

Nineteen Nineteen: The Boston Police Strike
in the Context of American Labor

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by
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This portion of my website presents "Nineteen Nineteen: The Boston Police Strike in the Context of American Labor." I wrote this essay in the spring of 1992 as my undergraduate honors thesis. I hope that the intervening ten years and my graduate education have helped me produce more sophisticated, better written works of history. But since I posted this thesis on-line several years ago, several websites have linked to the essay as a useful resource on the strike, labor history, and Calvin Coolidge. I therefore intend to keep it on the Web indefinitely.

Aside from some minor corrections, this version is identical to the one I submitted, now on file at the Harvard Depository. The suggested citation is, Zachary Moses Schrag, "Nineteen Nineteen: The Boston Police Strike in the Context of American Labor" (A.B. thesis, Harvard University, 1992).

Author's note, March 2012

In the spring of 2011, my website, www.schrag.info, was maliciously hacked, leading me to reorganize that site as historyprofessor.org and zacharyschrag.com. As part of the reorganization, and in honor of the twentieth anniversary of this document's completion, I have replaced the HTML version of the thesis—created in 1997—with the PDF you are now reading, which I hope is a more convenient format. At some point I may post the old html files as well.

This document has some minor corrections from the Harvard Depository version and may have differing pagination. I have tried to preserve the footnote numbering from earlier versions.

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“Just what lay behind that event I was never able to learn.”

--Calvin Coolidge
Autobiography

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

At 5:45 p.m. on Tuesday, September 9, 1919, at the beginning of the evening shift, 1,117 Boston policemen stopped work. The proximate cause of this walkout was a labor dispute that had been brewing for a little over a month, concerning the policemen's attempt to form a union affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. The immediate consequence was about 48 hours of looting and rioting in downtown Boston and South Boston plus sporadic violence over the next few days. The strike occupies a place of medium to high obscurity in American history. If the average American has heard of it, he probably learned about the strike either as the event which launched Calvin Coolidge into national prominence and eventually made him President, or as a milestone in public-sector unionism, an issue which recently gained attention during the 1983 strike of air-traffic controllers. Beyond these two claims to fame, the strike fascinates many because of its suggestion that the difference between what we call "civilization" and a reversion to a Hobbesian brutality is indeed a thin blue line.

This essay is about none of these issues. Of course, if one is interested in the history of public-sector unionism or the career of Calvin Coolidge, it helps to have as deep an understanding of the strike as possible, and this essay seeks to enlarge that understanding beyond the level of current scholarship on the subject. Although I will discuss the effects of the strike, and the long-term history of the Boston police, I am primarily interested in the strike itself, and the reasons it developed as it did. I will begin with the discontented policemen and ask why they chose the tactics they did in their attempt to better their lives. I will look at the actions of the government officials whose task it was to respond to the challenges of the police force and ask why these officials made the decisions they did, before and during the strike. And I will examine the behavior of organized

labor on the local and national levels, again attempting to explain the crucial decisions that shaped the outcome of the strike. And to explain requires context.

A Very Short History of the Boston Police Strike

This essay is not intended to be a complete, chronological history of the strike. That task has been more or less accomplished by Frederick Manuel Koss's thorough, if limited in scope, dissertation on the subject and by Francis Russell's book, *A City in Terror*, a lively, if not always entirely credible, narrative. Nevertheless, it will be necessary to provide a brief chronological account of the events of August and September 1919--the two months during which all the key events of the strike took place--because the reader is not expected to be familiar with them.¹

There was in 1919 and is today a general consensus that the Boston policemen of 1919 had a great deal about which to complain.² Their substantive grievances fell into three categories: hours, and working conditions, and most importantly pay. After getting a raise in 1913, the policemen had asked for another raise in 1917 to compensate for the high wartime inflation. In the summer of 1918, they asked for a \$200 increase in the patrolmen's annual salary, which was then \$1,200. By the time that raise was finally granted in May 1919, steady inflation had eroded buying power so that even with the raise, the policemen were still having difficulty making ends meet. Another point of

¹Of course, the choice of those two months as significant enough to serve as an introduction while events before and after are relegated to the analytical chapters or ignored altogether is a subjective decision by the author and in an ideal world would be analyzed itself. For example, one might argue that any account of the strike must begin with Police Commissioner Curtis's appointment in December 1918, or even earlier. But for my purposes these months include all the events which I most want to explain. The facts in this summary can be found in many secondary accounts of the strike or by examining the original newspaper record. In preparing this summary I have relied on Francis Russell, *A City in Terror* (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), which, for all its deficiencies, is both the best-written history of the strike and the most convenient source for reference.

²Even the policemen's chief enemy, Police Commissioner Edwin Curtis, was to argue on the grounds of affiliation, ceding the point that the police had legitimate grievances about pay and conditions. The obvious quotation from W. S. Gilbert has been made by an earlier author, so I will not repeat it.

contention was the long hours the men were forced to work, including special details and a night in the station house each week. Finally, the men objected to the conditions under which they worked, particularly the crowded decrepitude of the station houses. Men had to sleep in beds infested with bedbugs and cockroaches and on the soiled sheets left over from the previous occupant.³ The men's chosen means to voice their complaints was the Boston Social Club, a fraternal organization founded by Police Commissioner Stephen O'Meara in 1906.

On the opposite side of the negotiating table was Police Commissioner Edwin U. Curtis. Curtis had been commissioner since December 1918, when O'Meara, his predecessor, had died. (Prior to O'Meara's appointment in 1906, the police department had been administered by a three-member commission.) Since 1885, police commissioners had been appointed and removed not by the mayor, but by the governor of the Commonwealth, who in 1919 was a laconic Republican named Calvin Coolidge. Though the mayor of Boston helped determine the police department's annual budget, he could not override a decision by the commissioner. Curtis believed himself to be sympathetic to the policemen's demands,⁴ but he refused to deal with the Social Club and instead established a Grievance Committee comprised of men from each station.

On August 9, the policemen, through the Social Club, applied for a charter from the American Federation of Labor. Their application was accepted and on the fifteenth they formed Local 16, 807 of the A.F. of L.: the Boston Policemen's Union. On July 29, Curtis had responded to the rumor that the police were seeking a union, by issuing a statement detailing O'Meara's objection to a police

³A detailed list of the men's grievances was made public by Police Union President John McInnes shortly after the beginning of the strike. His statement may be found in the *Boston Labor World*, September 13, 1919, 2.

⁴*Fourteenth Annual Report of the Police Commissioner for the City of Boston, Year Ending November 30, 1919* (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Co., 1920)

union and proclaiming his own. On August 11, he followed this up with an amendment to Rule 35 of the department's Rules and Regulations, barring the policemen from forming any organization within the department with ties to an outside group, except for veterans' groups. This order initiated the showdown that led to the strike: the policemen's insistence on a union clashed with Curtis's demand for obedience.

