

The Boston Police Strike of 1919

By Brian Hahn and Amanda Heavner

Objectives:

- 1) Students will be able to examine the Boston Police Strike through analysis of primary documents.
- 2) Students will then evaluate the impact through multiple perspectives.
- 3) Upon completion of this lesson, students will recognize the broader connections between this labor strike and other issues during the early 20th century.

State Standards:

8.1.12.B. Synthesize and evaluate historical sources.

- Literal meaning of historical passages
- Different historical perspectives
- Visual data presented in historical evidence

8.1.12.C. Evaluate historical interpretation of events.

- Impact of opinions on the perception of facts
- Issues and problems in the past
- Multiple points of view
- Illustrations in historical stories and sources
- Connections between causes and results
- Author or source of historical narratives' points of view
- Central issue

8.3.12.B. Identify and evaluate primary documents, material artifacts and historic sites important in United States history from 1890 to Present.

- Documents
- 20th Century Writings and Communication

8.3.12.D. Identify and evaluate conflict and cooperation among social groups and organizations in United States history from 1890 to the Present.

- Domestic Instability
- Labor Relations

List of materials and equipment:

The only thing needed for this lesson plan is the primary documents, copied and printed for all students to view. Alternatively, to save trees, there could be just one master copy of each document, seen through a computer projector or overhead projector.

Activities & Teaching Strategies:

Students should be taught a quick overview of the strike, with emphasis placed on causes and historical context. However a lengthy lecture is not necessary. Cooperative learning will provide the bulk of the lesson plan. All information needed for the overview can be found in under the content section of this lesson plan.

Once split into groups of the teachers choosing, various primary documents (attached) should be dispersed. The students will evaluate and interpret the documents. They should work toward answering generalized analytical questions to gain insight which will later be shared with the rest of the class. Questions include, but are not limited to:

- 1) Who is the protagonist as portrayed by this source? Who is the antagonist?
- 2) What does this source *say*? In your opinion, what is the main argument behind this source?
- 3) Identify the bias. What does this bias indicate about the author and/or society as a whole?

After working with these questions within their selected groups, the students will reconvene as a whole for class discussion. They will present their various sources to the class (to do this effectively, all students should get a copy of every source or an overhead projector should make each source visibly available). They will address the question aforementioned and will gain the knowledge of the range of differing views that participants held. During class discussion, emphasis should be placed on the comparing and contrasting of the selected sources, and their viability.

Finally, to assess the students' comprehension and ability to respond objectively to biased sources, a short writing prompt will be assigned. This prompt will ask them to present the diverse arguments held by strikers, participants, citizens, and onlookers. It will also ask them to draw conclusions and create their own justification from the evidence presented in their previous research.

Writing prompt question options:

- 1) If you were a Boston citizen during this time, would you have supported the striking policemen? Why or why not?
- 2) In your opinion, which side was more justified? Explain why.
- 3) Did the policemen have a right to strike? Should employees of public sector jobs have different rights than private sector employees?
- 4) If you were Police Commissioner Curtis, would you have refused to rehire the

strikers? Why or why not?

Depending on time available, this lesson plan can be easily altered to allow for greater or less depth. See the attached annotated bibliography for more source options.

Content (what you, as the teacher, need to know):

On September 9th 1919, the majority of the Boston Police force turned in their badges. This strike was fueled by general grievances (bread and butter labor issues like higher wages, shorter hours, and better working conditions) and the right to form a labor union. They wanted to create a union affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (A.F. of L.). The A. F. of L. was a national group which created organization and representation for workers who wanted bread and butter labor issues. These patrolmen were not receiving what they believed to be a living wage. They were required to pay approximately \$200 for their uniforms and weapons. Furthermore, a normal workday ranged from ten to thirteen hours, and could last as long as seventeen hours straight. In an effort to change their situation, over 1000 policemen struck. Only 600 stayed on duty to enforce the law in all of Boston.¹

Since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, wage laborers in private-sector industries have used unions and strikes to be able to bring about change. However, the Boston policemen were in a public-sector job, working for the city of Boston. This posed new problems for labor unions. While in a private-sector company, employees strike against individual employers, public-sector workers strike against the government. This prevents government from running efficiently and carries the possibility of being interpreted as political opposition or treason.

During the previous world war, the labor force was prevented from organizing mass movements because of the interruption it would cause in wartime production. Subsequently, as WWI ended, the patrolmen of Boston were only a small part of the broad movement toward labor organization.

