

# Free research paper about boston police strike: 1919

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## **Introduction**

Boston Police strike is one of the most talked about strikes in the history of USA because it failed to produce the desired results. In 1919, Boston police rank and file went out on a full-throttle strike for wage increase, less working hours and better working conditions. During the strike, Boston witnessed several nights of lawlessness. Many houses were looted during the first two days of the strike by hooligans and robbers. This strike was not beneficial for the labor movement in USA. In fact, it took several decades before police officers were again allowed to organize. On the other hand, the governor of Massachusetts emerged as a heroic figure from the Boston Police strike, and it helped him immensely in launching his political career. Taking the views of the police into account, it seems that they thought that they were justified to go for the strike as they were paid even less than the unskilled labors at that time. They also worked typically more than 90 hours a week. On the other

hand, the general public and administration thought that police being a crucial public service should not have gone for the strike. Policemen, who were part of the strike, were called “ Agents of Lenin” by many newspapers of that time (Francis, 1975). There are many aspects of the police strike of Boston in 1919. This essay will discuss the events that led up to the strike, the main people involved in the strike from both sides, incidents that happened during and immediately after the strike and finally the aftereffect of the police strike in Boston.

### **Events that Triggered the Strike**

There were several events that triggered the strike. In the mid19th century, Boston Police force was controlled by the Mayor of Boston. Funding, recruitment, training and maintaining the law and order all were controlled by the mayor’s office. However, in 1895 Massachusetts legislature altered the structure (Wieneke, 2008). It shifted the control from the mayor of Boston to a five member board appointed by the mayor. However, after 11 years Massachusetts overturned the law and created the post of police commissioner (Francis, 1975). Police commissioner of Boston was appointed by the governor of Massachusetts, and police commissioner was entrusted with the responsibility for the entire Boston police department. This created a conflict of interest between the mayor’s office, which were still responsible for salary and physical working condition, and police commissioner, who was responsible for discipline, training, hiring and operations of the police officers. There were no incentive for the mayor’s office to devote resources and money for the police department as it was not responsible for that

department (Wieneke, 2008). Even if the police department and police commissioners approached the mayor's office with demands, they were often not given proper importance. This led to a phase of almost no salary increase and deteriorating working conditions for the police rank and files. One of the big reasons for the strike was salary. In 1854, patrolmen used to receive a salary of \$2 per day (Wieneke, 2008), and since then the police department did not see any significant rise in salary in over 60 years. However, wages of other type of workforce increased due to inflation, but the wage of Boston police force remained same. There were increasing grievances shown from the police department to the mayor's office for revising the salary. However, their request was ignored for almost 50 years. Finally, in 1898 an increased scale was agreed between the city council and the mayor's office. However, the mayor's office not being directly responsible for the police department was not proactive with the issue, and the matter remained unsolved for 15 years. Finally, in 1913 a rise in the wages of the police files and ranks were declared based on the recommendation made in 1898 (Wieneke, 2008). However, the inflation between 1898 and 1913 was 37%, and the inflation between 1913 and 1918 was 79% (Francis, 1975). In 1918, the police department was receiving a salary, which was proper for 1898 cost of living standards, but it was very low compared to the standards of 1918. The salary of a first year patrolman was \$730 a year in 1918, the same increased to \$821 in the second year and \$1, 000 in the third year. Finally, from fourth year onwards the patrolman would receive a salary of \$1, 200 (Francis, 1975). However, the amount was very less compared to other workers. On an average in 1918, an unskilled

steelworker used to make almost \$1, 500 per year. Any worker associated with the World War I activities used to get an average of \$2, 500 per year. A carpenter used to earn almost \$2, 000 per year, and even a conductor of streetcars used to earn almost \$1, 400 per year. The other Boston city council workers employed in non-police jobs used to make almost one-third more than the patrolmen (Francis, 1975).

Apart from wages, another big issue was the working conditions. The length of working hours for the police force was a big issue. Patrolmen used to work 7 days a week and were allowed to take a day off once every 15 days (Farmer, 2011). Patrolmen working in day shifts were supposed to spend 73 hours on duty per week, and those in night shifts were supposed to spend 83 hours on duty per week. After the day off, patrolmen had to perform a “house day” when they were supposed to serve 10 hours on duty, followed by a 3 hours break at the station (Wieneke, 2008). After the break, they were supposed to report back to duty for another 10 hours, and then they were allowed to go home. The policemen, who were on day shifts in addition to their 73 hours a week, were required to spend one night per week in the police station as reserve force. The length of this type of inhuman working hours was also a major contributing factor to the strike.

Another major factor for the strike was the physical working conditions. At that time, there were 19 police houses in Boston. None of the police stations were altered or significantly upgraded after the Civil War. The conditions of most of the police stations were very poor. The beds in the police stations were used by two, three and even four policemen per day. Bedbugs and roaches in the beds were pretty common. The police facilities were

inadequate for the number of policemen in service. For example, in the Court Street police station, there were only four toilets for 135 policemen (Francis, 1975).

