

## **Gasworkers riot, 1890**

Throughout 1889, there had been rumblings among the Gasworkers; it should not need stressing that these were critical to the economy and comfort of the city. As winter approached, the Gas Committee conceded to a number of demands on hours and pay. These were buoyant days for the newly powerful Trade Union movement and the concession was a notable victory.

The Committee was not minded to accept its defeat, however, and prepared for a battle the following summer when gas demand was at its lowest. After Easter, a number of provocative measures were introduced which resulted in a withdrawal of labour from July 1<sup>st</sup>. This was in an atmosphere of very large public meetings and serious hostility between the Union (treating in very reasonable language) and the Liberal Council - it is important to note that the dispute was held with the party which, prior to the establishment of the Labour Party, had been "of the working man".

The Council brought in blackleg labour from London and Manchester, and it was this development that sparked spectacular riots in the neighbourhood of the Meadow Lane and New Wortley gasworks.

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In fact, events had been brewing for some time, based on significant social discontent surrounding housing and sanitary issues among the working classes. Before the end of June, there had been blockades at the gasworks, and attempts to prevent the erection of marquees designed to house the blacklegs. The authorities had sensed the mood and took the precaution on their arrival of housing most of the blacklegs in the Town Hall. Other night-time arrivals were greeted violently by small numbers of pickets as they were escorted into the Meadow Lane works, resulting in several casualties as they were beaten off by police.

The following day huge crowds gathered at Meadow Lane to "persuade" the blacklegs to depart, which many did. By evening, a crowd of 10000-15000 was charging the works and conducting pitched battles with the police, resulting in a large and very bloody battle.

The men billeted in the Town Hall were understandably nervous, and the authorities chose to escort them to New Wortley works, a decision which turned out to be a major misjudgement. Police were drafted in from Bradford, York and Huddersfield, and large number of foot and mounted soldiers also deployed. At around 8pm on Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> July some 260 blacklegs, in company with the Mayor and other civic dignitaries set out, guarded by a force of some 500. The scale of public excitement and hostility can be judged by the numbers outside the Town Hall, estimated at 30000. The procession approached the railway bridges close to the works, which had been occupied by the gasworkers and their supporters, who started to direct a major bombardment on the police and soldiers below. The pro-union crowd at this point was estimated at 15000 people. The forces of law and order fought back, and the armed military indicated their desire to open fire; most of the blacklegs were hustled into the works.

The events of this day represent the most spectacular labour-related battle seen in Leeds, and was not exceeded in scale in most of the country throughout the last two centuries. Very large numbers had been given the opportunity to prepare ammunition and position themselves, while their primary targets (police and soldiers, not the

blacklegs) were well trained and only too ready to fight back. The local press described the scene in detail - the Leeds Evening Express noted

*The bridges were crowded with men ... and they massed piles of missiles.*

*As they came within range, the fire was directed with simply terrific force on them. The scene that ensued simply defies description, bricks, stones, clinkers, iron belts, sticks etc. were hurled into the air to fall ... upon and amongst the blacklegs and their escort.*

The following day, a large crowd renewed its attack on the works and the Mayor read the Riot Act, and called out a party of Hussars from York. Attacks meanwhile continued at Meadow Lane. At the end of the Wednesday, the great majority of the blacklegs had, one way or another, left the city.

The events of this summer week were important; they indicated the depth of (pro-worker) feeling within the city and resulted in ultimate defeat for the Council. Not only were they shown to be unable to defend the men they brought in, but a shortage of gas quickly developed, producing pressure from business and industry to settle the dispute, since both were heavily dependent on an abundant supply of what was then very cheap and reliable fuel. This union victory reversed some defeats in the industry in many other parts of the country (explaining the plentiful supply of blacklegs) and provided major encouragement to the movement. It also allowed a demonstration by the broader population of its hostility to authority, based on the squalid conditions in which they were required to live.

A Union adviser, Edward Aveling, wrote in the *People's Press* during the following week

*... there can be little doubt that in other conflicts between masters and men, both masters and men will not forget this Leeds business ...*

The Gasworkers incidents were not the mostly costly in terms of life, but as a spectacle were the jewel in the crown of Leeds riots.