Though this strike seemed justified in the eyes of the workers, there was a widespread panic and backlash toward these employees. Due to the lack of law enforcement, the city suffered from rampant criminal acts such as public gambling, theft, violence, destruction of property etc. Citizens of Boston reacted primitively through numerous acts of rioting and theft. Government officials were strictly against cooperation with the striking patrolmen. Instead President Woodrow Wilson is famously quoted as calling the strike an "intolerable crime against civilization"². Similarly, Massachusetts Governor Calvin Coolidge stated, "there is no right to strike against

¹ Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities. "Boston Police Vote to Unionize, Precipitating Riots: August 15, 1919." Accessed November 17, 2010. <http://massmoments.org/moment.cfm?mid=237>. See Annotated Bibliography for more details.

² *Public Workers* (2004) p.37. See Annotated Bibliography for more details.

public safety by anybody, anywhere, anytime”³.

To quell the violence and riots, the mayor called in the Massachusetts Guard and town militias. Federal troops were deployed by Governor Coolidge on the third day. In the end, the striking officers did not successfully gain new rights. Instead the Police Commissioner, Edwin Curtis, refused to rehire any of the strikers. In fact, he hired others in their place and gave them the wage raise and benefits that the previous officers had demanded!

Coolidge gained publicity through this event. He became popular among upper and middle class citizens for his actions during the strike. He was subsequently elected Vice President of the US within the following two years.

Assessment options:

The teacher will be able to make informal and formal assessments of the students multiple times. Informally, the teacher will listen to the various groups as they discuss their source and will be able to adjust the lesson or alert the students to possible comprehension issues. Later, verbal assessment can be made through addressing the questions and talking about the historical documents within class discussion.

Finally, at the end of the lesson, students will be asked to draw conclusions from everything they’ve learned. Through the writing prompt, the teacher will be able to make a formal assessment of the level of comprehension achieved.

Annotated Bibliography:

Arno Press and the New York Times. *The Boston Police Strike: Two Reports*. United States: Arno Press, 1971.

This book provides two sometimes contradictory primary source reports on the 1919 strike. The first is Public Document No. 49, the Fourteenth Annual Report of the Police Commissioner for the city of Boston. This covers the year from December 1, 1918 to November 30, 1919. Though the strike is never addressed outright, there are sections of this first report that show the changes made due to unionization. On page 22, Commissioner Curtis calls for a new statute of “respect for the symbol of the law” and on pages 63-65 are a list of complaints and cases taken out against officers, listing many accused of “joining and belonging to an organization outside of the police department in violation of section 19 of rule 35.” The second report is by the Citizen’s Committee, appointed by the Mayor, “to consider the police situation”. In the end, this committee agrees with the commissioner about the strike’s effects and the right (or lack thereof) for police to unionize. Neither of the reports consider the causes, the bread and butter issues. Instead they only look at cost-benefit analysis and take legal issues into consideration.

³ *Public Workers* (1997) p.26. See Annotated Bibliography for more details.

Artist Unknown. *Striking Back!* Cartoon. New York: Press Publishing Company, Published in *Evening World*. 1919. Baruch College, William and Anita Newman Library. http://newman.baruch.cuny.edu/digital/redscare/IMAGES_LG/Striking_Back.gif. (Accessed October 27, 2010).

In this political cartoon, Boston police men were portrayed as the antagonists. Because they struck, Boston struck back, with a long-armed punch to the face, holding a notice that says "you're fired". The policeman looks surprised to receive such a blow, hard enough to knock his baton out of his hands. This cartoon is meant to state that the city of Boston was not outdone by the strike. They had the last word, and the unionized policemen will suffer the consequences of their actions.

Author Unknown. "Wilson Denounces Police Strike That Left Boston a Prey to Thugs." *New York Times*, September 12, 1919. <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive--free/pdf?res=F10712F6385C1B728DDDAB0994D1405B898DF1D3>. (Accessed November 18, 2010)

Written just days after the police strike began, this article published in *The New York Times* summarizes a speech given by President Woodrow Wilson. In the speech, he calls the striking Boston police officers actions "a crime against civilization". He also declares that, because they are "public servants", when officers strike they are to be considered, "men who tried to get what they want by destroying governments". All in all, Wilson does not support the workers' rights or acknowledge their just causes; instead he is ashamed of their actions.

Lyons, Richard. "The Boston Police Strike of 1919." *The New England Quarterly* 20, No. 2 (1947): 147-168, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/361175>. (Accessed September 2, 2010).

