed in the streets by permits.31

The compound was a familiar institution in many British colonies such as Singapore, and in Darwin such restrictions had already been forced upon the Aboriginal population.

The reply from the Chief Pearling Inspector, Nylander was against such restrictions. He wrote:

It is so difficult to find a way out, seeing that the men, when leaving temporarily the crowded space of their boats behind, naturally desire to make the best of a short-lived change of mode of life. Yet, it appears, that they may abuse the privilege.32

The support of Nylander and no doubt the financial clout of the pearling masters were sufficient that no steps were taken to implement Koop's suggestion.

A sporting connection

Despite the segregationist attitude of Sergeant Koop, the relationship between the Darwin unionists and the Indonesian pearling crews was of a friendly nature. Many of the union members were themselves of Indonesian and Filippino background and it was quite common for the women workers in particular to 'knock round with the Malay boys', as one man put it.33 These connections were important as the Malay union members, were of good standing in the union. Johnny Ah Mat, for example, of Malay-Thursday Islander descent, was union delegate for the sorting shed workers in 1932.44 Given that Darwin was a union town, in a social sense, it was more important for the Indonesians to have union support than to have the support of the administration who tended to be roundly despised by the working-class community.35

One such positive connection between the two groups was their common interest in soccer. In 1936, the Singapore crew members challenged the Aru Islanders to a game of soccer. The game was played on Saturday afternoon on the Darwin Oval. The Northern Standard advised that the proceeds of the match were to be given to the hospital and they invited those 'interested in good clean sport' to come along.36 The newspaper commentary of the match named Abraham and Thomas as being goal-kickers for the winning Aru Island team and Lemon for the Singaporeans. The teams reported that they hoped to have other matches when they returned from their season on the Aru Island pearling grounds.37

The significance of this game goes far beyond the mere promotion of sport. The game was reported in the same fashion as the usual games in Darwin and in doing so, the individual crew members became public figures. Where before they had been labelled as 'coolies' or 'indenteds', known only by their nationality and occupation, now they were named as 'goal-kickers' and 'goal-keepers'. These were honorable positions in the eyes of most Darwin residents.

The following year in 1937, further soccer games were held, this time all the team members were listed by the Northern Standard.38 Finally a match was organised between local Darwin team (comprised of 'white' and 'coloured' locals) and the Koepangers. Rather appropriately, well-known sporting figure, Put Ah Mat, of Malay-Thursday Islander descent was chosen as the referee. One of the Darwin players was policeman Fred Don who worked alongside Sergeant Koop, suggesting that he did not share Koop's segregationist attitude.39 The Darwin team won the match and the newspaper commentator wrote: 'The little Koepangers played pretty football, and did very well to hold the heavy Australian team to one goal.40

These tentative signs of inter-ethnic cooperation elicited a negative response from the Dutch East Indies, where such interaction was regarded as subversive to their colonial authority. In February 1937, a complaint was received from a Dobo correspondent indicating that the Dutch administration were unimpressed with the freedom allowed Aru Islanders in Darwin. He wrote:

The Dutch Government view with alarm and concern, the attitude, and the big ideas, some of the local natives (Indenteds) adopt when they return on completion of their term in Darwin.

It was suggested that the Australian government should take action to regulate the behaviour of indents and to prevent them from entering hotels. The correspondent noted with approval that the Dutch at least knew how to 'manage and administer their native population'. Commenting on the difference between the Dutch and Australian systems, writing:

...it does not matter what position in life a white man holds – he is always a 'Toean' and is respected as such, and it is to be hoped that those 'Whiteren' of Darwin who mix and associate with the native indents, will try and uphold their prestige as a white man, and not forget that Australia is proud of her 'White Australia'.41

The social system of the Dutch East Indies which ensured 'white' hegemony, has been described by Furnival as being a plural society in which each 'racial' group was ranked as a separate segment of the society. This model, though at first glance apparently appropriate for describing the poly-ethnic society of Northern Australia, was in fact unsuitable. According to van Doorn, the Dutch system was intended to facilitate the administration of their colonies, and served to preserve a social distance between the colonial elite and the mass of the population.42 While some individuals in Darwin, such as the Pearling Masters may have favoured such a notion, there was also a stronger, working-class ideology which rejected such elitism.

Conclusion

If we are to understand the nature of the Australian labour movement in the twentieth century, then it is important that fully appreciate its international connections. Too often, it is assumed that the White Australia policy created a racially homogeneous workforce and an isolationist union movement. It is perhaps for this reason that labour historians have failed to relate the experiences of Indonesian workers in Australia. Given that Indonesia is our nearest neighbour should we not be surprised as this omission? The importance of focussing on Asian workers in Australia is that it allows us...
to paint a picture of an emerging Asian-Australian solidarity, in this instance between, left-wing Australian unionists and Indonesian workers during the 1930s. The source of this solidarity is initially to be found in the left-wing ideology of both Australian unionists and the Indonesian workers themselves. More important, however, to the growth of this rather fragile and uncertain relationship, was the gradual inclusion of the Indonesians in Darwin community activities. Social interaction, such as took place on the soccer field helped to establish the Indonesian workers as individuals not nameless ‘coolies’. Having exchanged names and life stories, and established personal relationships, the workers were then in a better position to recognise their common struggle against the pearling masters.

