

Transcript of an interview with Harry Watson conducted by Margaret Morris, 1975

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...one morning we had word that there were troops in the docks unloading ships and the lorries were coming up the Victoria Dock Road manned by the troops. Of course everybody turned out to see just what substance there was to this report that had been given, and sure enough when we got to the Barking Road outside Canning Town station up came the lorries with barbed wire all round the lorries' canopy with troops with guns sitting behind the barbed wire. The people were jeering and booing but that was the extent of the feelings of the people but for some reason, I don't know why, but where I was standing there were plenty of shouting and booing but certainly nothing in the way of physical reaction or anything of that kind. There was

still a degree of good humour about it. The police started pushing from behind - instead of being in front of us they were behind – and they kept pushing and pushing and pushing and we were being pushed further into the road and it led to arguments and before we knew it the police were laying about us with their truncheons and that caused more anger and a real explosion for about half an hour. It was a question of hitting back to defend ourselves from what the police were trying to do to us and succeeding in doing so to us and there were a few broken arms as a result of the blows we had been subjected to, It broke up in a bit of confusion at the end of it all. But the following day, before they went up to the main road hundreds of the men walked along the side streets and in those days the houses used to have a very low wall in front of them about two feet high or so and they had railings embedded in the walls for about a further two feet so that you had spiked iron railings in the small walls and then men just slipped the iron railings out of the walls and took them along with them and took them along Barking Road. When I got there, there were several lorries already that had been turned over. Not lorries that had troops on them, lorries of private contractors and whoever was driving them had been forced out of their wagon and the men and women were turning the lorries over and three or four of them already laying on their side. And then up from Victoria Dock Road came the lorries with the troops on it and again the police lined up – some were in front of us but most of them were at the back of us but before they could start anything the crowd turned on the police and started laying about with their iron bars on the police and of course the casualties were in reverse ratio to the previous day. The second day it was the police.

Were these regular police or special constables or a mixture?

They were a mixture in the sense that the special constables didn't have helmets they had a different type helmet or cap. And I think they were mainly local trades people who would have volunteered. Not having any idea when they volunteered of being party to this sort of thing but nevertheless having volunteered and accepting responsibility for it found themselves involved whether they liked it or not. But the regular police were the predominant feature of the situation. As I say we heard subsequently what had happened to us in Canning Town was also at the same time almost taking place in Poplar. In some respects far more vicious situation there

where the mounted police rode in among the strikers and rode some of them down, when they ran along side streets the police would chase them up the side streets into the doorways and houses. Although ours was bad enough and exciting enough in that sense, theirs was even worse. I don't know why that was but that's how it was at the time. However that went on to the point where instead of soldiers just really being outriders on the vans - riding shotgun as they called it - on these vans coming up from the docks. They brought in I'm not sure what they call it - a regiment or a platoon or whatever it is. They marched troops through Barking Road. When they got to Canning Town station they halted. And there was some pompous little twit of an officer in the front who gave somebody an order - and they called out "fix bayonets". And they fixed their bayonets and then they started marching along the main road, both sides of which were swamped with workers and their wives and that sort of thing. And of course they were out to intimidate the workers from attempting anything similar to what had taken place the previous day. I don't know - it didn't have any effect because they got the raspberry a sight more than those who had been on the lorries go it and all kinds of taunts.

They never were wanting to involve themselves in any physical violence in any shape or form. And the question of the strike itself was one that it never required - the way we were seeing it. And we were being guided quite a lot in my thinking by the elder men that we were going to win this one because it was a national strike and they knew what kind of power and authority that exercised. There was no question that there would be capitulation by the government on this matter of the miners. So there was no need for any violence or forcible application of their ideas.

Were you part of the Strike Committee?

No, mainly the Strike Committee was made up of the more senior men. We were carrying messages here and there because we could move faster.

By foot?

Some of us had bikes and some of us were on foot.

Which did you have?

I was on foot. I was attending meetings at Becton Road particularly and again there was a meeting there on the 4th day which was a very big meeting, well attended, well orderly. And the speakers were giving reports of the situation up and down the country and suddenly from out of the blue dozens of mounted police drove in amongst the lot of us and my cousin who was with me at the time got knocked down. And as he got knocked down he was in such a temper as to what happened he jumped up and knocked the policemen off his horse and of course that led to more trouble in that sense that seeing one bloke knocked off his horse they's trying to knock everybody else of their horses. And that was a real shambles for about 20 minutes - the platform went over. I don't know what become of the speakers. They certainly busted that meeting up and that was quite a peaceable meeting.