This is an article in a journal that describes the events that led up to the police strike and the effects of the strike. Richard Lyons uses both quantitative and qualitative data in his journal. He entails the involvement of historical figures like Samuel Gompers, Calvin Coolidge, Mayor Peters of Boston, and the police commissioner Edwin Curtis. Although written in 1947, the journal *The New England Quarterly* was known to citizens living in this region, and provided a regional interpretation on the events during that time period. Overall, it provides a detailed and excellent summary of the events involved in the Boston Police Strike of 1919.

Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities. "Boston Police Vote to Unionize, Precipitating Riots: August 15, 1919." <http://massmoments.org/moment.cfm?mid=237>. (Accessed November 17, 2010.)

This website provides a concise resource of background knowledge. Organized by Ellen K. Rothman (who has 25 years experience in public history), "Mass Moments" supplies all the information necessary to understand not only *what happened* during historical events but also *why* it happened and *why* it is important to American history. This specific page records not only what took place, but also the Boston Police Strikes' causes, opponents' views, and results and significant effects.

Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities. "Newspaper, Boston Globe, August 16, 1919." Accessed on November 21, 2010. http://massmoments.org/primary_source.cfm?mid=237.

This short article provides a primary source about the unionization of the policemen, prior to their strike less than one month later. It reports on a meeting that the policemen held and the widespread interest that the men had in an A. F. of L. union. It also establishes that Commissioner of Police, Curtis, had made it a known fact that unionization was prohibited and that men could expect to be fired for this action. This source is useful because it demonstrates the build-up to the strike as seen by a Boston reporter.

McCutcheon, John T. *He Gives Aid and Comfort to the Enemies of Society*. Cartoon. Chicago: Published in *Tribune*. 1919. Baruch College, William and Anita Newman Library. http://newman.baruch.cuny.edu/digital/redscare/IMAGES_LG/Aid_and_comfort.gif. (Accessed October 27, 2010).

Another political cartoon against unionization of Boston police is illustrated here. In this cartoon, the striking policeman stands idly by, as all the sinister characters approach him with hands outstretched. These characters are named Violence, Crime, and Disorder. One has an eye mask like those worn by the villains in comic books. Most have menacing facial expressions with wide sly smiles. They all are crowding towards the policeman, excited to form an alliance. What can be concluded by this illustration is that policemen who unionize are friends of the evils of society.

Photographer Unknown. *One of the Few Loyal Policemen on Guard in Boston During the "Reign of Terror"*. Photograph. New York: Underwood & Underwood, 1919. Baruch College, William and Anita Newman Library. http://newman.baruch.cuny.edu/digital/redscare/IMAGES_LG/Boston_police_Strike.jpg. (Accessed October 27, 2010).

This photograph depicts a police officer standing in a storefront with other citizens around him. The male onlookers stand around, hands in pockets, while females gawk. The store is obliterated. Glass and other broken particles litter the floor and doors and cabinets hang open. From this photograph, one can understand the effects of the lawless riots that took place during the September strike. One can also see the chaos that Boston officers must've faced, and what the "loyal" un-unionized officers confronted when others turned in their badges.

Reznek, Daniel A. 1991. "An Innocent Abroad." *American Scholar* 60, No. 3: 441. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost. (Accessed November 21, 2010).

This is a personal account of a scholar who was alive during the 1919 strike. Written jointly with his son, Daniel Reznek, the scholar's life entails a personal account from a diary of the actual Boston Police Strike. The father, Samuel, describes in the diary the sightings of policemen who are not in uniform and are walking off of the job. He also explains how the city has been affected by the mayhem that is happening due to lack of law enforcement. This primary source document shows a perspective of a man who is neither involved in the strike nor involved in the government

acting against the strikers. Though the source is not entirely about the incident that happened in Boston, the insight gained from the recollection on the police strike gives an interpretation not normally accessed.

Slater, Joseph E. 1997. "Public Workers: Labor and the Boston Police Strike of 1919." *Labor History* 38, No. 1: 7-27. *America: History & Life*, EBSCOhost. (Accessed September 2, 2010).

Joseph Slater focuses on the American Federation of Labor and the affiliation between policemen and unionization leading up to the actual strike on September 9th, 1919. A main issue brought up during this time was the cooperation amongst these two groups and whether policemen affiliated with the A. F. of L. would take necessary action towards other A. F. of L. strikes during this time. The government became aware of the intentions of these policemen and called for regulations to prevent the organization of the workers. Angered, the Boston Police force went on strike. The city soon felt the consequences of lack of law enforcement. Governor Calvin Coolidge reacted appropriately for public opinion and addressed the matters extensively. The strike ended, but the unionized police force did not win.