As the weeks passed, the situation grew tenser. On August 26 and 29, Curtis tried 19 policemen, including the president and other officers of the union, for violation of his amendment to Rule 35. Meanwhile, former police superintendent William Pierce began recruiting a volunteer police force as insurance against a strike. As discussed in Chapter 2, Boston Mayor Andrew J. Peters attempted to effect a settlement between the two sides by forming a Citizens's Committee composed of prominent residents of Boston and its suburbs. This committee drafted a compromise, which Curtis rejected. Saying that the compromise had nothing to do with his legal obligation to punish violators of the anti-union clause of Rule 35, Curtis announced the suspension of the 19 officers he had tried, on Monday, September 8. That evening, the Policemen's Union voted to protest the suspensions by striking at evening roll call the next day: Tuesday, September 9.

The strike took place as scheduled, and nearly three-fourths of the force walked out. As Boston residents absorbed the reality of the policemen's absence, some of the more mischievous among them took the opportunity to engage in petty crimes, such as gambling in public. These crimes grew more serious as the evening advanced, and crowds coalesced in downtown Boston. At about 8 p.m., the crowd broke a cigar-store window and removed the merchandise. This started a frenzy of looting, which swarmed back and forth over Hanover and Washington Streets. Similar violence erupted in South Boston. Checked only by a small

coalition of non-striking Boston police, Metropolitan police, and a few private watchmen, the riots continued until about 1:30 a.m.

On Wednesday, Peters and Coolidge together mobilized the entire Massachusetts State Guard, while Pierce readied his volunteers. That day, the volunteers had difficulty maintaining order, but by evening the Guard was deployed. Nevertheless, there were several more instances of violence, some fatal, especially in South Boston. By Thursday, the State Guard had pretty much restored order, although there were a few more deaths, and shooting continued on Friday and Saturday. In the process of pacifying the city, the Guard forces killed five residents and wounded several others. Three more were killed by civilians, and dozens were injured and wounded. The riots also destroyed hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of property.⁵

As described in Chapter 3, the nation responded to the events in Boston with shock and horror. In addition to feeling repulsion at the violence that had swept the city, many Americans--particularly newspaper editorial writers--saw the strike as a manifestation of what they called "Bolshevism." In Boston, the immediate concern was not so much whether a red flag would be raised over the State House but whether the city's unions would go on strike in support of the police, touching off an even greater crisis than the one the city had endured. This threat essentially dissolved by September 21. Meanwhile, in the face of public disapproval of their actions and the uncompromising stance of Curtis and Coolidge, the police began considering cutting their losses and returning to work. But when American Federation of Labor President Samuel Gompers sent a telegram to Governor Coolidge asking that the men be reinstated and their grievances negotiated later, he was rebuffed on September 14 by Coolidge's

⁵Russell, *City in Terror*, 170.

immediately famous reply that “there is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time.”

The policemen’s defeat came when Curtis succeeded in hiring a new force from the ranks of young World War veterans. By December 13, the commissioner had gotten the new force up to its desired strength. Eight days later, the last State Guard unit was dismissed, bringing Boston back to some semblance of “normalcy.” Beyond that December, there were ripples of consequences: the rise of Coolidge to the Vice Presidency and Presidency, the futile attempts of the policemen to get re-hired, and decades in which police unions were unthinkable in this country.

The Historiography of the Boston Police Strike

Although the Boston Police Strike has not inspired major historians to vie with each other to re-interpret it, the small set of works about the strike vary significantly among themselves. The essential differences among these accounts are not ideological, in the sense of Marxist versus non-Marxist interpretations, though the level of sympathy for the policemen varies considerably. Nor do the primary sources used by the authors vary widely, though there is some variance.⁶

⁶Boston’s newspapers are the greatest source of primary material on the strike. In 1919, Boston had seven dailies, if one includes the *Christian Science Monitor*, which had a more national focus. While the tendency of these papers to include much information without attribution and their failure to give any background information or to run feature stories with longer focuses can frustrate a reader used to today’s dailies, at least they had the habit of quoting proclamations by politicians and labor leaders at length, if not in full. In addition to the dailies, the Boston Central Labor Union published the *Boston Labor World*, which was distributed to members of unions which chose to subscribe.

Government documents are also important, especially the report of the Storrow Committee, which includes several communications and proclamations as appendices. Besides these fundamental sources, numerous memoirs, letters, manuscript collections, and, for previous researchers, interviews provide a wealth of information about the strike. This essay relies heavily on secondary sources, hoping to contribute to the analytical rather than documentary understanding of events. Almost by accident it has ended up using sources not used before, but it rests on the incomplete foundation of previous scholarship.

As far as I know, this essay is the first account of the Boston Police Strike to make use of the *Boston Labor World*, which can be found in a microfilm edition at the Boston Public Library. The number of citations to the *Labor World* may exaggerate its value, since in many cases it merely reported in a more convenient and slightly more trustworthy fashion information that could otherwise have been obtained from the conservative dailies. On the other hand, there are instances--especially in Chapters 2 and 4--when the *Labor World's* articles and editorials provided invaluable insight into the perspective of organized labor on the police situation.

Rather, the essential distinction between one account and another is the orientation, the angle of approach to the strike. Some accounts are written from the perspective of Calvin Coolidge, others from that of the policemen. This essay does not stick close to any one participant or group of participants in the strike. Instead, it seeks to add another perspective by fitting the strike into the history of organized labor in North America and the position of organized labor--moderate, radical, or somewhere in the middle--in August 1919.

Historians of the Boston Police Strike emphasize various themes as they write about this complex event. The first theme is Calvin Coolidge, who as one of 41 American presidents attracts a fair amount of attention simply for having held the nation's highest office. Because Coolidge's rise to the White House was indisputably a direct result of the Boston Police Strike, those writing articles and full-length biographies of Coolidge must confront the issue of the strike. In many cases, this comes down to a thumbs-up, thumbs-down verdict on Coolidge's conduct, a verdict which may be appealed. In 1938 and 1940, Mark Allen White and Claude M. Fuess published adulatory biographies confirming Coolidge's heroism during the strike.⁷ Later writers, notably Francis Russell, have questioned the extent to which Coolidge deserved the sparkling evaluation that won him the presidency.⁸ Most recently, Thomas B. Silver has attempted to

Beyond the *Labor World*, I relied on the *Boston Herald* and the *Boston Evening Transcript* for primary material, largely on the advice of the writings of Frederick Koss (who likes the *Herald*) and Richard Marchick (who relies on the *Transcript*). Given the similarity of information provided by these two papers, I doubt very strongly that I would have had a very different impression of the strike had I chosen instead to read the *Post* (the favorite of Howard Zibel).

