

# The Battle of Cable St, 1936 - Joe Jacobs



Joe Jacobs was in 1936 a local Communist Party activist in London's East End. This is his account of his involvement in the famous defence of the East End against an attempted march by Mosley's fascists.

Joe describes events leading up to the march, including the changes in the CP leadership's tactics as they finally realised their calls for a peaceful demonstration elsewhere would be ignored. His account corrects false impressions later created by official Communist versions of the events.

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*Out of the Ghetto* is reviewed here; <http://libcom.org/library/review-joe-jacobs-out-ghetto-al-richardson>

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## The Battle of Cable Street

*Joe Jacobs*

In Stepney we heard a rumour that Mosley intended organising a mass march of uniformed Fascists through the heart of the Jewish areas. In fact, the *Blackshirt* carried a notice saying full information about a proposed march and meetings would appear next week (1). The next week's issue announced a march ending in four meetings, at Aske Street, Shoreditch, Salmons Lane, Limehouse, at 5pm in Stafford Road, Bow and at 6pm at Victoria Park Square, Bethnal Green (2). Before these announcements, the air was full of foreboding. Speculation was mounting. Rumours multiplied. The immediate response was that this could not be allowed to happen and that if it did, the outcome would be disastrous.

Clashes with Blackshirts continued. This report in the *East End News* (about someone I have already told you became a friend of mine) is an example of what anti-Fascists were up against. The headlines read:

'Commotion in Victoria Park - Demonstration by anti-Fascists - Mile End man bound over.'

The article stated:

'An anti-Fascist demonstration to Victoria Park on August 30, had a sequel at Old Street Magistrates' Court on Tuesday (October 6, two days after the 'Battle of Cable Street'. Author's note.), when Harry Goodrich (30) an electrical engineer of Carlton Road, Mile End,

was charged on remand with using insulting words and behaviour whereby a breach of the peace might have been occasioned and further with obstructing Inspector Pennick in the execution of his duty.

Goodrich, who said he was ward secretary of the Mile End Labour Party, was bound over under the Probation of Offenders Act on payment of five guineas costs on the second charge, the first being dismissed on the ground that Victoria Park is not an open-space within the meaning of the Metropolitan Police Act.

Mr E.J.P. Cussens prosecuting for the Commissioner of Police said that the case had previously been before Mr Basil Watson at North London Police Court, when it had been found that the Magistrate's jurisdiction did not extend to Victoria Park. Accordingly the case had been remanded to Old Street.

On August 30, said Mr Cussens, there was an Anti-Fascist demonstration to Victoria Park where meetings were to take place. A number of police were present to preserve peace and good order, and as the demonstration came in, a rush was made and considerable disorder took place, children being knocked down.

The police had to take steps to stop it, continued Mr Cussens, and Goodrich, who was wearing a marshal's arm-band called out: "Don't let them break up our meeting -gather round our speakers."

There was another rush near a motor car fixed up as a first-aid station and Goodrich shouted "Down with the Fascists - demonstrate against Jew-baiting" and clenched his fists.

Giving evidence, Inspector Pennick stated that there were a number of rushes by the crowd in the park and some people were knocked down and hurt. There was one rush in which Goodrich was in front.

"He pushed me in the chest" said witness, "seized my left arm and swung me round".

When told he would be charged he said: "You are all Blackshirts - all you policemen" and on the way to the police station, "When the Home Secretary is done with you, you will all have the sack".

At the Hackney Police Station, Goodrich was charged and in reply he said, "I want to charge the Inspector with assault and illegal arrest while exercising my duties as a marshal".

Replying to E.L. Mallalieu (defending) witness said he thought the rushes were caused by a search for Fascists.

Mr Mallalieu, "Did they find any?" Inspector, "No - they were not there. They were banned from entering the park by the police."

In answer to a further question witness agreed that it was quite obvious that Goodrich was complaining about the way in which the police were handling the crowd.

After further evidence for the prosecution Goodrich in the witness box said he had been secretary of a ward of the Mile End Labour Party for the past ten years.

He had no connection with the Communists. He had not made use of the words attributed to him neither did he push or catch hold of the Inspector.

When the procession entered the park there was a tremendous commotion caused in the main by young boys and girls and he realised that the police were averse to arresting them.

Behind these young people were older persons who were egging on the youngsters and he asked a police officer to remove two girls who were shouting abuse at the marchers who were resenting it.

He had been a marshall for a number of years and had never had any trouble with the police before. "In fact we have always got on well together" added Goodrich.

When Goodrich suggested that Inspector Pennick had "punched out right and left" the Magistrate, Mr F.O. Langley turned to him and said, "I have a good mind, if you say anything further, to order a prosecution for perjury".

To Mr Mallalieu, the Magistrate added, "He is lying. I say it deliberately - he is lying".

Mr Mallalieu, "He is entitled to say what he has said and it is a most improper remark for you to make at this stage of the proceedings."

Goodrich finished his evidence and after a number of witnesses had been called in support of his story, the Magistrate gave his decision as stated'(3).

With the local Labour Party members and others we joined in the general agitation concerning the Blackshirts' proposed march through Whitechapel. The YCL had been organising a rally to Trafalgar Square to take place on October 4th in support of the Spanish Workers. As this was the date we had heard might be the one Mosley had in mind for his march (4). I saw Willie Cohen, Secretary of the London YCL and asked him what was being

proposed. He told me that the District Party Committee were going ahead with the plan for the Trafalgar Square demonstration. He said Spain was more important than Mosley. I was horrified!

On September 30th, the following report appeared in the *Daily Worker*:

'Ex-soldiers "asked" to give way to Mosley.

On Sunday, October 4, members of the Ex-Servicemen's Anti-Fascist Association planned to hold a march and meeting in the East End of London. They had all their plans drawn up and police permission was asked. This was not refused. No, the police merely asked the Ex-Service men to put their meeting off.