Slater, Joseph E. *Public Workers: Government Employee Unions, the Law, and the State 1900-1962*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.

Though the book as a whole is too broad for this specific topic, many passages within it serve our research purpose well. The first chapter, pages 13-38, is all about the 1919 Boston Police Strike and the precedent it sets for later public-sector unionization. In this chapter, a lengthy explanation details the "who, what, when, where, why" information of the A. F. of L. and the Boston police officers' efforts to organize. Slater focuses on the legal rights of the officers and on previous legal precedents that had been set. He uses this as his first chapter to position his main argument: that the triumphs and tragedies of this strike provide an indication of things to come for public-sector employees.

Questions for Rimby:

1. appendix v. a. bibliography. where do handouts go. both? YES
2. objectives in question form? NO
3. how long do you expect our fact sheet to be? W/E
4. citing inside the factsheet? YEP

Wilson Denounces Police Strike That Left Boston a Prey to Thugs

**In Two Montana Speeches He Warns Radicals That Agitation Must
Be Orderly—Must Accept Treaty or Play Lone Hand,
Grasping Hilt of the Sword.**

HELENA, Mon., Sept. 11.—President Wilson referred in his speech here tonight to controversies resulting from police strikes in the East and denounced the action of the Boston police as “a crime against civilization.”

The text of the President's reference to the Boston police strike follows:

“I want to say this, that a strike of the policemen of a great city, leaving that city at the mercy of an army of thugs, is a crime against civilization.”

“In my judgment the obligation of a policeman is as sacred and direct as the obligation of a soldier. He is a public servant, not a private employe, and the whole honor of the community is in his hands. He has no right to prefer any private advantage to the public safety.”

“I hope that that lesson will be burned in so that it will never again be forgotten, because the pride of America is that it can exercise self-control.”

In the course of his address the President said, referring to “radicalism,” that the men who tried to get what they wanted by destroying Governments would themselves be destroyed.

The President also asserted that no one could kill government by killing those who conducted government.

He expressed his “shame” over the recent race riots in this country.

The New York Times

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found at: [http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?](http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=5&E10712737564B728DDAR0094D1)

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Copyrighted, 1919, by John T. McCutcheon.

HE GIVES AID AND COMFORT TO THE ENEMIES OF SOCIETY.

—McCutcheon in the *Chicago Tribune*.



Copyrighted by the Press Publishing Company, New York.

STRIKING BACK!

—Cassel in the *New York Evening World*.



Copyrighted by Underwood & Lothrop, New York

ONE OF THE FEW Loyal POLICEMEN ON GUARD IN BOSTON DURING THE "REIGN OF TERROR"

MEMOIR

For this source,
the information
pertaining to the Boston
Police Strike, is found
in the boxes:

An Innocent Abroad

My Father's Diary

DANIEL A. REZNECK

My father, Samuel Rezneck, was a professor of history at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. He died in 1983. I recently discovered a diary he kept while traveling on a Harvard fellowship in the years 1919-20, some seventy years ago. It now has the dual character of an artifact from a vanished world and an uncanny forecast of things that took place in the intervening years.

My father came to the United States from Eastern Europe in 1908, at the age of eleven, speaking no English. His family settled in Fall River, Massachusetts, where he attended high school and received a scholarship to Harvard in 1915. At Harvard he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in his junior year and came under the intellectual influence of a gifted teacher—Harold J. Laski.

Laski, an Englishman who had come to Harvard in 1916, was only a few years older than his students, but in a short time he made a distinguished reputation for himself. He became a friend of Felix Frankfurter, then a professor at the Harvard Law School. Frankfurter introduced him to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who was more than fifty years his senior. Laski began a warm friendship and correspondence with the Justice that lasted until Holmes died.

Laski was a gadfly at Harvard, beloved by his students but reviled by some for his radicalism. He was a theorist of pluralism and an opponent of statism while at Harvard, publishing *Authority in the Modern State* in

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1919. He became sympathetic with the cause of labor and, later in his career, turned to Marxism in the economic and political crisis of the 1930s. He became chairman of the British Labor Party and an intellectual leader of British socialism.