⁷Mark Allen White, *A Puritan in Babylon: The Story of Calvin Coolidge* (1938. Reprint. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973). Claude M. Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge: Man from Vermont* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1940).

⁸Francis Russell, "The Strike That Made a President," *American Heritage* 14, no. 6 (October 1963):44-47, 90-94, and *City in Terror* (New York: Viking, 1975).

restore the gleam of Coolidge's armor in the face of such detractors as the skeptical Donald R. McCoy.⁹

Early in this century a group of historians blamed the Civil War on a "blundering generation." Similarly, some investigators of the Boston Police Strike have tended to emphasize the combination of mistakes, by Coolidge, Peters, Curtis, labor leaders, and policemen, that was necessary for the disaster to occur. The best example of this perspective comes from Randolph Bartlett, who comes right out and says, "the strike was an American tragedy of blunders."¹⁰ Richard Lyons, writing twelve years later, echoes this view, though less explicitly. He sprinkles praise and blame around, suggesting that each major figure in the strike could have behaved better or worse.¹¹

Robert K. Murray's *Red Scare*, published in 1955 during the height of the McCarthy era, provides a broader view.¹² Although he only devotes one chapter to the strike, Murray is perhaps the most influential interpreter of the event, for his emphasis on the fear of radicalism has been repeated by most subsequent commentators. In his argument, the strike was just one in a series of events and fears that contributed to the Red Scare, what Murray calls the "national hysteria" of 1919. Other events he includes are the founding of communist parties in the United States, the letter bomb campaign against prominent politicians, and the Seattle General Strike. Murray did a great service by putting the Boston Police Strike in the context of the fear of radicalism, and almost every subsequent author--myself included--has acknowledged the tremendous value of his work by

⁹Thomas B. Silver, *Coolidge and the Historians* (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1982). Donald R. McCoy, *Calvin Coolidge: The Quiet President* (1967. Reprint. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1968).

¹⁰"Anarchy in Boston," *American Mercury* 36, no. 144 (December, 1935), 456.

¹¹"The Boston Police Strike of 1919," *New England Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (June 1947), 147.

¹²*Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920* (1955. Reprint. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980)

quoting from it extensively. *Red Scare* is so well-written and persuasive that it is very easy to accept it uncritically, but there are two serious pitfalls in doing so.

First, Murray's goal in his chapter on the strike is not so much to explain the origins of the strike as to explain how it contributed to the national feeling--as expressed in newspapers, statements by public officials, and voter preferences. He is more interested in the effects of the strike than in its causes, which is not true for this essay, or most of the other accounts of the strike. Other authors, having read Murray, have tended to take for granted that the national mood affected the strike, whereas Murray only argues that the strike affected the national mood. Of course, there were certainly some instances in the strike (such as Gompers's waffling) when public opinion did affect events, but too many accounts of the strike assume that "public opinion" (often an historian's unacceptable shorthand for newspaper editorials) had some effect, without explaining the mechanism by which it could have. Second, once *a* solid context for an event is offered, it is too easy to think that it is *the* context. But no one coherent set of previous events can explain the strike, as will be elaborated below.

Perhaps the most thorough work on the events of the strike is Frederick Manuel Koss's Ph.D. dissertation, "The Boston Police Strike of 1919."¹³ The heart of Koss's work is the *Boston Herald*, which he cites extensively, but he brings in many primary sources, including many government documents and interviews he conducted with participants in the strike and children of deceased participants. From these documents he creates a massive collection of facts in chronological order. He has no stated ideological or interpretive position, and presents only a two-page introduction about the significance of the strike before plunging in to the policemen's grievances. Koss sees his role as less of an

¹³Frederick Manuel Koss, "The Boston Police Strike" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1960)

interpreter than a judge; in fact, he calls his concluding chapter “Judgments,” resembling the Coolidge biographers who try to grade the performance of everyone involved. This chapter is in many ways an odd appendage to the rest of the text, for only here does he hint at a context outside of Boston. At the very end of this final chapter, he discusses the general labor unrest of 1919, the Seattle General Strike, and other events of the time. But his goal in doing so is limited to explaining why the public (both newspapers and voters) lauded Coolidge and reviled the police; he does not attempt to suggest that the “climate”¹⁴ of the times had any greater effect than that. Essentially Koss’s work remains the best source on events in Boston in August and September 1919, but he fails to put those events in a larger context.

Francis Russell’s *City in Terror*, the only book written exclusively about the Boston Police Strike, is often the the only account read by researchers interested in the strike.¹⁵ Russell takes a broader view of the strike than Koss. He traces the history of the Boston police department back to the seventeenth century, and provides excellent background information on local politics of the time. Russell’s primary context is Boston, though even in this light he fails to delve into the history of organized labor in that city, either of individual unions or the Boston Central Labor Union (B.C.L.U.). He does mention the presence of radical labor in the United States in 1919, but, as is noted in Chapter 3, he does not do a very good job gauging the impact of American radicalism on the strike.¹⁶

¹⁴“Climate” is an unfortunate term to describe the nation’s mood in 1919, which fluctuated as rapidly as the weather.

¹⁵*City in Terror*, (New York: Viking, 1975). Jonathan Randall White notes that studies of police administration and unionism tend to refer to Russell for information on the strike, and this confirms my own experience in glancing at books on police unionism. White, *A Triumph of Bureaucracy: The Boston Police Strike and the Ideological Origins of the American Police Structure* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1982),48.

¹⁶Russell’s failure to use footnotes is appalling. Such an omission may be acceptable in a book that is intended to be just a popular account of a subject that has been thoroughly examined by scholars, but when the only book on a subject lacks footnotes it is a serious obstacle to subsequent scholarship.

Jonathan Randall White's *Triumph of Bureaucracy: The Boston Police Strike and the Ideological Origins of the American Police Structure* explains the strike largely in terms of Progressivism and the restructuring of police departments that took place as part of that movement. White's argument is that the policemen's grievances were the result of reforms which were in turn part of a nationwide movement toward more centralized, bureaucratized police administration structures. He compares the Boston Police Department with the New York City police and the Pennsylvania state police to show that power was being centralized in many police departments during the Progressive Era, and that Curtis's position as an essentially autocratic administrator who could not tolerate a police union was part of a larger trend. He also hints about the long-term effects of the Boston strike on police administration. This argument is fine as far as it goes, and it certainly adds an important angle to our understanding of the strike. But White is on shakier ground when he tries to evaluate the importance of events outside of the police history about which he is expert. For example, he does not go into depth about the effects of the "national hysteria" which he describes (amazingly, he does not seem to have read Murray), but his argument that this hysteria seriously affected decisions during the strike appears to be *post hoc ergo propter hoc* reasoning. White's essential contribution, placing the police crisis in the context of Progressivism, is obscured by his attempts to fit the strike into less appropriate contexts as well.

