Boston police strike for better working conditions, 1919

Timing
September 1919 to December 1919

Location and Goals
Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Boston, Massachusetts
Goals: The police demanded higher pay, shorter hours, and better working conditions

Methods
Methods in 1st segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 104. Professional strike
Segment Length:
20 days

Classifications
Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Economic Justice
Group characterization:

- Boston Police officers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites
Leaders:
Boston Police Force
Partners:
American Federation of Labour
External allies:
not known
Involvement of social elites:
not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups
Groups in 1st Segment:

- American Federation of Labour

Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Segment Length:
20 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence
Opponents:
Police Commissioner Edwin Curtis
Nonviolent responses of opponent:
not known
Campaigner violence:
Not known, since reports of crowd violence don't clarify whether the striking police were part of it.
Repressive Violence:
The threat of live ammunition and horsemen with swords pushed the crowd from Scollay Square. The military guard forced mobilized units with machine guns, killing five residents. Civilians caused three other deaths
during the gathering on Scollay Square. Over twenty people sustained serious injuries.

**Success Outcome**

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
0 points out of 6 points  
Survival:  
0 points out of 1 point  
Growth:  
1 point out of 3 points  
Total points:  
1 out of 10 points  
Notes on outcomes:  
While the Boston police commissioner did increase wages and improve work conditions for the Boston Police Force, he only did so after firing and replacing the striking police.

While the American people were still recovering from the First World War, inflation of the cost of living surpassed wage growth. Further stretching the domestic economy, soldiers returning from the war inundated the market, limiting workers’ earning power. Demanding higher wages and better working conditions, one-fifth of the nation's workers went on strike during the year 1919. 

From 1913 to 1919, the cost of living rose 75 percent, while police wages had risen only 18 percent. At that time, police wages were even lower than the earnings of most inexperienced factory workers. Boston Police worked seven days a week, with a day off every other week, during which they could not leave their station without special sanction. Officers worked between 72 and 98 hours per week. Local governments required them to sleep in their stations in case they were needed on duty, and did not pay them for court appearances.

In June of 1919, the police appealed to the American Federation of Labour to help them form a union in Boston, Massachusetts. Police Commissioner Edwin Curtis was honest about his disapproval of the officers’ plans to unionize. In August, the commissioners granted the police a union agreement.

Governor Calvin Coolidge and attorney general Albert Pillsbury put forward legislation to prohibit unionization among the police. On the 20 August 1919, Commissioner Edwin Curtis suspended eight of the leading police union organizers for conspiring against the police administration. Commissioner Curtis mandated the unionizing police officers to turn in their uniforms and badges. He enlisted volunteer police as substitutes.

Of the 1,544 employed Boston officers, 1,117 did not come to work on 21 August. Governor Coolidge enlisted 100 members of the state’s Metropolitan Park Police to replace the striking officers. 58 of the enlisted Park Police refused to participate and were suspended from their jobs. The police union members responded by voting 1132 to 2 in favour of a strike. The police union went on strike to protest the Commissioner’s efforts to break their union and prevent the American Federation of Labour from supporting them.

On the evening of 9 September, the police began the strike. As residents realized that police officers were no longer safeguarding the streets, prospective criminals seized the opportunity to engage in petty crimes, such as looting and pillaging. Citizens harassed striking officers as well as those who stayed on the job. By 8pm on 9 September 1919, an estimated 10,000 people crowded the streets in Scollay Square, South Boston.

On 10 September, Mayor Andrew Peters appealed through a press release to the state guard to take charge.
Governor Coolidge released a statement acting on Peters’ appeal, and transferring responsibility from Boston to the state of Massachusetts. To allow the state guard to take control of the police, Coolidge employed an emergency clause designed for riots and violent civil disturbances.

The President of Harvard, Lawrence Lowell called on students to volunteer in order to provide police protection during the strike. Students, along with some businessmen, volunteered. Crowds waited outside police stations to attack the volunteers. The Commander of Station 6 in South Boston kept his Harvard student volunteers in the station to protect them from the crowds outside.

Sporadic confrontations among the replacement police and rioting crowd continued at Scollay Square, along with property destruction by the rioters. Some of the crowd cornered several Harvard students. When the first round of mounted troops arrived, they had to intervene to rescue groups of cornered police. Some of the crowd wounded several guardsmen by throwing rocks. Eventually, the threat of live ammunition and horsemen with swords pushed the crowd from Scollay Square. The military guard forces mobilized units with machine guns, killing five people in the crowd. Those in the crowd reportedly killed three others, though the details of these incidents are unclear. Over twenty people sustained serious injuries.

The following days, Mayor Peters feared that a general strike would follow with the support of other unions and public employees. With order restored, he met with union leaders to seek compromise. The Police Union requested that the City reinstate all police, while the police leaders and the city government negotiated a new contract.

Governor Coolidge forbade the requested reinstatement, stating that he would never again allow a strike to threaten public safety. Coolidge withdrew the state guard. By December Commissioner Curtis had recruited a new police force with increased salaries and benefits and with improved working conditions.

The American Federation of Labour responded to political pressure experienced during the strike and revoked the charters previously granted to the police unions. The revocation ended police unionism for two decades, as police would not try again to organize until World War II.

**Research Notes**

**Influences:**

Economic struggle during the 1919 Seattle General Strike influenced nonviolent protests and boycotts by city labourers and Boston Police forces.

**Sources:**