Upon graduation from Harvard College in 1919, my father received a traveling fellowship. He left for England in September 1919, armed with letters of introduction from Laski to some of the great names in the British academic world, particularly the group at the London School of Economics. The diary begins shortly before his departure from Boston during a memorable event in the city's history—the Boston police strike. He observed the strike at firsthand and wrote in the diary for September 9, 1919:

The policemen struck today at 6:00 in the afternoon. It was a peculiar sight to see many of them going home half dressed in civilian garb, with their uniforms and helmets under their arm. Tomorrow we shall see what a city without police protection and traffic guidance looks like. The significance of this strike is greater than that of any other recent one. It attests to the instability of the present order. It requires only the collapse of the military power to have it crumble in the dust. Then what?

The next day, September 10, was the peak of the strike. The day culminated in Governor Calvin Coolidge's calling out the Massachusetts State Guard. Coolidge later made the statement that was to carry him to the vice-presidency in 1920 (and then to the presidency three years later): "There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time."

As my father's diary recounts the events of that day:

As a parting gift Boston has left me with a deep impression of a city in the throes of anarchy. True to their word, the policemen struck last night, and left the city unprotected for the night against the rowdyism of a populace let loose from all restraint.

The results of the night made a wonderful sight this morning. Stores by the score in all parts of the city had been broken into and wrecked, and presented a deplorable appearance in the morning with their shattered windows and disordered goods. Discount the newspaper accounts of the night's doings 90%, and you will still have sensational proof of the thinness of the veneer of our civilization, and of the inherent viciousness of even our ordinary man. All day long today the city was in an uproar. Gambling proceeded openly on all the streets—and whiskey was sold freely everywhere in spite of all prohibition.

My father's ship sailed for England the next day, leaving Boston in a "critical" state. "Militia and mob were engaging in open conflict, and the toll for the first clash was three dead and fifteen wounded." Harvard did not remain untouched by the disorders. Students volunteered as peace keepers or strike-breakers, depending on one's perspective. Laski, a vocal supporter of the strikers, most of them Irish and of the working-class, was denounced by many alumni, who called for his dismissal. President Lowell stood firm against these pressures. He was reported to have said: "If the overseers ask for Laski's resignation, they will get mine." But Laski left Harvard forever the next year.

The Laski connection, however controversial at Harvard, was a credit to my father in London. Through Laski, my father met Sidney Webb, founder with his wife, Beatrice, of the London School of Economics and pillar of the British Fabian Society. He dined with R. H. Tawney, the great economic historian and author in 1920 of *The Acquisitive Society* and later of *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. He attended lectures at the London School by Graham Wallas (whose most famous work was *The Great Society*), G. D. H. Cole, and L. T. Hobhouse. It was in Hobhouse's class that my father had an "impromptu introduction" to Felix Frankfurter's sister, when he happened to sit beside her. He learned that she was "Radcliffe '17 and has

taken a special course in factory management at Bryn Mawr, so that by all accounts she is no chicken and she looks all of 24-25 though not at all disagreeable in appearance." This from someone who was himself all of twenty-two.

London in that first year after the war was a cultural and intellectual feast for a young American. My father attended a lecture by George Bernard Shaw, who reminded him of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts in both physical appearance and quickness of manner—a comparison that I suspect each man would have disavowed. Of Shaw he wrote in the diary:

He spoke presumably on Socialism and Ireland. While there was a lot about Ireland in his talk, there was little about Socialism. In fact, it was characteristically Shavian, embracing everything. Shaw has a facility of speech almost superhuman. And his wit is sparkling. It makes all his interest, because of serious common sense there is very little in him.

G. D. H. Cole spoke one evening on his favorite topic, Guild Socialism. My father commented:

He was disillusioning, and disclosed the flaws in his own case. His argument has been modified since he wrote his book. He has come to believe in the necessity of a catastrophic change from the capitalistic to the socialistic state, and he decried any dealing or compromising with capitalism. He, moreover, admitted that it was only a conscious minority which was aware of the benefits of Guild Socialism. It was, therefore, for this minority to assume the dictatorship and to force the inert masses into acquiescence and possibly into a later approval.

My father also attended talks by H. G. Wells and Bertrand Russell. He was particularly taken with Russell, whose opposition to the war had "stirred up so much opposition. He is a youngish looking man apparently of excellent health to judge from his ruddy complexion." (An accurate assessment, since Russell lived almost to the age of one hundred.) "His full head of gray hair looks rather odd on a man so young as he appears to be. What is most remarkable about this man is his extremely fluent and refined diction. He can make the most abstruse subject lucid by his easy command of language."

And there was much more. He heard Nellie