Thus, we have four main contexts in which the Boston Police Strike has been studied. Some accounts, including Frederick Manuel Koss's impressive narrative, diminish the role of context and stick to the events of August and September without much in the way of background. Coolidge's biographers see it as an important event in Calvin Coolidge's career. Robert Murray sees the strike as one of the causes of the Red Scare; it is well to remember that he does not

claim that it was an effect of the Red Scare. Francis Russell explains the strike primarily as an event in Boston history, though he skillfully alludes to other views. Jonathan Randall White depicts the strike as an event in the history of police administration in the United States. Each of these contexts is valid, and a full understanding of the strike would have to include all of them.

But all of these accounts, from the contemporary newspapers to Jonathan Randall White's recent dissertation, fail to locate the strike in what must be considered one of the most important--perhaps the most important--context of all: the position of American labor, both radical and moderate, in 1919, and the tactics for controlling labor that had been developed by governments in response. When all else is stripped away, the Boston Police Strike was first and foremost not an event in Massachusetts politics, nor a milestone in the development of American police administration. In its very essence, the strike and the events preceding it were a labor dispute, and a labor dispute that took place in that unique year: 1919. To understand why that dispute took the course it did, it is necessary to understand what a labor dispute meant to Americans in 1919. One cannot create a model of a typical conflict or a typical strike; even if such a task were possible for another period, 1919 was so volatile a year that its events defy generalization. Instead, I will suggest some of the events of the preceding decades that the actors in the Boston police crisis recalled as they planned their strategies. In some cases, different actors, such as the policemen and their commissioner, may have recalled different events as they watched the Boston situation unfold. In other cases, two sets of actors may have been thinking of the same events, but drew opposite lessons from them, since the "lesson" of an event is always subjective. To see how the decision of a person or group can be informed by previous events or customs--as happened repeatedly during the Boston strike--it will be helpful to examine the work of two social theorists: Max Weber and Clifford Geertz.

Thick Description

Good historical writing is not necessarily explanatory. The initial task in the study of any historical phenomenon is simple description, a task which in the case of the Boston Police Strike has been ably accomplished by Frederick Manuel Koss. Once the event has been described, the historian must ask why it worked itself out the way it did, and attempt to deduce the causes of the event in question. The goal of this essay is to explain events and decisions. To do so, it will seek to put those events and decisions in their proper context or contexts.

This end and means correspond closely to the guidelines for social scientists set forth by Max Weber in his book, *Economy and Society*, and his essay, “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy.”¹⁷ Weber’s ideal of history is explanatory history. He writes, “History. . . is oriented to the causal analysis and explanation of individual actions, structures, and personalities possessing cultural significance.”¹⁸ He cautions against accepting a materialist interpretation of history for its own sake, arguing that such an interpretation’s “specific significance consists only in the fact that we not only *observe* human conduct but can and desire to understand it.”¹⁹ For Weber, observation is not enough; understanding is the goal.

It is, however, impossible to explain directly human behavior. Even in cases where people left statements or memoirs stating their reasons for making the choices they made, such statements may either deliberately or unintentionally distort the real motivations of the time. And in most cases, people fail to leave

¹⁷Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Vol. I, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), and “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy” in Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. and eds. Edward A Shils and Henry A. Finch (New York: The Free Press, 1949).

¹⁸*Economy and Society*, 19.

¹⁹“Objectivity,” 83.

specific explanations for each action. Weber suggests a very sound method for overcoming the impossibility of reading the mind of an historical figure.

For purposes of a typological scientific analysis it is convenient to treat all irrational, affectually determined elements of behavior as factors of deviation from a conceptually pure type of rational action. . . .
 . . . It is naturally not legitimate to interpret this procedure as involving a rationalistic bias of sociology, but only as a methodological device. It certainly does not involve a belief in the actual predominance of rational elements in human life, for on the question of how far this predominance does or does not exist, nothing whatever has been said.²⁰

By calculating what the rational course of action would be in a given circumstance, one can often account for a good majority of decisions. I have not ignored the importance of emotion in this essay; certainly there were many instances during the strike when emotional momentum overrode rational calculation and caused people to act in a manner contrary to their own self-interest. But in general I try to show that the context surrounding the Boston police crisis made logical many decisions that might be labelled irrational were they examined without background information.

Having accepted a model that postulates reason as the primary, but not sole, force behind social action, it is still necessary to appreciate that even rational thought takes into account subjective evaluations. Each social actor assigns to his actions what Weber calls “meaning,” the personal significance of the action. Weber cautions that in “the empirical sciences of action, such as sociology and history” there is no objectively ‘correct’ meaning or one which is ‘true’ in some metaphysical sense.”²¹ The Boston policemen and the conservative press could attribute very different meanings to the same action without either meaning being false; rather, both meanings would be subjectively correct. The meaning a person assigns to his action is dependent on the *context* of the action. As Weber puts it,

²⁰*Economy and Society*, 6.

²¹*Ibid.*, 4.

“rational understanding of motivation. . . consists in placing the act in an intelligible and more inclusive context of meaning.”²² He provides examples, such as the different contexts that can give meaning to the act of aiming a gun: a firing squad, a battle, a desire for revenge. Thus, to explain human behavior, we must understand the meaning assigned to the behavior by the actors, and to understand meaning, we must understand context.

Generally, this context will not be arbitrary and individual--a union member deciding to support a general strike because it would serve as a convenient excuse to cancel a dreaded family vacation--but will apply to many people. In this sense, explanatory history edges close to anthropology. Clifford Geertz distinguishes the two fields by saying historians examine grander events. “The anthropologist characteristically approaches. . . broader interpretations and more abstract analyses from the direction of exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters,” whereas historians and other social scientists tend to work “in more fateful settings.”²³ This distinction is quite arbitrary when one considers how subjective is the determination of what is “fateful.” Given its relatively minor role in world history, the Boston Police Strike seems to hover between the extremely small matter of the anthropologist and the earthshaking Event of the epic historian. Although an historical event, it remains the story of a relatively small number of people, confined to a small geographic area and taking place in a short segment of time; thus, it is much like the type of event an anthropologist would study.

Geertz appreciates the influence of context on human action: it forms a large part of his notion of “culture.” In his essay outlining a theory of culture, he

²²*Ibid.*, 8.

