

The Boston Police Strike

In 1919, there was a general agreement that the Boston policemen had a great deal to complain about. They disliked their hours, working conditions and most importantly, their salary. After getting a raise in 1913, the policemen had asked for another raise in 1917 to compensate for the high wartime inflation. By the time the officers had finally received that raise, the buying power of that extra money had gone down so low that the policemen were still having problems making ends meet. Another point of struggle was the long hours the officers were forced to work, including a night in the station house each week and the special details. Lastly, the police force objected to the conditions that they were forced to work in. Men had to sleep in beds infested with all sorts of bugs and on the soiled sheets that were left over from the previous occupants. To voice their complaints, the policemen turned to the Boston Social Club, a fraternal organization founded by Police Commissioner Stephen O'Meara in 1906.

On the other end of the negotiating table sat Police Commissioner Edwin U. Curtis. Although Curtis considered himself to be sympathetic to the policemen's demands, he refused to deal with the union. As the days went on, the situation grew tenser. On August 26 and 29, Curtis fired 19 workers for their union activity.

This caused massive outrage among the workers and on Tuesday, September 9, the strike began with three-fourths of the force walking out. Realizing that the police force was gone, some of Boston's residents began to commit small crimes. This eventually escalated into massive riots that continued until 1:30 in the morning. The following day, the small fraction of the police force had much difficulty maintaining the order but by that night the National Guard was deployed and the violence slowly came to a stop over the following couple of days.

The nation responded to the strike with horror. Many Americans believed that this incident was related to Bolshevism or even begun by the Bolsheviks. Nevertheless, as the publicity of this event died down, the Boston Police force was defeated. As WWI was coming to a close, Curtis was able to hire a new force from the ranks of young World War I veterans. And by December 13, the commissioner had gotten the new force up to its desired strength.