Why? Because suddenly Mosley and his Blackshirts announced their intention of holding a march, and not one, but four meetings in the East End on that same day. No dilemma for the police. Streets clear for Mosley, that was a necessity. No matter that the Ex-Servicemen had already arranged their demonstration. They could have a day that Mosley did not want, but not next Sunday.

At Trafalgar Square, however, on Sunday the YCL is holding its great meeting to collect £100 for the people of Spain. A call has been sent out by the London District of the CP for workers to go in their thousands to Trafalgar Square, and after the demonstration to march through East London's streets to show their hatred of Mosley's support for the Fascist attack on democracy in Spain.

East London workers are called on to rally to Tower Hill on Friday at 8pm to demonstrate against the Fascism which the Mosley gangsters will demonstrate for on the following Sunday.' (5)

This attitude clearly reflected what I already knew was the London District Party leadership's position on Mosley. I was furious. I could hardly believe what I was reading. I had been fighting their ideas for years. Here was the confrontation and I could not withdraw. On the contrary, I knew that if the DPC line was carried, a heavy blow would fall on the workers of East London and workers everywhere. It would also be the end of me. I had nothing to lose and everything to gain by fighting these pernicious tactics.

Even some who were often opposed to me could not agree to the District line. I was not alone. All my close friends were extremely agitated. Before the report in the *Daily Worker* on September 30th, we had begun to organise for a march through East London starting from Tower Hill on October 2nd at 8pm, two days before Mosley's threatened provocative march (6). A petition was being signed against Mosley's march, all over the East End. Other organisations were organising and calling for opposition to the march. Others were telling people to stay at home and leave it to the police to see that Mosley's hoards behaved (7). We in the CP were supposed to tell people to go to Trafalgar Square and come back in the evening to protest *after* Mosley had marched. The pressure from the people of Stepney who went ahead with their own efforts to oppose Mosley left no doubt in our minds that the CP would be finished in Stepney if this was allowed to go through as planned by our London leaders.

I had seen the East London organiser, Frank Lefitte and told him that the Stepney Branch Committee asked for immediate meetings with District representatives to discuss the situation. He had agreed to put our request to the Secretariat the following morning, which must have been Monday, September 28th. The day after this I received this note, which I collected from one of the places where Frank Lefitte usually left such notes when he could not contact me personally.

'Joe. In case you come back, the DPC has made the following arrangements re Mosley's march:

1. A Party meeting at Salmon and Ball and another at Piggott Street in Poplar, i.e. near to each end of the march. Meetings to be kept orderly control. Avoid clashes.

2. Loudspeaker van is touring area advertising the meetings.

3. Thousands of leaflets are waiting at Carters' for immediate distribution. I leave a copy here.

4. What Stepney must do is rally masses to each of these meetings (Mostly to Salmon and Ball round here).

b. Keep order: no excuse for Government to say we, like BUF are hooligans. If Mosley decides to march let him. Don't attempt disorder (Time too short to get a "They shall not pass" policy across. It would only be a harmful stunt). Best see there is a good, strong meeting at each end of march. Our biggest trouble tonight will be to keep order and discipline.

c. Push the Party's leaflet around the crowds. (Poplar and Bethnal Green are getting supplies too). F. Lefitte.'

I could hardly believe my eyes. How could they be so blind to what was happening in Stepney? The slogan 'They shall not pass' was already on everyone's lips and being whitewashed on walls and pavements. I went to Pearl's home where I met her brother Harold, when he returned from his work with the Ex-Servicemen's Anti-Fascist Association. He was in no doubt about what he was going to do, whatever the CP had in mind. His language was even stronger than his usual strong language. It was too late to contact anyone so I told Harold I was going to phone the DPC early the next day, the 30th, and ask them to come to the East End the same evening. I would suggest they come to Harold's home to meet a delegation of the Stepney Branch Committee. If I could not get hold of anyone, then Harold and myself would have to do. He agreed. So, when I saw that Daily Worker report on the 30th I was really worried because the policy had now been made public. When I phoned I made it quite clear that many Party members were rejecting the Party line in practice. In fact, the membership, in my view, would revolt if the DPC adhered to their line. It was agreed that a delegation would come to Harold's place that same evening, 30th September.

There was only four days to go to the 4th October. Dangerously close, and I wondered what to do if the DPC would not change its views. I could hardly get through the day's work. My head was spinning and I was a worried young man. As soon as I left the workshop at 6pm I headed for Stepney and tried to find some members of the Branch Committee to be present when the DPC delegation arrived. Few ordinary people had telephones in those days, so this was not a simple matter. When I got to Pearl's place, Harold was there and we had a hurried meal and waited for the delegation to arrive. In the meantime, Sam Berks and others were waiting at the 'Popular Cafe' in Maningtree Street to hear the result of the meeting which lots of Party members got to know about during the course of the evening, as a result of my earlier run round the area, leaving messages in various places. Harold had also told several people that there was to be a meeting, because we were unable to answer all the questions which Party members were asking. Most of them seemed to have taken the view that we would be opposing Mosley's march and were acting accordingly, in the absence of any clear lead prior to the 30th.

Harold and I were determined to have a showdown with the delegation if we could not get a change of line. We thought it would not come to that once they were presented with the facts concerning what was really happening. In due course, John Mahon, D.F. Springhall and I

think the third one was Bob McLennan and Frank Lefitte arrived. We were treated to a long talk on the world situation in which it was stated that the demonstration to Trafalgar Square in support of Spanish Democracy, was more important than Mosley's march in East London. Our leaders always talked about the world situation in a particular jargon which often impressed the rank-and-file. On this occasion Harold told them not to try to blind us with science, that he did not understand their language and even less their attitude. We argued that the best way to help the Spanish people was to stop Mosley marching through East London. It was, in fact, the same fight. If we said the Fascists should not pass, it was what the Spanish people were trying to ensure and giving their lives in the process. A victory for Mosley would be a victory for Franco. In any case, the people of East London had their own ideas about all this and would oppose Mosley with their bodies, no matter what the CP said. We argued long and hard.

