

The Boston Police Strike of 1919

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In the book *A City In Terror, Calvin Coolidge and the 1919 Boston Police Strike*, author Francis Russell takes an event that he witnessed personally, and delves into the details in order to place it in the proper historical context. He has researched and brought to life an event that has set a precedent for all public unions that has had staying power, and proves to be as controversial today as it was in 1919. Russell enthusiastically gives insight into the real issues and the role played by politics, and the specific politicians in power at the time. Russell not only reports the facts surrounding the police strike, but also carefully suggests possible alternatives to the decisions that were made at the time, that could have prevented the strike, and the strikes consequences on the strikers, city, and future public unions. Although Russell includes as part of his reporting on this event character sketches of many politicians of the day, and pays attention to Coolidge and the role his austere personality played in this event. In reading *A City In Terror, Calvin Coolidge and the 1919 Boston Police Strike* one gains deeper knowledge of the strike's causes and effects, is both overwhelmed and fascinated with the details provided, and is better equipped to explain the strike to students, and design the more in depth lesson that leaves lasting knowledge and skills.

The story of the Boston Police Strike is both famous and complicated. It is packed with race, politics, and a real concern for individual rights, as well as public safety. Boston is a unique city in the way it has evolved racially. Boston was founded by the British, and was heavily dominated by the Brahmins, but with the Irish famine, Boston's population changed, and the Irish took the place they still presently hold today. "A generation after the beaten survivors of the famine years had overrun the brick complacency of Boston; the Irish were emerging to political power" (Russell 34). At the end of the Civil War, the Irish who were living in Boston aspired to be policemen because it meant a level of financial security. This appealed to the Irish sensibility

due to the fact they were coming from a famine, and appreciated hard work and a fair wage. Russell describes the role of the policeman. “Not only did he embody authority, but his pay was at least double that of the average laborer and somewhat more than that of a teller or bookkeeper” (Russell 35). This plush description changed rapidly over the following sixty-five years. The precursor to the Boston Police Strike is World War I, and in times of crisis everyone pulls his or her weight, and the policemen of Boston were no exception. They accepted no pay increase over the course of the war in order to help the war effort. After the war ended however, it became apparent that not only had their pay stayed stagnant, but was below that of the times, and they were having trouble surviving. Additionally, the conditions in which they worked can best be described as deplorable. The hours they worked were inhuman, they had to pay for their uniforms out of their meager salaries, the station houses in which they had to stay were uninhabitable being infested with rats, and lice, and contaminated with mold. Additionally, superior officers mistreated them. They were often forced to run personal errands, such as fetching coffee and newspapers, without reimbursement. The worst part of this mistreatment was the lack of procedure in formally complaining about it in order to correct it. At times they felt as though they were indentured servants. Their personal time off did not even belong to them. They could not leave the state when they were off just in case an emergency broke out and they needed to be called back to work. “We had no freedom, no home life at all. We couldn’t even go to Revere Beach without the captain’s permission” (Russell 50). So although wages are what most people think strikes are about, often times there is much more than meets the eye to the issue, and in the case of the Boston police, money was a small part of their problems. They were seeking out justice, respect, humane treatment, and most importantly, the right to be heard as one

solid unit. The powers that be were in an interesting cast of characters, and they shaped how the events unfolded.

Although Francis Russell describes many people involved in the Boston Police Strike, he pays particular attention to the political figures. Politicians shape public employees worlds, and it was no different in 1919. The major figures of the time include the Police Commissioner Edwin Curtis, Mayor Andrew Peters, and Governor Calvin Coolidge. Each man's personality dictated the decisions made, and ultimately what they did and did not do escalated the actions of the police into a strike that brought the city terrible violence, and created a rule that has impacted every public union since the time of the strike, as well as left a legacy for political figures and how they deal with public unions. Commissioner Curtis had political aspirations his whole life, and had managed to serve sporadically, but had been excluded from serving as the Irish began to take center stage in the politics of Boston. "In his heart he was convinced that Boston would never again be a decent city until the ephemeral Honey Fitzes and Jim Curleys and Dan Coakleys had been replaced by Curtises" (Russell 45). His disdain for the Irish may have had a role in the hard line he took, but overall Curtis was most disturbed by having his authority challenged.

Mayor Peters was an absent leader, who left the running of the city to his corrupt administration, and turned a blind eye to the corruption. He spent a great deal of his time on vacation, and by the time the city was on the verge of crisis, and he decided to act by asking Governor Coolidge to step in, it was too late. Coolidge, who earned the nickname "silent Cal" due to his ability to use the least amount of words to get his point across, seems to be the most impacted by his participation in this strike. His tough stance on the strikers has had a lasting impact, and it propelled him into the limelight and eventually into the Presidency. Coolidge never took an

active role in the steps that led up to the strike and let Curtis run the show with an unwavering support for whatever decisions Curtis made. As always when dealing with history it is hard to tell what may have happened had Coolidge not been so steadfast in his hands off approach. “He had felt from the beginning that the troubles of Boston’s police department were not his” (Russell 67). And so with the battle lines drawn, and personalities captured, Russell describes the cause of the strike, the consequences of the strike, and the lasting legacy of the strike.