²³“Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 21.

relates a short series of events that took place in central Morocco in 1912 and points out the incredible complexity contained in an anecdote that takes only one-and-a-half pages to relate.²⁴ Borrowing a term from Gilbert Ryle, he argues that to understand what was going on in the Moroccan sheep-raid he describes the anthropologist must create a “thick description.” As opposed to a “thin description” which merely records observable phenomena, a thick description would include all the social conventions, subjective impressions, and background information necessary to reveal, in Weber’s words, “the causes of [individual events’] being *so* and not *otherwise*.’”²⁵ In Geertz’s example, this description entails the customs, positions, and aspirations of Berbers, Jews, and Frenchmen at a particular moment in Moroccan history. In the case of the Boston Police Strike, a thick description would include, among other elements, the recent history of the American Federation of Labor, the fear of radicalism, and the results of earlier general strikes. By including these factors in this essay and analyzing their effects on the strike, I am hoping to thicken the available description.

The problem with this approach is that it leads to infinite analysis; each component of an event’s context has its own context to be elucidated, and so on *ad infinitum*. Geertz recognizes this problem, complaining that “I have [never] gotten anywhere near the bottom of anything I have ever written about, either in the essays below or elsewhere. Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete.”²⁶ Weber concurs, writing “the number and type of causes which have influenced any given event are always infinite and there is nothing in the things themselves to set some of them apart as alone meriting attention.”²⁷ It is theoretically impossible to write a history of the Boston Police Strike that takes into account

²⁴*Ibid.*, 9.

²⁵“Objectivity,” 72.

²⁶Geertz, “Thick Description,” 29.

²⁷“Objectivity,” 78.

every cause, the complete context, of the situation. I am forced to limit myself to the context that, in Weber's terms, is "interesting and *significant*" to me as a student.²⁸ And for no objective reason, though for reasons that I hope will appeal to others who wish to understand the strike, that context happens to be the history of organized labor in North America in the decades prior to 1919.

My Argument

This essay is neither about the police strike as a whole, nor about its consequences. It is an attempt to clarify three moments in the sequence of events, by examining the meanings that three concepts had for various participants in the dispute. The first concept is "the American Federation of Labor." What was the A.F. of L., what did it mean to the Boston police, and what did it mean to the leaders of Boston's government and business? Second, "Bolshevism," and all its close cousins, such as "anarchism," "communism," and "radicalism." Again, what was the meaning of these terms and ideas for the police, and for their opponents? And finally, the nature and meaning of the "general strike."

The policemen's application for an A.F. of L. charter, the hyperbolic cries of "Bolshevism," and the Boston Central Labor Union's consideration of a general strike are all actions whose "meaning" can only be understood through deep investigation. To say that these events took place is to describe them thinly. To attempt to understand the significance of the events to the actors is to try to achieve a "thick description." Such an understanding demands that we trace these concepts--A.F. of L., Bolshevism, general strike, back to their roots and forward to September 1919. It is a process that requires traveling chronologically back several decades, and geographically at least as far as Seattle, if not Petrograd.

²⁸*Ibid.*

The three body chapters of this essay are not organized by chronological sequence, as would be the case in a conventional historical account, nor, for the most part, by groups of actors. Rather, each chapter deals with a group of actions and decisions which were informed by a particular aspect of the American labor movement as it stood in 1919.

Chapter 2 discusses those decisions which were made in light of the reputation of the American Federation of Labor, the great representative of moderate, non-revolutionary organized labor. On the one hand, I will ask why the dissatisfied Boston police turned to the A.F. of L. as a means to increase their power to negotiate with their employer, the government. I will also ask why the A.F. of L. was willing to join the cause of the police. On the other hand, I will demonstrate that to some leaders of the Boston establishment, notably Mayor Andrew Peters and his negotiator James Storrow, the A.F. of L. represented an approachable, non-threatening negotiating partner. Though both men were reluctant to allow the police to join the A.F. of L., they hoped that the past history of negotiations with the Federation augured an amicable solution to the police crisis. Chapter 3 covers the fear of “Bolshevism” and the Red Scare, whose impact on the Boston Police Strike has been overstated. Nevertheless, some decisions were very clearly affected by the knowledge that many Americans did believe that there was a widespread danger that a social revolution would unseat the American system of government. To understand how this belief affected the strike, I will examine the meaning that “Bolshevism” had for the national press, for Curtis and Coolidge, and for the policemen. Chapter 4 examines decisions made in reference to the series of four general strikes by moderate North American labor organizations in the decades prior to 1919. Many laborers in Boston interpreted these general strikes as victories or at least positive steps for organized labor. Labor leaders and government officials looking at the same

events drew very different lessons from them, an example of how subjective interpretations of history can cause divergent actions based on the same event. In each chapter, various actors are discussed, and the chronological frame of the chapters occasionally overlaps. Although this situation is not ideal, by organizing the material by historical context, rather than by chronology or by group of people, I have given context the emphasis it deserves.

These three themes--the A.F. of L., "Bolshevism," and the general strike are inextricably connected. People in 1919 often either lumped two or three of them together (e.g., calling the Seattle General Strike an example of Bolshevism) or contrasted them (e.g., the A.F. of L.'s insistence that the Federation wanted nothing to do with Bolshevism). Moreover, an in-depth examination of these themes in American labor history will point out the reasons behind some of the key decisions during the strike, especially the policemen's decision to affiliate with the A.F. of L. and then their decision to strike, as well as the Boston Central Labor Union's decision not to call a general strike. By doing so, it will explain aspects of an event that has up to now been only described.

CHAPTER 2: THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR

At the center of the controversy which led to the Boston Police Strike were the policemen's wish to form a union affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (A.F. of L.), and the insistence of forces inside and outside of government that the policemen would not be allowed to do so. This statement immediately raises several questions. First, what perception of the A.F. of L. did the policemen have (in Weber's terms, what *meaning* did they attach to it) that made them want to join it, and made them think they could? Second, what meaning did the A.F. of L. have for those who sat at the other end of the negotiating table from the police, particularly Mayor Andrew J. Peters and his Citizens' Committee? The police believed that affiliation would solve their problems, while the mayor and his supporters considered affiliation intolerable. But despite this difference in interpretations, the policemen and Peters referred to the same set of events when considering the issue of affiliation.

Because they shared a familiarity with the A.F. of L. and because their interpretations of its history were not entirely different, the policemen and Peters could use the men's desire to affiliate as a sort of *lingua franca*. Both knew that the A.F. of L. had been continually active in labor disputes and negotiations since the end of the war ten months earlier. The policemen were primarily concerned with the A.F. of L.'s proven record of success in resolving labor disputes to the benefit of the workers. Mayor Peters and James J. Storrow, chairman of the Citizens' Committee, had negotiated with affiliated unions before, and to them the American Federation of Labor was an old acquaintance which they knew to be moderate in its aims and reasonable in its negotiations. They did not believe or pretend to believe the charges of "Bolshevism" that are discussed in the next chapter. The establishment leaders did note that that the A.F. of L.'s had often achieved success by means of strikes and were wary of allowing any public

employees, particularly policemen, to affiliate. But although their interpretations of past labor disputes were at odds, the two sides did share a common framework: the recent history of actions by the moderate--not radical--A.F. of L. Though their interpretations varied, this shared context contributed to their ability to forge a compromise, the compromise that was undermined by Police Commissioner Edwin U. Curtis. His rigid personality and inexperience with negotiation led him to take an inflexible posture and veto the settlement.