I can't remember exactly who arrived during the discussion. Other Branch Committee Members were there when there was a knock at the front door, very late in the proceedings. We were almost thinking of closing the meeting as those living outside the area would find it difficult to get to their homes. I was quite prepared to argue all night. Pat Devine arrived. He had come as fast as he could from a meeting at the Party Centre. It appears, unknown to us, that the Centre had decided to take a hand in our situation in Stepney. I don't know if this had happened as a result of the District leaders' approach to the Centre, or whether others in East London had approached them, or whether they had decided to intervene themselves. I think it was a combination of all three. I knew from past experience that some people in Stepney could approach the Centre quite freely. As Branch Secretary I could not by-pass the District leadership in this way. In any case I would not have done so in this situation because some of those I was dealing with were themselves members of the Executive. However, Pat Devine was very excited and before any more could be said, he announced that the Centre had decided to change the line. The call would go out to all branches to rally to Aldgate instead of Trafalgar Square on October 4th. The slogan would be 'They shall not pass', which was already being repeated all over Stepney and could not be ignored, in this case, by the CP or anyone else.

By way of explanation, and in order to get the District leaders off the hook, Pat said that the Centre had made this decision because they had become aware of the real situation in East London only that day. They did not previously appreciate the feeling and did not think that enough people could be rallied in time to stop Mosley marching. They now knew that this was possible.

I was too excited to see, at that moment, that the previous line had been the result of reports which these same District leaders must have transmitted to the Centre. This, despite the fact that we had been pressing for a change for days past, precisely because we knew that Mosley would be opposed whatever the CP decided. As I say, we were excited and stopped all argument and proceeded to talk about practical implementation of the new line. Piratin in his book, *Our Flag Stays Red*, simply says: 'The LDC gave consideration to October 4th.' Nothing about what they had to consider or the fight we had with the leadership (8).

The District Secretariat would discuss the details for the all-London preparations the following morning, October 1st. We were going ahead with our march on Friday evening, October 2nd from Tower Hill. We meant to make the slogan 'They shall not pass' a reality. It was close to 11pm when Pearl, Harold and I left to tour the area wherever we knew Party members would be waiting to hear from us. When we got to the 'Popular Cafe' in Manningtree Street, there were lots of people there and they wasted no time. Arrangements were made by groups all round us to start whitewashing until the small hours of the morning. The slogan was clear, 'They shall not pass - Rally Tower Hill, Oct. 2nd, 8pm; Rally Aldgate,

Oct. 4th.' I never saw such enthusiasm before. The air was electrified. We proceeded to other points, cafes, 'Circle House', anywhere we might find Party members to take up the slogan in a clear, loud voice. The whole area seemed to be alive. Squads of whitewashers seemed to be everywhere. We didn't get to bed until after 4am. I was so tired I must have fallen asleep the minute my head hit the pillow. My mother had a hard job getting me up for work on Thursday morning.

The *Daily Worker* for the next day reported on the basis of the old line because it had been printed before the decision had been taken late in the evening of the 30th September. The report referred to the Ex-Servicemen's march, the Jewish People's Council's petition to the Home Secretary calling on him to ban Mosley's proposed march. It spoke of 'Indignation in East End' and gave details about how to help to get signatures to the petition. This is what it advised its readers to do on Sunday 4th:

'All anti-Fascists are asked to rally to the Embankment (opposite Temple Station) at 2.30pm on Sunday. There will be a march from the Embankment to Trafalgar Square, where London's youth will vow solidarity with the Spanish people. Those taking part in the demonstration are asked to join the march after the meeting to the East End.'

The report also drew attention to a special leaflet issued by the London District Committee of the CP giving the details of the action to be followed on Sunday. This was the leaflet which Frank Lefitte told me about in his note, which I had no intention of using if I could help it (9).

There were only two more issues of the paper prior to the 4th and I hoped all would now be concentrated on getting the line clear. It was plain from all the reports in the press that a great deal had been going on in East London. I could not accept the argument that the Centre did not appreciate what the position really was, and that this had made them adhere to their line right up to this late hour. There was no time to argue about all this now. The battle was on. The big clash was only four days away. There was much to be done. On Thursday evening I was told there was not enough time to print new leaflets, but the old ones would be printed over calling on all anti-Fascists to rally to Aldgate at 2pm. I still have a copy of this leaflet with its new message printed across the old print.

The same evening I collected a note which read as follows:

'*Sunday*, Trafalgar Square demo called off. All marching contingents to march to Stepney. All workers rally at 2pm to points indicated in Sat *DW* where Fascists may possibly enter E. London, to prevent entry. Activity leading up to meeting at Shoreditch Town Hall to be announced. 100,000 leaflets to be collected for distribution. ?YCL march Sunday am. ?YCL march Sunday aft. Friday Rally-Tower Hill 8pm (I Stepney speaker). Immediate contact with LP and TU officials to rally support.' (10).

This is probably a note from the District Secretariat. I cannot say who wrote it as it is unsigned.

Thursday evening was one long grind. Outdoor meetings, whitewashing, leaflet distribution, planning for Friday's demonstration. Posters and banners had to be made and all details for the march to be discussed and decisions to be implemented.

Stepney was a hive of activity. Every kind of Anti-Fascist organisation was full out. Thousands of people were in the streets. Ordinary people who had not taken part in this kind of political activity before.

Petition forms were going around to be signed by willing hands. Some people were making arrangements for Sunday. First-aid posts had to be organised. Legal aid for those arrested. We had no doubt about the nature of the fight we were facing.