This paper has considered international linkages between Darwin unionists and Indonesian workers, demonstrating that connections were already well-established before 1945. I would question, therefore, Rupert Lockwood’s representation of Australian unionist support for Indonesian anti-colonialism. It was clearly not a sudden and uncharacteristic display of internationalism. In order to strengthen this argument, one would need to consider similar links with the other pearling ports, Broome and Thursday Island. In addition, the relationship between Indonesian sailors and Australia’s maritime unions in decades before 1945 might similarly offer evidence of a pre-existing solidarity. More research is needed if we are to break away from stereotypical images of the early Australian labour movement as isolated from our northern neighbours.

Endnotes
4 Note the use of the term Indonesian in other histories such as H. Benda and R. McVey, The Communist Uprisings of 1926-1927 in Indonesia: Key Documents, Modern Indonesia Project, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, Ithaca, 1960.
5 Some possibly came via Singapore which acted as a entrepot for indentured workers in this period.
6 I would like to express my appreciation to Professor James Fox at ANU who is currently helping me to identify the origins of the crew members who were loosely categorised as Koepangers. The majority appear to have come from Sabu Island which is close to Kupang in Timor and located in between Roti and Sumba Islands in the eastern region of Indonesia.
8 Ibid., p. 9.
9 Ibid., pp. 11-15.
10 H. Benda and Ruth McVey, The Communist Uprisings of 1926-192, p. xii.
13 Returns of persons engaged in Pearling Industry, Years 1931-39, A433/1 49/2/6961 AA ACT; Secretary of TPC, B. Morgan to Nylander, 26 May 1937, Applying for Licences, F1 1938/726, AA NT; Gregory and Co. to Chief Pearling Inspector, 7 May 1938, F1 1938/402, AA NT.
14 F.J. Quinlan to Sub-Collector of Customs, Darwin, 31 August 1925, A1/1 30/880, AA ACT.
15 A more detailed account of pearling conditions can be found in Ganter, The Pearl-Sellers.
16 Memorandum from Sub-Collector of Customs, Darwin to Department of Home and Territories, Canberra, 29 October 1928, A1 30/880, AA ACT.
17 Clifford Pierce, Sub-Collector of Customs, Darwin, to Department of Home and Territories, 29 October 1928, A1/15 30/880, AA ACT.
18 Customs and Excise Office, Darwin to Department of Home Affairs, 26 March 1929, A1/1 29/1132, AA ACT.
19 Clifford Green, Sub-Collector of Customs, to Secretary of Home Affairs, 12 June 1929; Government House, Port Moresby to Prime Minister, 7 August 1929, A518/1 J918/3, AA ACT.
20 See Harry Benda and Ruth McVey (eds), The Communist Uprisings of 1926-1927 in Indonesia: Key Documents, Modern Indonesia Project, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, New York, 1960.
21 ‘Indentured Laborers Obtain their wages’, Northern Standard, 14 April 1931.
22 Gregory to Administrator, Darwin, 12 October 1934.
25 Secretary of TPC, B. Morgan to Nylander, 26 May 1937, Applying for Licences, F1 1938/726, AA NT; In 1938 Gregory employed three Malay divers: Amdan bin Mahomet, Abdul Halik, and Rajap bin Salim, and two trial divers: Jacobus Latrawa and Teteos Onewhela. Gregory and Co. to Chief Pearling Inspector, 7 May 1938, F1 1938/402, AA NT.
26 K. Nylander to Manager, Territory Pearling Company, 10 December 1938, F1 1938/726, AA NT.
29 McDonald, ‘Indentured Labor in Darwin’.
30 Sub-Collector of Customs to Department of Home and Territories, 29 October 1928, A1 30/880 AA ACT.
31 A. E. Koop, Sgt, to Superintendent of Police, Stretton, Darwin, 18 October 1936, F1 1936/220, AA NT.
32 Nylander to Crown Law Officer, Darwin, 30 October, 1936, F1 1936/220, AA NT.
33 ‘Larceny from Gaol’, Northern Standard, 6 March 1936.
34 ‘Sorting Shed Workers’, Northern Standard, 8 July 1932.
36 ‘Singapore Luggermers’, Northern Standard, 6 March 1936.
37 ‘Singapore v Aru Islands’ Northern Standard, 10 March 1936.
38 ‘Soccer’ Northern Standard, 8 January 1937.
40 Northern Standard, 22 January 1937.
41 ‘Aroe Island Notes’, Northern Standard, 26 February 1937.