To explain how interpretations of the A.F. of L.'s history affected the actions of Peters, his Citizens' Committee, and the policemen, I will first sketch out the A.F. of L.'s position of proven patriotism and moderation, but also some vulnerability to charges of socialism, in August 1919, when the policemen received their charter. Then I will examine the responses by Mayor Peters and Chairman Storrow to the policemen's decision to affiliate, in light of events in the Federation's history and in their own experience. Finally, I will examine the tangled relationship between the policemen and the A.F. of L., showing how vague and contradictory Federation policies helped lead the men into the fatal decision to strike.

The American Federation of Labor in August 1919

In August 1919, when the policemen received their charter, the American Federation of Labor was an established and powerful force in the country. The A.F. of L., as it was popularly known, was founded in 1886 as an organization to further the interests not of laborers in general, but of craft unions composed of skilled workers.¹ The Federation grew gradually during its first twelve years, but experienced rapid growth beginning in 1898.² Between this point and 1917, when

¹Lewis L. Lorwin, *The American Federation of Labor: History, Policies, and Prospects* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1933), 22.

²*Ibid.*, 59.

the United States entered World War I, the Federation sought not only to secure better wages, hours, and working conditions for its members, but also to achieve respectability in the eyes of the nation as a whole.³ To do so meant disassociating the Federation both from violence, then a common factor in labor disputes, and from socialism, as represented by socialists within the Federation, socialist politicians, and the Industrial Workers of the World. The A.F. of L. gained in power and respectability with the 1912 elections, which put Democrats in both the Congress and the White House.⁴ President Woodrow Wilson, who was quite sympathetic to organized labor,⁵ signed legislation which gave official sanction to labor unions' activities, which previously had been of questionable legality.

World War I marked a rise in the A.F. of L.'s status. Largely due to the personal beliefs of Federation President Samuel Gompers, the Federation leaned away from pacifism and toward support of the Entente Powers as early as 1915.⁶ In March 1917, the deeply patriotic Gompers⁷ led the Executive Council of the Federation in announcing a "declaration of loyalty," which sought to establish a role for organized labor during wartime while assuring the nation that the unions would not undermine the war effort.⁸ After the United States declared war in April 1917, Gompers moved to define that role. Still worried about socialist and pacifist feelings among American labor, Gompers was instrumental in founding and sustaining the American Alliance for Labor and Democracy, which again pledged labor's loyalty to the government.⁹ In recognition of these efforts, President Wilson publicly praised Gompers's "patriotic courage, his large vision,

³*Ibid.*, 104.

⁴*Ibid.*, 117.

⁵*Ibid.*, 136.

⁶*Ibid.*, 141.

⁷Florence Calvert Thorne, *Samuel Gompers--American Statesman* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), 146.

⁸Lorwin, *American Federation of Labor*, 143-45.

⁹*Ibid.*, 150.

and his statesmanlike sense of what has to be done,” thus indicating his approval of the A.F. of L.’s activities.¹⁰ The Administration’s trust in the Federation was again demonstrated in 1918, when the government sent A.F. of L. “labor ambassadors” to Europe via military convoy on a mission to encourage European labor leaders to accept Wilson’s Fourteen Points, rather than the program of Bolshevik Russia, as proper war aims.¹¹

In addition to supporting the war in general, Gompers was active in the efforts of business and labor to prevent industrial disruptions which might hinder the war effort. In 1916, Congress, recognizing that the United States might become involved in the European conflict, had established the Council of National Defense to assure American preparedness.¹² As chairman of the Council’s Committee on Labor, Gompers enjoyed a quasi-official status as representative of organized labor.¹³ But the Council proved ineffective at averting labor disputes, and in 1917 strikes in the lumber, copper, and shipbuilding industries directly hampered war production.¹⁴ After devising and experimenting with various committees and boards, the government eventually created the War Labor Board, composed of representatives of labor, industry, government, and the public. This Board established standards for the hours and conditions of labor and guaranteed the right to organize, in return for a promise by organized labor not to strike during the war.¹⁵ Under this regime of legitimized unionism, union membership increased dramatically during the war.¹⁶ By participating on these boards and putting “aside their roles of organizers and strike

¹⁰Frank L. Grubbs, Jr., *The Struggle for Labor Loyalty: Gompers, the A.F. of L., and the Pacifists, 1917-1920* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1968), 91.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 110.

¹²Philip Taft, *The A.F. of L. in the Time of Gompers*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 343.

¹³*Ibid.*, 348.

¹⁴Lorwin, *American Federation of Labor*, 160.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁶Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Boston: South End Press, 1972), 103.

leaders to become conciliators and mediators,” Gompers and other A.F. of L. leaders attempted to gain the confidence and respect of government and industry, perhaps at some expense to the workers.¹⁷ But these labor leaders may have overestimated the degree to which they had succeeded; when the Armistice was declared, many employers and citizens had yet to be convinced of the value and trustworthiness of organized labor.¹⁸

During the war, the A.F. of L. had risen from an organization whose significant growth was still recent to a semi-official body with the president’s ear that had secured some benefits to its members while safeguarding the national interest. The Federation’s “power and prestige. . . had reached a new high.”¹⁹ But this fairly impressive war record was not enough to protect the Federation from attacks by employers and conservatives after the Armistice, nor was the Federation able to sustain the wartime climate of cooperation between capital and labor. In January of 1919, the Seattle General Strike led many to associate the A.F. of L. with radicalism, a view that is discussed in Chapter 4.²⁰ But even many well-informed businessmen who understood that the A.F. of L. was for the most part quite uninterested in overthrowing American capitalism were eager to dismantle the wartime regulation of industry. Many workers and labor leaders, thinking that they could fare better without government intervention, also wanted a return to prewar haggling.²¹ Meanwhile, throughout the spring of 1919, the government regulatory boards were dismantled, a development which “was generally accepted by labor and employers as the end of the industrial truce.”²²

¹⁷Lorwin, *American Federation of Labor*, 170.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁹Richard L. Lyons, “The Boston Police Strike of 1919,” *The New England Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1947): 147-68.

²⁰Grubbs, *Struggle for Labor Loyalty*, 134.

²¹Lorwin, *American Federation of Labor*, 176.

²²*Ibid.*, 176.