Friday October 2nd. The *Daily Worker* at last gave front page headlines to Mosley's march: 'East End rallies against Fascism ... prepares to answer Mosley march: Four mayors protest. Youth Meet transferred'. Here are a few excerpts from the report which I think are important for my version of what really happened prior to the events on October 4th:

'The London Communist Party and the Young Communist League, reacting to the urgency of the situation created by the intention of the British Union of Fascists to organise a march through the East End of London, have decided to concentrate all their forces in support of the East London workers on Sunday. Calling all workers to mobilise in protest against this provocative Fascist move, the Communist Party and YCL have transferred to the East End the youth rally that was to have been held in Trafalgar Square.

### **Fascist General Plan**

The "General Plan" of the operation provides for assembly in uniform and in military formation at Royal Mint Street at 2.30pm. A column will parade for inspection by the "Leader" before the march.

Workers' contingents from various parts of London will march to the rally in Aldgate, Commercial Road, Cable Street, Minories and Leman Street.

There is no doubt that from 2 o'clock onwards the roads will be crowded with people intent on opposing Fascism. ...'

Across the bottom of the page and in large print was a call to demonstrate against Mosley and details of the meeting at the Shoreditch Town Hall at 8pm on the same day. In a special box, about two column inches long, was the following notice:

'For Londoners only... Tomorrow's London edition of the *Daily Worker* will contain a special four-page anti-Fascist supplement. The right stuff to rally masses against Fascist provocation. Order copies and organise sales now' (11).

Now I know we were often expected to perform miracles, and sometimes I think we did, but this was a bit much. We normally received our supplies of the paper for local distribution during the late evening. Most of us would not see a copy until the following morning when it could be obtained from a newsagent. I had no advance information about the special supplement. So far as I remember, there were no special orders for more copies other than an increase on our normal quantity because we expected to sell more anyway. Remember this was Friday and we had the Tower Hill rally and march on our hands and only one day to make all the other preparations for Sunday. After work I hurried towards Stepney seeing all sorts of people when I got there. Hurried consultations, quick checks, then all to Tower Hill for our Friday, pre-Sunday warm-up march through East London. We decided to take the fight into 'enemy territory'. The route was to be from Tower Hill via Royal Mint Street, Leman Street, Gardeners Corner, Whitechapel Road, Cambridge Heath Road, Salmon and Ball, Green Street, Grove Road, Mile End Road and White Horse Lane to Stepney Green for a mass meeting.

Over two thousand people assembled at Tower Hill. There was a very small number of police in attendance. I did not know what had happened. J.R. Campbell and Willie Cohen were there. Some members of our Branch Committee were not there because there was so much that required attention. Our banner headed the march and I was in front as chief marshall. We set off shouting 'They shall not pass', carrying posters of every description. I think Phil Piratin was one of the Banner carriers heading the demonstration. J.R. Campbell was in front of the banner.



We proceeded along the route unmolested by the police. The march grew in numbers with every step we took. As we marched along Whitechapel Road the shouting grew louder. We got to Green Street, everyone braced themselves because we were about to enter the enemy's so-called stronghold. The police Inspector approached me and said we could not go along Green Street. He had a small force which was growing as we marched. We could have decided to ignore his orders and carry on as planned, but we did not want a confrontation here. We went down Old Ford Road, which runs parallel with Green Street (now Roman Road). As we approached the area near the BUF headquarters, the pavements were lined by Blackshirts and their supporters. They pelted us with rotten fruit and flour. There were several scuffles, and since the police were unable to assist the Fascists effectively, we got much the better of the exchanges. We passed with more ease than I had anticipated. Turning into Grove Road on the way back towards Stepney Green, we proceeded towards the junction with Mile End Road, Bow Road and Burdett Road. Half way there I was told that a girl and young man in blackshirts were selling their paper, the *Blackshirt*, outside the 'La Boheme' cinema, on the corner of Burdett Road and Bow Road. I knew it was a spot we had to pass. I knew it would be impossible to stop all the people who might feel provoked into attacking the Blackshirts. The message was passed back asking the marchers not to break ranks when we got to the junction. I approached the police Inspector whose forces had grown quite a bit by now, with a request to remove the Fascists from the line of march, in order to avoid trouble. He refused to do this, saying they were not breaking the law and he saw no reason to do as I asked. In fact, when we got to where the Blackshirts were, they were being protected by a squad of policemen. We turned right into Mile End Road and as anticipated, some people could not be prevented from leaving the march to shout at the Fascists.

The front of the demonstration had reached the Regent Canal bridge, about two-hundred yards from the point of conflict. We decided to halt the march which now stretched some way down Grove Road, across the junction and into Mile End Road. All traffic was held up and it looked as though there might be trouble with the police. I again approached the Inspector and said we had no intention of moving until he had the Fascists escorted away from the corner. He would not agree, but after only a few minutes they were in fact escorted away and I didn't care where, neither did it matter. We started to march on, the slogan shouting getting louder as a result of a feeling of elation arising from the success of our efforts. Three hundred yards further on, we were about to turn into White Horse Lane, when there was a sudden rush and I found myself in the middle of about half-a-dozen policemen who were trying to arrest me. Arms were flying in all directions as the crowd moved all around where I was resisting with all my might. I managed to break away for a moment, but the density of the crowd did not allow an opening to be made in time for me to get away. I was grabbed again and I can remember Pearl's young brother Arthur jumping onto a policeman and a general melee ensued. Someone threw a milk bottle which managed to miss all the policemen and hit me. The police finally had me firmly in their grip and dragged me away from the crowd and others formed a cordon across the narrow road. I was told that the March proceeded towards Stepney Green after my arrest. A great meeting was held, as originally intended.

