Disorder in Melbourne

In the spring of 1913 an industrial dispute escalated into violence that was still remembered 25 years later by an article in the Derby Daily Telegraph. In many ways, it was a microcosm of the swirling changes that were taking place in British society at the time. In 1899, Britain with an empire upon which the sun never set was the world's super power. But the early years of the 20th changes on the 'world's stage' were to bring conditions in Britain that led to the time from 1910 to 1914 which is sometimes referred to as 'the Period of Great Unrest'. In many ways, the 1913 dispute at the shoe factory at the top of the Mount (Commerce Street) represented a microcosm of this 'unrest'.

The events leading to a near riot started when three of the employees at the shoe factory talked about joining a union and went to see the owner of the factory to express this desire. On making this request, they were dismissed. To be fair, this was not the employer's version of events and he said that given said that the men had talked to him about joining a union and when he said that they could not, they given given in a their notices and left the factory.

At the time there were approximately 60 men working at the factory and of these 40 walked out on strike in sympathy with their three dismissed mates. The ranks of the strikers were joined by a further 6 boys and 5 girls making 51 strikers in total, and from this group a band was formed using tins and bugles as their instruments. As the employees that had not gone on strike left the factory for their lunch break and at the end of the day, the band would escort them in a mocking way as they walked home. As the weeks passed by, the numbers accompanying the band started to increase and sometimes, there would be as many as 200 people deriding those still at work.

At this initial period, It is not known where the sympathies of Melbourne's people lay, but when the factory's owner drafted in new 'new men' from Shepshed to take the jobs of those on strike, there is little doubt that the majority of the residents felt that it was wrong for outsiders to take the jobs of Melbourne folk.

Monday 7th April, was the first day when the the six 'new men' from Shepshed started work at the factory and on this day, a large crowd of approximately 300 people waited at 8:00 pm for those working and the 'new men' to finish work. As they started to leave the factory, they were met with jeers and blows were exchanged. Quite frighteningly, the ranks of the initial 300 people had swelled to *at least 2,OOO*[1] and it was impossible for the those working at the factory to walk down Commerce Street because it was blocked by the crowd.

The situation spiraled out of control as the crowd started to throw stones and all those still working together together with the 'new men' had to scurry back into the factory for their own safety. The factory was bombarded with a hail of stones and walls at the rear of the factory were pulled down to provide more 'ammunition'. This bombardment continued for approximately 3 hours The damage to the factory was considerable with 70 large sheets of glass in the roof smashed and stones entering the factory and damaging machinery and engines.

Paradoxically, although the police were present, there were no was arrests. It seems that the Melbourne police were completely overwhelmed and unprepared for the size of the crowd and and ferocity of actions on a scale of which was little short of a riot.

The police did make a telephone call to request support from Woodville but by the time these extra constables had arrived, the damage had been done and the crowd dispersed. But even then, to ensure the safety of the ‘new men’ force of 16 police constables escorted them to Melbourne’s railway station where they caught the first train home.

1. Derbyshire Advertiser and Journal 23rd May 1913