The rapid disappearance of government regulation of wages and prices, the cancellation of government contracts for war production, and the return of millions of soldiers and sailors to the civilian labor market made 1919 one of the most chaotic years in the nation's economic history. There were over 3,600 strikes in 1919--more by far than in any other year in American history.²³ Some of these strikes, such as the steel strike of September, were the results of long planning and consideration by the leadership of the A.F. of L. and its affiliates.²⁴ But other strikes, such as the railroad strike of April, were initiated by rank and file workers in direct disobedience to the leadership of their unions.²⁵

Losing its wartime respectability and membership, unable to control organized labor, radical or not, yet having positioned itself as the dominant voice of labor and still vital enough to plot an expansion into the steel industry, the A.F. of L. in August was redefining its role as an institution. It had not fully shed its spirit of cooperation with the government, but it was aware that the war was over and with it the expectation that industry and organized labor shared a common set of goals. It had established its bona fides as a patriotic American body but was still vulnerable to allegations of socialism and worse. So when the Boston police applied for their charter and later staked a great deal to keep that charter, the meaning of A.F. of L. affiliation was far from clear-cut.

Municipal Employee and Police Unions

The vast majority of A.F. of L. members were skilled workers--such as miners, carpenters, and shipbuilders--employed by private employers, often large corporations. But as the Federation and the union movement grew, government

²³Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), 9.

²⁴Taft, *The A.F. of L. in the Time of Gompers*, 388.

²⁵Brecher, *Strike!*, 129.

employees began to unionize as well. Although the A.F. of L. did not grant charters to police unions until 1919, other types of municipal employees had marked a path for the police to follow. Municipal employees formed their first unions soon after the turn of the century. Urban reformers regarded these unions as a weapon in the struggle against political corruption in city government.²⁶ Unions offered a pathway of complaint independent of ward bosses, who had previously acted as city employees' only voices. Strikes by public employees were rare, though sanitation workers in a few cities were able to win concessions by striking.²⁷

Teachers were the first group of municipal employees to affiliate with the A.F. of L., beginning in 1902.²⁸ More relevant to the policemen was the success of fire fighters in organizing. The Federation granted its first charter to fire fighters in 1903. City governments, though wary, tolerated the organization of fire fighters. Furthermore, fire fighters launched a series of successful strikes in 1916.²⁹ In 1918, the various fire fighters' locals in the United States and Canada formed the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), which by 1919 represented half of the uniformed fire fighters in the United States.³⁰

Police officers in big cities began organizing associations--not unions-- in the last decade of the nineteenth century.³¹ "Many of these early organizations were formed to provide what we now term fringe benefits (death benefits, welfare insurance), to lobby with the employer for more pay, and to fulfill fraternal-social

²⁶Hugh O'Neill, "The Growth of Municipal Employee Unions," *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 30, no. 2 (1970): 2.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 2.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 3.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 4.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 5.

³¹Henry A. Juris and Peter Feuille, *Police Unionism: Power and Impact in Public-Sector Bargaining*, (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1973), 15.

needs.”³² 1917 marked the first concerted efforts of policemen to establish affiliated unions. America’s entry into World War I raised private wages and the cost of living while public employees’ wages remained fixed by law.³³ Other public employees, such as federal employees and letter carriers, decided to affiliate with the A.F. of L.³⁴ In response to numerous requests for charters, the A.F. of L. at its 1917 convention decided for the first time to consider allowing public police forces to affiliate.³⁵ At the 1919 convention, held in June, the Federation voted to grant charters to municipal police unions. The response was enthusiastic. Gompers later commented that in his thirty-six years as A.F. of L. president, “I have never seen or heard nor has there come under my observation in any form so many appeals, so many applications for charters from any given trade or calling, business or profession, in so short a time as were received by the American Federation of Labor from policemen’s unions.”³⁶

In theory, at least, unions of government employees differed from their counterparts in the private sector in that they were pledged not to strike,³⁷ but this prohibition did not always prevent walkouts. Even public employees who were not affiliated with a union or the A.F. of L. occasionally struck. In September of 1918, the Cincinnati police, who had not been previously unionized, struck for three days. At issue were several of the same matters as those in Boston: a pay raise, a fear of disciplinary action if complaints were made, a prohibition against organizing, and the reinstatement of officers dismissed for their organizing activity.³⁸ Because the striking officers were quickly replaced by the Cincinnati

³²*Ibid.*,

³³*Ibid.*, 16.

³⁴Allen Z. Gammage and Stanley L. Sachs, *Police Unions*, (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1972), 32.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 33.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 37.

³⁷*Boston Evening Transcript*, Aug. 30, 1919, Pt. III, 3.

³⁸David Ziskind, *One Thousand Strikes of Government Employees*, (1940. Reprint. New York: Arno & The New York Times, 1971), 35-39.

Home Guards, a militia organization, there was none of the unfettered looting and violence that was to characterize the Boston strike. The mayor of Cincinnati was able to effect a compromise: the striking officers would return to work, the dismissed officers would be allowed to petition for reinstatement, the police would form an unaffiliated welfare organization within the department, and the question of pay would be decided later.³⁹ Despite some fierce rhetoric on each side, enough mutual trust survived to allow a negotiated settlement.

Boston was no stranger to either public sector unions or public sector strikes. In August 1919, one of the policemen's negotiators could claim that "almost every other employee of the City of Boston is organized in some union which is affiliated with the American Federation of Labor."⁴⁰ The Boston fire fighters had formed a union and had affiliated with the IAFF, which was part of the A.F. of L. In the fall of 1918, they demanded a pay raise, voting to strike if their demands were not met. They got the raise.⁴¹ In April of 1919, 20,000 employees of the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company, then under government control as a wartime measure, ignored warnings from the postmaster general that it was illegal to strike against the government and struck for six days. Aided by a sympathy strike by electrical workers, they succeeded in shutting down telephone service in New England, and were granted a raise almost as high as their demands.⁴² That two unions of public employees could use strikes or the threat of strikes to achieve pay raises was not a lesson lost on the Boston police.

To one familiar with the history of the A.F. of L. and public sector unionism, the police situation in August and even early September of 1919 represents yet another labor dispute in a strike-ridden year when even children

³⁹*Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁰James Vahey in *Boston Evening Transcript*, Aug. 26, 1919.

⁴¹Gammage and Sachs, *Police Unions*, 34.

⁴²*Boston Evening Transcript*, Aug. 9, 1919, 5.

were striking.⁴³ And indeed, Mayor Peters, Chairman Storrow, and labor leaders saw it in this light. As a result, when they began their attempts to resolve the situation, they were not thinking in the broad strokes of anarchism versus law and order, or freedom of association versus autocracy, but in terms of a pragmatism that was the product of experience in these matters. As a result, their tactics were more moderate and more aimed at compromise than those of the extremists.