Meanwhile, I was being frogmarched towards Arbour Square Police Station, about three-quarters of a mile away. Both my arms were pinned behind my back and the two policemen who had me in this position were forcing my arms up so that I could not walk in an upright position. I had cooled down sufficiently to assess my position. I knew of countless cases of people being beaten up in police stations, especially when those arrested had given a good account of themselves during the arrest. I hope I am not boasting when I say that on this occasion I had given as much as I had taken. I have never been a weakling and I had been in some fights before. This is not to say I had not, on occasions, felt very frightened and avoided

a fight if I could. However, I was now facing a possible beating where it would be difficult to defend myself. I decided to take precautions. I appealed to the two policemen to relax their hold as I had cooled off and did not wish to resist. They responded by pushing my arms further up my back. A few yards further on, I said I wished to see to my eye. One of them said, 'What's wrong with your eye?' I told him I had a glass eye and I must have been hit, as it was hurting. I was allowed to free one arm and removed my glass eye and put it in my pocket. At least there would be no danger of splintered glass in my eye socket, in the event of my being beaten. They no longer held me so tightly and a little further along, I asked to be allowed to see to my teeth. I had a small plate on wires holding three top front teeth to replace those I had lost in a previous fight. I got that out of my mouth and felt a lot happier, having minimised the possible danger.

These two incidents considerably relaxed the tension and the two policemen must have been wondering what next I would wish to remove. It looked as though I was coming to pieces. We arrived at the police station and I was ushered into a room and had to remove all I possessed from my pockets. I was left with one policeman I had not seen before, while all those connected with my arrest, including the Inspector who had returned from the march, went into another room. After about twenty minutes they emerged. I was cautioned and asked to listen to the charges against me. Among my possessions lying on the table was a packet of peppermints. I usually had these on me as I suffered from heartburn occasionally and was relieved if I sucked a peppermint. Just at this moment I asked if I could have a peppermint and was allowed to have one after I had explained. They were very long-winded about reading the charges and writing something or other, so I had to ask for another peppermint. Eventually I was told to 'Take the bloody peppermints'. I think they were a bit fed up with me.

I was put in a cell and lay on my back waiting for the possible entry of the heavy mob. I heard a woman screaming in another cell. There was a clanking sound as her cell door was opened. Followed by complete silence, after which I heard the cell door being closed. I don't remember any more about my stay in the cell as I fell fast asleep. I had not been interfered with in any way. It was about 11.30pm when I felt someone shaking me. He said, 'Come on, your friends have come to take you home'. He added, 'You haven't half got a lot of friends'. I entered the reception area and there was Phil Piratin complete with rent book. He had come to bail me out. Outside the station hundreds of people were assembled, all shouting 'They shall not pass'. A little cheer went up as I appeared.

We headed for New Road, where Piratin lived. Pearl was there along with other Party members including branch committee members, waiting for my return. We had a hurried consultation and it was decided that I should defend myself the following morning when I would appear before the magistrate. This was agreed after I had opposed a suggestion to ask for a remand to obtain legal aid. I wished to use the court to further our publicity for Sunday's rally against Mosley. In any case I did not fancy being out on bail during Sunday's events. It might handicap me somewhat. Our march on October 2nd had been better than I could have hoped for. Two days to go and everything that could be done was being done. I must stress the point that this activity was by no means all being conducted by the CP. We were in a leading position now because of our large army of active members and previous experience. We also had the equipment and other resources for producing leaflets, banners etc. We also had some of our leading members in most of the other antiFascist organisations, who could now proceed without regard to our previous line on Mosley's proposed march.

Saturday October 3rd. I was up early. I was to appear at Thames Magistrates Court to face charges of obstructing P.C. Webb in the execution of his duties and with using insulting words and behaviour whereby a breach of the peace may have been occasioned. I left home

about 9am. I had not seen that day's issue of the *Daily Worker* the previous evening, which I would normally have done, because of the excitement of my arrest and release on bail. I went to the corner shop where I got a copy, also that week's issue of the *East London Advertiser*. Looking at the front page of the *Daily Worker*, I felt sick. I turned the pages furiously but could find nothing about our preparations for the following day, October 4th. No call to action, no details of rallying points, no information about first-aid and all the other information which would make our opposition to Mosley more effective. Just a report in the bottom right hand corner of the front page about the Petition against the march which had reached 100,000 signatures collected in the last 48 hours. Included in the report was a reference to a leaflet issued yesterday by the ILP, calling on East London workers to take part in the counter demonstration which assembles at Aldgate at 2pm (12). The local paper had a similar report on page five. This report told of the local mayor's approach to the Home Secretary to get him to ban the march. It also advised people to avoid attending the march. 'Stay away' said the mayor of Stepney (13). I wondered what was going on as I walked along Varden Street towards Pearl's home where I would meet her and others, as arranged, before going to the court. My mind was in a turmoil. The first reaction was that our fight was being sabotaged, that there were evil forces inside the CP who were out to defeat us despite the change in line and would do all in their power to undermine our efforts. I had not seen the special London supplement which had been advertised in the previous day's paper. I don't remember seeing one that day. I have been unable to find a copy after a thorough search in the files of the British Museum Newspaper Library. When researching for this book I was given no help when I enquired at the offices of the *Morning Star*, successor to the *Daily Worker*. I was not allowed to see their file of back issues. At the time I reflected that I would not be able to prove any particular charge. It could be said that it was a matter for the *Daily Worker* editorial decision makers, or that someone had slipped up. I thought about the effect on my comrades locally, if I raised the question now, just one day before the big confrontation. As so often at that time, I did not want to affect morale by doing anything which might deflect our attention from the fight against Mosley. I decided to keep quiet and see if there would be any reaction from other Party members I was about to meet.