For those familiar with the Boston Police Strike of 1919, it is a long standing belief that the cause was that the police were denied the right to unionize, but Russell dispels this myth and makes the situation plain for the reader. The city officials up through the Governor did not in fact object to the police organizing a union, the objection was in affiliating themselves with the American Federation of Labor, led by Sam Gompers, and the politician’s fears and objections were the affiliation with a separate entity would distract the police from doing their job and divide their loyalties between personal gain and duty. To drive the point home, the legislature passed Rule 35 making it against the law to set up a union for public employees that is affiliated with an outside organization. The police conversely felt that the affiliation was important and that they were being denied a voice and a choice that is afforded to every citizen who is not a public employee. The police who were pursuing the union with the AFL, were now violating a law and were being tried for their actions. The situation became tense, and they went back and forth quite a bit for almost two years before the strike actually happened. A citizens committee was set up to mediate between the two sides. They made their recommendation “That the Boston Policemen’s Union should not affiliate or be connected with any labor organization but should maintain its independence and maintain its organization” (Russell 107). The other suggestions

from the group were to adjust the working conditions and wages, set up a grievance process, and that no discrimination should be exacted on union members. The citizens group designed a way for Curtis to save face, while averting a strike. Mayor Peters urged Curtis to accept the terms, but Curtis saw a compromise as a challenge to his authority that would make him ineffective. He decided to accept the terms proposed for the future union, but not in regards to the men presently on trial. This was a severe error in judgment. "He would accept no solution that might impinge on his authority or that might be considered as a pardon of the men on trial" (Russell 111-12). Thus when he disciplined the men on trial with a suspension, the police decided to strike. Curtis had rounded up a volunteer police force just in case the strike came to fruition. The strike took place in September of 1919. The results were disastrous. Riots broke out in the city, and businesses were attacked and looted, gambling in the street took place, pistols were being shot in the street, and mayhem was rampant, but particularly horrible in both South Boston and Scollay Square. Finally, as the violence and rioting worsened, Coolidge called in the National Guard, and after three days of violence, the chaos subsided. "Eight persons died in the strike, twenty-one were wounded, and at least fifty injured. An estimated third of a million dollars' worth of property was stolen or destroyed, most of which, according to some obscure statute, had to be paid for by the city" (Russell 170). People were outraged, and in the aftermath, both Coolidge and Curtis had made the decision to fire all those who had gone on strike. "Featured on Monday's front pages from coast to coast, the telegram confirmed Coolidge as a national figure, a sudden folk hero. One sentence burned itself into the popular awareness: There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, anytime" (Russell 192). The strikers went to the AFL to garner support, but they were instead unpleasantly surprised by the lack of support.

Gompers threw the Boston police under the bus by conceding that although the strike of the BPD benefitted police everywhere that no police force has the right to strike. In the end, the strikers were fired; a new force was hired with all the benefits the strikers had fought for, and a new rule that public employees in general cannot strike because it poses a threat to public safety. This does not mean that public employees have not used the strike to better their causes throughout the years, but it means they can be jailed for such actions. The debate over free speech, rights and individual freedoms still continues, but the legacy of the police strike is unfaltering. Additionally, most police departments as well as other public unions remain independent and not affiliated with outside organizations. “No American city in over half a century has again been threatened by a walkout of its police. This, at least is the legacy of the Boston Police Strike” (Russell 235). In today’s tough media culture, where public unions seem to be the cause of every financial woe this country is currently seeing, it would behoove everyone to remember the deplorable conditions, and the complexities of the 1919 police strike rather than to oversimplify it as has been done, and it is up to history teachers everywhere to teach the facts correctly to rectify the erroneous information reported by the media.

Overall, Francis Russell’s book has more positives than negatives in its reporting of the strike. It is hard to understand the main points of contention through the details, but Francis Russell does an excellent job of bringing the story to life for the reader. He discusses every detail with such enthusiasm, that it keeps the reader of the book interested. The book was extremely readable, and I felt that Russell made it relatable for a reader interested in the topic. Russell begins his book with his own personal account of the event, and to attach history to a specific person is helpful when trying to hook high school students. At the time of the strike he was in

the fourth grade, which puts him at around nine years old, and to witness this event for him was terribly exciting and his memory paints a romantic picture of national guardsmen in the streets and electricity in the air. The only criticism that can be found is that at times his attention to detail can make some aspects of the story a bit convoluted. The only other issue the book presents is the speculation inserted as to what may have happened if different decisions were made, or different people were in the positions of power. Overall though the book was excellent, and did exactly what it set out to do which was tell the story of this historical event.

In teaching the Boston Police Strike, there is much that can be done by incorporating the knowledge Russell provides to a teacher. I would have students read about the strike and summarize what happened on their own first. Then I would have a class discussion about the reality to insure they are getting all of the facts. Next I would have the students participate in a debate with the resolve being Public Employees Should Have the Right to Strike. They will not have a say in the position they must take. It is especially enjoyable watching students prepare a side of a debate with which they disagree. After the students participate in the debate, each one will be sent home to write up their factually supported opinion on the matter. I have found that students get passionate about this issue, and they like being able to sound off on it after they have discussed it at length. I feel that because of Russell's book I now have a better handle on the situation, and can make my students more aware of how the event escalated. The ramifications impact public unions today and as previously mentioned, the media coverage and politicians using the public employee as a scapegoat for all the financial troubles of the nation, makes this topic more interesting to study as the years have passed.

Francis Russell accurately details the Boston Police Strike of 1919 in terms of the importance of politics and the politicians of the day that were in charge. He depicts a city in crisis, and the consequences of the knowledge of the lack of authority presented. Each side's point of view is given fair treatment, and in the end the reader can argue for either side. It is so rare that both sides of a conflict can invoke such a scenario, but Russell writes his account in such a way that it is totally plausible and one has sympathy for both sides. The reading of this book only enhances any teacher's knowledge which in turn creates better informed students, and thus a better informed eventual electorate. This strike has played a significant role in the rights and responsibilities of the public employee, and it is for that reason it should be studied in a serious and complete manner.

Works Cited

Russell, Francis. *A City in Terror Calvin Coolidge and the 1919 Boston Police Strike*. Boston: Beacon Press., 1975. Print