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Boston Police Strike In 1919

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795583489271153

The Boston Police Strike of 1919: A Turning Point for Labor and Law Enforcement

The Boston Police Strike of 1919 stands as one of the most pivotal moments in American labor history, a dramatic confrontation that reshaped public perceptions of law enforcement, unionization, and government authority. When roughly 1,100 Boston police officers walked off the job on September 9, 1919, they set off a chain of events that would have lasting consequences for police unions, public safety policy, and the broader labor movement in the United States. This episode, occuring during a period of intense social upheaval and fear of radicalism, offers a compelling window into the tensions of early twentieth-century America.

The Seeds of Discontent: Life for Boston Police Before 1919

To understand why the Boston Police Strike happened, one must first appreciate the working conditions faced by Boston police officers in the years leading up to 1919. Officers worked extraordinarily long shifts, often twelve hours or more, with no days off for weeks at a time. They slept in station house dormitories on simple cots, their lives tightly controlled by a rigid chain of command. Pay was notoriously low, with starting salaries barely above subsistence level. Officers were expected to purchase their own uniforms and equipment, and they had no voice in departmental policies that directly affected their daily lives.

Perhaps most frustrating was the lack of any formal mechanism for addressing grievances. Officers who dared to complain risked immediate dismissal or transfer to undesirable posts. The Police Commissioner, Edwin U. Curtis, held near-absolute power over the department and was known for his uncompromising stance against any form of collective action by his men. In many ways, Boston police officers were treated not as professionals but as interchangeable parts in a machine, expected to obey without question.

The Push for Unionization

By 1919, the idea of forming a union had gained significant traction among Boston police officers. The American Federation of Labor, under the leadership of Samuel Gompers, had been actively organizing workers across various industries, and police officers began to see unionization as the only viable path to improving their working conditions. In August 1919, the Boston Social Club, which had originally functioned as a fraternal organization, transformed itself into a collective bargaining entity and applied for a charter from the American Federation of Labor.

Police Commissioner Curtis responded swiftly and decisively. He issued an order prohibiting any police officer from joining a union or participating in union activities, declaring such actions incompatible with the discipline required for law enforcement. When nineteen officers were identified as leaders of the unionization effort, Curtis suspended them pending investigation. This heavy-handed response only deepened the resolve of the rank and file, and the stage was set for a confrontation.

The Strike Begins: September 9, 1919

On the evening of September 9, 1919, approximately 1,100 Boston police officers—roughly three-quarters of the entire force—walked off the job. The strike began at 5:45 PM, leaving the city of Boston with only a skeleton crew of about 400 officers, many of whom were supervisors or recent recruits who had not joined the union. The timing could hardly have been worse. Boston was a crowded, bustling city with a significant transient population, and the absence of a reliable police presence created an immediate power vacuum.

The city's response was initially chaotic. Mayor Andrew James Peters, who sympathized with the officers' grievances but opposed the strike itself, called upon the state government for assistance. Massachusetts Governor Calvin Coolidge, a man of few words but firm convictions, saw the strike as a direct challenge to public order and governmental authority. He initially hesitated but soon authorized the mobilization of the state guard to restore order in the streets.

Chaos and Violence in the Streets

Without adequate police protection, Boston descended into a state of near-anarchy within hours. Looting broke out in commercial districts, with crowds of young men smashing shop windows and helping themselves to merchandise. Gangs formed and roamed the streets, assaulting citizens and engaging in acts of vandalism. The situation was particularly dire in the city's working-class neighborhoods, where long-simmering resentments against authority exploded into open lawlessness.

By the second night of the strike, the violence had escalated significantly. Several people were killed in clashes between rioters and the makeshift security forces attempting to maintain order. The state guard, composed largely of World War I veterans, was initially overwhelmed by the scale of the disorder. It became clear that the situation required a more robust response, and Governor Coolidge ultimately deployed additional troops to patrol the streets and protect property.

The National Response and Governor Coolidge's Role

The Boston Police Strike quickly became a national news story, capturing headlines from coast to coast. Newspapers editorialized passionately, with many taking a hard line against the striking officers. The concept of police unionization was deeply unsettling to many Americans, who viewed law enforcement as a special calling rather than an ordinary occupation. The strike seemed to confirm fears that unions posed a threat to public safety and social order.

Governor Calvin Coolidge emerged as the dominant figure in the crisis. His famous telegram to Samuel Gompers, in which he declared that "There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time," became one of the most quoted statements in American political history. Coolidge's firm stance during the strike catapulted him to national prominence and set the stage for his eventual ascent to the Vice Presidency and then the Presidency of the United States.