When I met Pearl, Harold and the rest of the family, the conversation immediately turned to the question of the trial and how I proposed dealing with that. I said I intended using the court to spotlight the cause of our immediate problems in East London and to say they were due to Mosley and his antisemitic activities. I said I would call on everyone to oppose him the following day. On arrival at the court there was already a sizeable crowd waiting to enter. There was some excitement as everyone seemed to be talking about their preparations for the following day.

You have read my account of the events concerning my arrest and release on bail. Before I tell you what happened before the actual trial, and comment on some aspects of it, here is one report from the *East London Advertiser*:

**' "Lynch her" shouts at Mile End.  
Communist procession and girl Fascist.  
Police arrest leader.**

That the police protected a girl in Fascist uniform selling copies of the *Blackshirt*, when a crowd rushed towards her, but were not in sufficient strength to make an arrest which was effected later, was stated at Thames Police Court on Saturday. It was stated there were shouts of "Lynch her, lynch her."

Joseph Jacobs, aged 23, of 30 Bedford Street, Mile End, was charged 1. with obstructing P.C. Webb in the execution of his duty; and 2. with insulting words and behaviour.

### **Rushed towards girl**

P.C. Webb said that at 10.15pm on the previous night he was on duty with other officers escorting a party of Communists in a westerly direction along the Mile End Road towards Stepney Green. Opposite the 'La Boheme' Cinema a girl was standing in Blackshirt uniform selling the *Blackshirt*. A crowd of about 200 to 300 were in the procession and they rushed towards the girl and attempted to get hold of her. Several police officers got round the girl and protected her. Witness went across and saw Jacobs who was the leader of the party. He was shouting "Lynch her, lynch her - she called us Jew. .." In company with P.C. Griffiths he got Jacobs and other men back into the procession again.

At the junction of White Horse Lane and Mile End Road, Jacobs, who was leading the party, said to other men in the lead, "We will go down here and get her". The head of the procession then turned into White Horse Lane. Witness went in front with his arms extended and told them that they could not go down there.

### **"You won't stop us"**

Jacobs then said "We are going round here and you won't stop us". At the same time he threw his arms round the neck of witness and tried to pull him out of the road.

P.C. H. Clayton and P.C. Barnwell came to his assistance. Witness told prisoner that he would take him into custody. He struggled violently and did so on the way to Arbour Square police station. When the charge was read over, he made no reply.

Jacobs: "The arrest was made at twenty past ten, but the incident concerning the girl had taken place half an hour before that." Witness: "There was an interval of between five and eight minutes. The distance between the 'La Boheme' and White Horse Lane was about 300 yards."

A police inspector informed the magistrate that the distance was about half a mile.

Jacobs: "Why was I not arrested at the time I am alleged to have insulted the girl? Had she not been there and the Fascists threatened to come on Sunday there would have been no trouble. The police actually provoked the trouble."

### **Defendant Prominent**

Junior Station Inspector Rutherford said that he was accompanying the procession of Communists. He was close to the accused. There were about 1,000 people in the procession. They reached the junction of Grove Road and Mile End Road.

"I saw a crowd of people, some from the procession, and others following, rush towards a woman wearing the uniform of a Fascist organisation" continued the Inspector. "She was selling the *Blackshirt* newspaper. The crowd was menacing and shouting threats. I went to her assistance and endeavoured to protect her from the violence of the mob."

He added that they walked down the Mile End Road followed by a large number of people. He saw defendant particularly prominent in the incident of the young woman. The prisoner was walking alongside the girl and himself inciting the crowd to disorder and shouting "Lynch her, lynch her. She called us Jewish. .."

Witness asked the prisoner to go away, but he continued and demanded that witness should arrest the girl. As there was the possibility of serious disorder, he took the girl down a side street (Canal Road) and other officers compelled the defendant and the rest of the crowd to continue along Mile End Road. Witness directed two officers to see the girl home and returned to the procession.

### **Struggled Violently**

At White Horse Lane he saw the prisoner endeavouring to force his way past P.C. Webb who

was endeavouring to stop him walking down the street. Prisoner was very violent, and attempted to struggle with the officer and was taken into custody. He struggled violently for some time and there was some difficulty in getting him to Arbour Square station.

Jacobs: "If what you say is true, and I used insulting words and behaviour, why did you not arrest me at the time? Why did you wait till the second incident at White Horse Lane?"

Witness: "It was owing to state of the crowd and the fact that the police were short-handed or you would have been arrested at that time."

Accused: "Why did the first officer make the charge of obstruction and then later on make another charge?"

Magistrate: "Yes, why was there any interval of time between one charge and another?"

Witness: "I went back to the crowd at Stepney Green and when I returned later, he was then charged."

### **Three times headed off**

Jacobs then entered the witness box. He denied obstructing the officer in the course of his duty and said that he did not use insulting words and behaviour. The procession was marching along in an orderly manner. The police had said they were short-handed and there were not more than a dozen with the march. During the course of the march they were shouting slogans such as "Stop the Blackshirts from coming to East London on Sunday". The procession started from Tower Hill. They went up Cambridge Road. They then desired to go down Green Street. The police refused them leave to go down that street. They complied with that and went down Old Ford Road. Later they wished to go down Russia Lane, but the police refused them permission to go down that street. His friends did not want trouble and so they went southwards by way of Grove Road.

### **A scuffle ahead**

As they turned into Mile End Road he saw a scuffle ahead, which proved to be the Blackshirt girl. He went to the Inspector and told him to take the girl away as it might cause disorder and they didn't want that. The officer's reply was to tell him to go away or he might be arrested.

Witness put a cordon on one side of the procession to prevent people rushing to the pavement. They saw the Blackshirt girl turning into a side street and they proceeded on their way.