## **Main Characters of the Boston Strike**

There were many characters involved in the Boston strike. We will discuss a few main characters of the Boston strike. One of the main characters of the strike was Edwin Upton Curtis. From 1917 onwards, Boston Social Club, the association for rank and files of the Boston police department, was approaching the police commissioner Stephen O'Meara with their demands for an increase in salary (Farmer, 2011). However, O'Meara was unable to convince the mayor's office to increase the salary. After O'Meara died in 1918, Edwin Upton Curtis was appointed as the new police commissioner by the governor (Wieneke, 2008). Unlike O'Meara, Curtis was a strict commissioner. He refused to talk to the Social Club as he was against the unionization of the police force. Instead he created his own management-employee dispute resolution cell. He argued that the involvement of police in any labor union organization was in direct conflict between the duties of police officers and union membership. Curtis finally issued an official statement on 11th August, 1919 prohibiting police officers from joining any club, organization or body outside the police department (Farmer, 2011). However, even after the official announcement, Central Labor Union welcomed the police union. Curtis refused to meet with any police member, who was associated with any union. He even suspended 11 policemen on the ground of being associated with unions. Curtis became an overnight hero to

the business community of Boston as he was protecting their interests.

Another notable character of the strike was the mayor Andrew James Peters (Farmer, 2011). Peters was a person who wanted to strike a balance between the two parties. He created a citizen's committee that recommended that policemen should be allowed to be a part of a union, but those unions should not be affiliated to any ties with the American Federation of Labor. He hoped that in this way Curtis would recognize the police union, and also there would be no conflict of interest. The committee also recommended that 11 policemen, who were suspended, should be allowed back to service (Farmer, 2011). However, the recommendation made by Peters was not implemented as the most powerful character of the strike, Calvin Coolidge, intervened. Calvin Coolidge was the governor of Massachusetts (Farmer, 2011). He supported the actions taken by Curtis and nullified the recommendations made by Peters. Coolidge was in a much more powerful position than Peters and also Coolidge had the support of Boston Chamber of Commerce. With the support of Coolidge, Curtis proceeded with the trial of policemen, who were found to be involved with unions. On September 8, 1919 the judge found the policemen guilty (Farmer, 2011).

## **The Strike**

As soon as the trial results came out and 11 policemen were found guilty, Boston Police officers went on a strike on 9th September, 1919 (Farmer, 2011). Among 1, 544 officers, 1, 117 failed to report to work on 9th September. Coolidge immediately assigned 100 metro park police departments to replace the striking policemen. However, even among those

100, 58 refused to go to work, and they were immediately suspended (Francis, 1975). Over the night of 9th and 10th September, the city turned into a paradise for hooligans and robbers. Looting, throwing stones at the cars and store windows and overturning the carts were rampant in the streets. Mayor Peters was unable to contain it and asked for help from the Governor. Governor Coolidge immediately deployed almost 5, 000 state guards around the city of Boston to bring back law and order (Farmer, 2011). However, state guards were not very well-trained in handling large crowds, and initially their arrival added to the chaos. However, soon they got the control back with firepower. Two people died of gunshots in South Boston. The day life continued at its own pace, and even schools remained open during the course of the strike. Governor Coolidge took over the control of Boston from mayor Peters. He started portraying the strikers as the “deserters” and “traitors”. Initially, the Central Labor Union thought of supporting the police strike but then stepped back due to the lack of support within the labor union. Public and newspaper termed the strikers as the “agents of Lenin and Trotsky”. The officers on strike were not reinstated. Instead Curtis started hiring new officers, and he fired 1, 100 officers, who participated in strike, within next three months and replaced them with 1, 574 new officers at a better pay and work hours (Francis, 1975). They also were provided with more vacation and state sponsored uniforms. It took almost 15 years, after the strike, for the policemen to get justice, and Massachusetts legislature directed the police commissioner to reinstate the officers. However, the police commissioner refused to do that. Finally in



1965, policemen were allowed to participate in unions for collective bargaining (Farmer, 2011).

## **Chances of Police Strike Today**

Chances of police strike are much less than before. It is mainly because the salary of the police department is regularly revisited by the city council and states. They are revised on a regular basis. Also, police service is no longer seen as any normal service. It is seen as one of the essential services for the government to function. Most of the states and cities allow police unions for collective bargaining. However, even today if a police strike happens, it probably should be handled in the same way as the Boston strike was handled. It is the duty of the police to secure the safety of the citizens, and if they are on strike, they are not only doing their duty but also creating a situation putting the lives of thousands of people at risk. Police unions should be allowed, but police strikes should still be handled with strength.

## **Conclusion**

Boston police strike is the biggest police strike in the history of USA. It created huge chaos in the city of Boston for two days. The main reasons for the strike were less wage, pathetic working condition and extremely long working hours. Even the unskilled labors of Boston in 1919 used to make more money than the policemen. These reasons were already creating the backdrop of the strike, but the suspension of 11 policemen on account of participating in union by the then police commissioner Curtis triggered the strike. Governor Coolidge and police commissioner Curtis tackled the strikers with no mercy. All 1, 100 strikers were suspended, and new policemen were

hired. Boston police strike was unsuccessful in its objective but remains a very important event in the American history. It shows us the importance of police force, and what damage they can do to the society simply by refusing to go to work.

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