The Breaking of the Strike

The strike was broken not through negotiation but through force and attrition. Commissioner Curtis refused to reinstate the striking officers, and the city began recruiting replacements. Many of the striking officers were skilled and experienced, but they had been effectively fired, and their jobs were filled by new hires who were willing to work under the existing conditions. By late September, the strike had collapsed, and the vast majority of the former officers were never allowed to return to duty.

The consequences for the strikers were severe. Blacklisted from police work in Boston and often across New England, many struggled to find employment comparable to what they had lost. Some turned to manual labor, others left the region entirely, and a few found work in private security or related fields. The sense of betrayal

among the striking officers and their families lingered for decades, a bitter reminder of the high cost of collective action.

Long-Term Impact on Police Unions and Labor Relations

The Boston Police Strike had profound and lasting effects on police unionization in the United States. For decades after 1919, police departments across the country actively discouraged or outright prohibited union membership among their officers. The strike created a powerful precedent that police work was incompatible with the collective bargaining traditions of the labor movement. Many states passed laws specifically barring police from joining unions, and those that did allow police unions often imposed strict limitations on their activities, including prohibitions on strikes.

The strike also influenced the broader labor movement. At a time when organized labor was gaining strength and visibility, the Boston Police Strike served as a cautionary tale about the limits of public tolerance for strikes that directly affected public safety. The labor movement's support for the striking officers was lukewarm at best, and the American Federation of Labor failed to mount a meaningful campaign to pressure Boston officials to reinstate the fired officers. This episode highlighted the challenges of organizing public sector workers whose jobs involve essential services.

The Changing Nature of Policing

In the wake of the strike, Boston and other American cities reexamined their approach to policing. There was a renewed emphasis on professionalization, training, and the establishment of clear lines of authority within police departments. While the immediate aftermath of the strike was punitive for the officers involved, it eventually led to incremental improvements in pay, working conditions, and the recognition that officers needed some form of representation, even if collective bargaining remained off the table for many years.

The strike also accelerated the trend toward state-level control of police forces during emergencies. The Massachusetts State Guard's role in restoring order demonstrated the importance of having a well-trained reserve force capable of stepping in when local resources proved inadequate. This model was adopted by other states and influenced the development of modern state police and national guard systems.

Coolidge's Rise to National Prominence

Few figures benefited from the Boston Police Strike as much as Calvin Coolidge. His handling of the crisis positioned him as a champion of law and order at a time when many Americans feared social unrest and radicalism. The strike occurred during the First Red Scare, a period of intense anticommunist sentiment following the Russian Revolution, and Coolidge's firm stance appealed to voters who were anxious about the spread of revolutionary ideas.

Coolidge's reputation as a man of principle and action carried him to the Republican National Convention in 1920, where he was selected as the party's vice presidential candidate alongside Warren G. Harding. When Harding died in office in 1923, Coolidge became President and went on to win a full term in 1924. His presidency is remembered for its conservative fiscal policies and its emphasis on limited government, but his political career might have followed a very different path without the Boston Police Strike.

Lessons for Modern Labor and Law Enforcement

The Boston Police Strike of 1919 continues to resonate with contemporary debates about police unions, public sector collective bargaining, and the right to strike in essential services. Modern police unions are powerful entities in many American cities, but they operate within a legal framework that was shaped, in part, by the events of 1919. The strike serves as a reminder of the delicate balance between the rights of workers and the imperative of maintaining public order.

Historians continue to debate the lessons of the strike. Some argue that Commissioner Curtis's intransigence and the state's refusal to negotiate were excessive and punitive, while others maintain that the strike itself was an unacceptable abdication of duty. What is clear is that the strike exposed deep tensions in American society about the nature of work, authority, and the role of government in mediating labor disputes.

Conclusion

The Boston Police Strike of 1919 was a watershed event that reshaped American policing and labor relations for generations. It began with legitimate grievances about low pay, long hours, and poor working conditions but escalated into a crisis that tested the limits of public tolerance for collective action by essential workers. The strike's failure to achieve its immediate goals did not end the push for police unionization, but it fundamentally altered the terms of the debate. Governor Calvin Coolidge's famous declaration that there is no right to strike against the public safety became a guiding principle for many policymakers, and the strike's legacy can still be felt in contemporary discussions about the role of unions in law enforcement. As a historical episode, it remains a powerful illustration of the consequences when labor rights, public safety, and governmental authority collide.

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