Their intentions were to proceed down White Horse Lane and conclude the demonstration with a meeting at Stepney Green. As they were on the turn, however, the police began to push them about and said, "You can't go down there". He contended that the police had no lawful right to stop them going down the lane. Witness was pushed and punched about and eventually arrested.

Morris Genis, 14 Gt Alie Street, hat presser, denied that prisoner made the remark "Lynch her, lynch her - She called us Jewish". Sidney Barkan and Willie Cohen, the latter describing himself as the secretary of the London Young Communist League, also gave evidence on behalf of accused. The latter said that after Jacobs had been arrested he (witness) went to the Inspector and said "We want to go down White Horse Lane to Stepney Green where we are holding a meeting". His reply was, "What's stopping you? You can go through if you like". The procession then actually did pass through White Horse Lane.

### **Now satisfied**

The magistrate said that if he had heard defendant alone he would have been rather doubtful about the case, but having seen and heard defendant's witness he had no doubt about the matter at all, and he fully accepted the story of the police so far as both the charges were concerned. With regard to the incident at White Horse Lane he was fully satisfied that

following upon the earlier incident when defendant was making use of what were insulting words likely to cause a breach of the peace, that it was necessary to prevent the procession passing down White Horse Lane.

The police officer had taken proper steps and had been obstructed in the course of his duty.

The magistrate asked if anything was known about defendant, and was told that nothing was known about him.

Jacobs was fined £5 on the charge of obstructing the police, and the other charge was marked not separately dealt with' (14).

There were other reports which only differ in emphasis or minor details. What was not reported is that I said I would not pay the fine and shouted out loud that the Fascists were responsible for the current disorder in the area.

You can judge for yourself whether the police had been telling anything like the truth. I can tell you that all the so-called evidence was concocted and all the police witnesses perjured themselves, as they do on so many occasions. Just look at the evidence of P.C. Webb and the Inspector. One said the crowd numbered 300, the other 1,000. The real total would be nearer 4,000. P.C. Webb said the distance (which was crucial to the credibility of their story) was only 200 to 300 yards between the two incidents he was describing. The magistrate was told it was actually half a mile. This meant his evidence that it was only five to eight minutes before my arrest and the first incident, was false. They almost agreed about the actual words I am alleged to have used. Almost, but with a difference which would be almost impossible if they had really heard me say them. One said "JEW" etc., the other said "JEWISH" etc. They had fallen into the usual trap when concocting evidence. This always concerns the details about actual words, times, distances and descriptions which can be elicited under cross examination. The magistrate, had he wanted, could easily have seen that the alleged proposal to follow the Blackshirt girl was ridiculous. Entry into White Horse Lane would have taken us further away from where the police had escorted her away. We would have had to cross a canal bridge further on to get there, in a direction away from Stepney Green.

I will give some more details about all this because it describes, from my own experience, what I know happened to others when they were unfortunate enough to fall into the hands of the police and the courts. The Inspector in particular, played a sinister role. Prior to going into court he saw me and took me to one side. Without giving me any idea of the 'evidence' which he intended giving, he said words to this effect: 'I saw among your possessions there was a razor blade in a holder'. This was true. I used it as a pen-knife particularly for sharpening pencils. These things were in common use. He said if I did not agree to plead guilty he would raise the matter and say I was in possession of an offensive weapon and things would be very nasty for me. I could be sent to prison. I told him I intended fighting the charges and he could do his worst. The matter of the razor blade knife was not in fact mentioned at the trial.

After the verdict I was taken to a room because I had said I would not pay the fine. After about a quarter of an hour I was told I had to go as the fine had been paid. When I reached the street, Phil Piratin was there and told me it had been decided that no useful purpose would be served by leaving me inside and the fine was paid to secure my release. I did not argue about the decision. There didn't seem to be much point. I was really glad to be out, but would have been prepared to stay there if that would have helped our cause.

Pearl and I went to my home where my mother was pleased to welcome us and had a big Saturday lunch all ready and waiting to be eaten. We had a good laugh about the trial and I felt quite good. I had almost forgotten my feelings about the *Daily Worker* and as no one seemed to be very agitated about it in the way that I was, I decided to keep quiet and

concentrate on the rest of the day's activities which would carry on well into the small hours of October 4th.

Came the Big Day. I was up fairly early and after a good breakfast, I went as arranged, to my sector of the front, which was Gardiners Corner. Our headquarters were in Manningtree Street, behind the fire station in Commercial Road, about sixty yards from Gardiners itself. We had a first-aid post as well as facilities for dishing out leaflets, banners, posters etc. We were equipped to receive messages and runners to carry messages to all the other sectors, particularly in Cable Street, where we anticipated there might be a lot of problems. We thought the crowd would be concentrated at Gardiners, and that if the Fascists attempted to march, they would find it almost impossible to leave Royal Mint Street by way of Mansel Street or Leman Street to Gardiners. The most likely route if these ways were barred, would be along Cable Street. I can't remember exactly, but I think Pat Devine was in charge in the Cable Street area.

There were first-aid posts and points where contact could be maintained for reporting and issuing instructions, at Whitechapel library, Toynbee Hall, off Cable Street and other places in addition to where I was at Manningtree Street. The geography favoured us as the approach to Whitechapel Road could be barred by moving crowds in a short space of time, no matter which way the police and Mosley decided to try to march. By mid-morning the crowds coming to Aldgate were already so big that Gardiners Corner, a big road junction made up of Whitechapel Road, Whitechapel High Street, Commercial Road, Commercial Street and Leman Street, was blocked and traffic was coming to a standstill. Around midday, the police were beginning to show their hand. There were skirmishes going on all over the place. I was told that down in Cable Street, which is quite a narrow street, it was already impossible to pass. By about one o'clock there was a tram stuck on the rails, right in the middle of the road junction at Gardiners Corner. Young people were perched on all the lampposts and any other vantage point, displaying posters and directing the crowd towards the weak spots in the front with the police. The crowds were roaring 'They shall not pass'.

The police were making periodic baton charges, both mounted and on foot, in an effort to keep the crowds back. Many people were being arrested. It took several policemen to escort anyone arrested to the station. This was because they were not equipped with the number of vehicles and other crowd control technology that exists now. As anyone was grabbed by the police there were determined attempts by others to secure their release. So each arrest meant that a large number of policemen would have to leave the main cordons, thus weakening them. For every ten arrests about a hundred policemen were engaged in getting them to the police stations. After a while the senior officers realised what was happening and the arrests almost stopped. They were content to baton charge and inflict heavy wounds on the front ranks of the demonstrators. This they did with great effect.

If their efforts had failed and the main body of demonstrators had managed to get into Leman Street, or round the back via Mansel Street and the side streets towards Royal Mint Street, where Mosley's forces were surrounded on all sides by thousands of police, I'm sure there would have been a pitched battle in Royal Mint Street and Tower Hill. Fortunately for the police and Mosley, who had chosen the Fascists' assembly point with great care, the whole of their southern and part of their western flanks were protected by the docks, which were closed, and the river at Tower Bridge and Tower Hill. Otherwise it would have been impossible to surround them and I don't know how they would have retreated without being severely mauled by the enormous crowds who were ready to make any sacrifice to prevent the march. They did eventually retreat westwards over Tower Hill, but not before the great battle of Cable Street.

Around one o'clock, I decided to have a look at Royal Mint Street if I could get there. By way of Great Alie Street, across Leman Street into Little Alie Street, where the 'Circle House' was situated, I got into Mansel Street, and eventually to the junction of Royal Mint Street and Tower Hill. I saw lots of Blackshirts in full uniform, many vans specially designed for carrying personnel, with iron-barred windows. Police vehicles of all kinds were everywhere. No one not in uniform could get into Royal Mint Street itself. Judging from the way everybody and the Blackshirt vehicles were facing, it looked as though they could either go by way of Leman Street or Cable Street. Any thought that they could try going by some devious route which would take them through the back streets, was irrational. They would have been sitting targets for all the people in all the houses en route.

I returned to Gardiners Corner where things were getting really hot as we got nearer to two o'clock, which was the time the counter demonstration had been asked to assemble. There were already many people walking around with their heads bandaged. Our first-aid units were being kept very busy. Lots of people were coming up with stories about terrible fighting at the junction of Royal Mint Street, Leman Street and Cable Street. Thousands were turning away from Gardiners Corner down Commercial Road into all the side streets towards Cable Street, where we knew that barricades were being built to bar the way. I got back to Manningtree Street to hear all the reports coming from Cable Street and elsewhere. It appeared that the police were trying to force a way through Cable Street to clear a path for Mosley and his supporters. I was never in Cable Street that day, so I had to hear and read all about what happened there later.

Mosley's forces preceded by a massive force of mounted and foot police actually tried to leave Royal Mint Street, but never managed to get into Cable Street. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner who was on the spot decided to call the whole thing off, and Mosley was obliged to take his forces westwards away from the East End. As the news spread, cheers could be heard all over the area and into the surrounding streets some distance from the battleground itself. The air was full of sound. People shouting slogans: 'They did not pass'; 'They shall not pass'.

As the police withdrew their main forces and the crowds moved away from the major points of conflict, all the cafes and other public places were full of laughing people swapping stories of their own particular experiences of the past few hours. As things turned out, there had been over eighty arrests and many of them had already begun to leave the police stations on bail. I would not like to estimate the number of injured. There were many people bandaged and bloody. The debris left after the fight was everywhere. The streets did not return to normal for some time. There were such a lot of detailed matters needing attention, such as getting people to go to all the police stations to bail out those arrested. Seeing to those who had been hurt. For some of us there was the meeting to consider the possibility of immediate reaction from the Fascists in those areas close to where they had some support. Nothing very serious happened that day, but we did not have to wait very long before we knew that the events on October 4th represented a victorious battle, but not the end of the war. Much remains to be written about what happened before and after as well as the day itself (15).

Those who took part have never stopped talking about it from time to time, over the years, since that great day. Much discussion has centred around the issues involved. Speculation on what may have happened if Mosley and the National Government had not suffered this massive defeat. For what it is worth, I have often thought that if Mosley had secured a firm foothold in East London, from which he might have built a mass base, the whole history of the world could have been different. Certainly there were powerful forces backing him. If these forces had not been checked, might they not have had an alliance with Hitler and Mussolini resulting in an all-out attack on the Soviet Union, rather than what happened in



1939? I don't know. I do know that Mosley was being supported to build an alternative to the National Government, if it should fail to hold down the workers' struggle against unemployment and the low standard of living. There was also the growing United Front and Popular Front movements as in France and Spain, which could have developed here. After all, Hitler had arrived on the scene because of the strength of the CP in Germany, as a means of defending the capitalist system. Had not Franco been supported in his efforts to overthrow the Spanish Popular Front Government?

Mosley and his friends had suffered a defeat at the hands of gentile and Jewish people alike. This did not mean he and his friends would give up. October 4th was not just the result of some few days' effort on the part of all who participated. The defeat of Mosley started way back when he failed to gain a foothold in Shadwell and Wapping, where lived the dockers of Irish descent with a strong Catholic background and a long history of working-class struggle behind them. The Jews of East London could not, in my view, have held Mosley back without support from this area to the south of the Jewish areas, which would have found them completely surrounded on October 4th if Mosley had made the headway there which he had made in Bethnal Green, Shoreditch and Limehouse. As for the part played by the CP and other organisations, there is much to tell. For my part the fight had only just begun. We needed to follow October 4th with yet more massive activity, if the victory was to be consolidated. To this task we immediately turned our attention.