Peters and the Citizens' Committee

Boston Mayor Andrew Peters stands out as having made the greatest efforts to settle the police situation amicably, despite the legal limits on his ability to intervene in a matter concerning the police. While he had many reasons for wanting to negotiate a compromise, Peters's confidence in the overall benignancy of organized labor, his general familiarity with labor disputes, and his own experience in mediating disputes, including the fire fighters' threatened strike the previous fall were undoubtedly key factors. Peters's attitudes and, to some extent, his experiences were shared by James Storrow, whom Peters appointed as the chairman of the Committee to Consider the Police Situation. These two men, seasoned in politics, negotiation, and labor matters, provided a note of moderation to the proceedings.

Peters tackled the problem of a disgruntled police force with two initial presumptions that were to color his tactics. First, he was generally sympathetic to labor and unions, though he did not feel that an affiliated union would be appropriate in this instance. Even as he announced his position that the policemen should not be allowed to affiliate, he was at pains to point out that "I am in entire sympathy with the fundamental aims of the A.F. of L. and believe it to be a wisely

⁴³*Ibid.*, Aug. 9, 1919. To express its exasperation with the perceived tendency of labor to strike as a first, rather than last, resort, the *Evening Transcript* pointed out that even children hired to deliver lunches to factory workers now saw the strike as the most efficient means of improving their lot.

administered and progressively conservative organization” which could protect the country from both plutocracy and Bolshevism.⁴⁴ Storrow shared his faith in the A.F. of L. and referred to the Federation’s conduct during the war. As Storrow put it, “As our Government advanced to exert its utmost force in the mightest [sic] war of all ages, the American Federation of Labor stood absolutely behind the Government and contributed every ounce of strength it possessed to make that force the knockout blow to Germany.”⁴⁵ Both men were familiar with the Federation’s history, and they were confident that the union was not out to destroy the country.

Yet they were quite determined that the police should not be allowed to affiliate with what Peters called a “bulwark of patriotism and strength to our country.”⁴⁶ Why? Peters and Storrow were not overly concerned with the specter of a police strike. Nor were they averse to the principle of collective bargaining for the policemen; the Executive Committee and the policemen’s lawyers specifically agreed to a settlement that recognized the right of the police to be represented in negotiations over pay, hours, and working conditions by the Boston’s Policemen’s Union, so long as that union remained independent of the A.F. of L.⁴⁷ What Peters and Storrow feared was police partiality towards A.F. of L. strikers in the event of violent strikes. Peters delicately referred to “complications,” while Storrow bluntly hypothesized that an affiliated police force might favor strikers over strikebreakers in arresting or testifying against suspects.⁴⁸ Such worries were in fact moot, since pro-labor police, unionized or

⁴⁴City of Boston, Documents of the City of Boston for the Year 1919 (City of Boston Printing Department), Vol. IV, Doc. no. 108; “Report of Committee Appointed by Mayor Peters to Consider the Police Situation” [Storrow Report], 12.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 12, 15.

not, could and did favor organized laborers.⁴⁹ But here too Storrow and Peters were drawing on a long familiarity with strikes and an understanding of the policeman's role in them.

James J. Storrow, a Harvard-educated, patrician banker, had experience as a labor negotiator.⁵⁰ His greatest triumph had come in 1913, when he had settled a tense dispute between the Boston Elevated Railway and its unionized employees. The carmen had struck in 1912, and as part of the settlement of the strike both the company and men had agreed to submit to arbitration in the future. When a dispute arose the next summer, the settlement was invoked. Each side chose an arbitrator, the third and decisive vote on the three-man panel being reserved for a neutral person. Storrow's reputation for fairness made him acceptable to both parties to the dispute, and he joined the panel. Despite a recent operation to remove a tumor from his neck, Storrow worked 14-hour days for weeks, confined to a hotel room and subsisting on sandwiches. Minutes before deadline, he and the other members of the panel produced a 136-page settlement that occupied a middle-ground between the competing sides.⁵¹ This affair may have taught Storrow that would have been that hard work and last-minute negotiation could resolve even thorny conflicts. Moreover, in the course of the arbitration Storrow worked with the two labor lawyers who were to represent the police in 1919: James P. Feeney and James H. Vahey. The former had served as legal counsel to the carmen, while the latter had been cooped up in the hotel as labor's chosen arbitrator.

⁴⁹Bruce C. Johnson, "Taking Care of Labor: The Police in American Politics," *Theory and Society* 3, no. 1 (1976), 98.

⁵⁰Storrow was not the only Brahmin to settle labor disputes. Henry B. Endicott was consulted about both the firemen's and the policemen's complaints.

⁵¹This account is drawn from Henry Greenleaf Peterson, *Son of New England: James Jackson Storrow, 1864-1926* (Boston: Privately Printed, 1932), 174-86.

Mayor Peters also had experience settling union disputes. Much of his hope for a peaceful, amicable resolution of the police situation could conceivably be traced to his successful defusing of a threatened strike by Boston's fire fighters a year earlier. On September 4, 1918, the Russell Club, City Firemen's Union--an IAFF-affiliate to which almost all of the city's fire fighters belonged--voted to strike if the firemen's demands for wage increases were not approved within six days.⁵² To avoid the no-strike clause in their union charter, the men referred to a mass "resignation."⁵³ In this case, no state law put the fire department or its commissioner under the authority of the governor, so Peters was in charge of the crisis. He handled it well. First, he met with the head of the IAFF, and arranged for a one-day grace period in which to negotiate. Second, rather than taking a hard line, the mayor proved willing to discuss salary increases, but made efforts to avoid the appearance that he had been coerced by the threatened walkout.⁵⁴ At the same time, he prepared for the worst, arranging with the governor to have State Guard units replace fire fighters in the event of a strike.⁵⁵ After a tense round of negotiations on September 6 during which Peters met representatives of both the fire fighter's union and the Boston Central Labor Union, it seemed that the strike was imminent.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the fire commissioner smoldered, calling the threat "damnable" and muttering about the danger of fire amid the munitions being readied for shipment to France, the firemen's lack of patriotism, and his joyous expectation of being able to break the union.⁵⁷ But on the evening of September 8, the night before the strike was to begin, the union acceded to Mayor Peters's proposals and his explanations of why he simply could not grant the

⁵²*Herald*, Sept. 5, 1918.

⁵³*Ibid.*, Sept. 7, 1918.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, Sept. 5 and Sept. 6, 1918.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, Sept. 6, 1918.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, Sept. 6, 1918.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, Sept. 5, 1918.

requested raises. The union leadership condemned the fire commissioner, but praised Peters as “a keen sympathizer with the underpaid workers of this city” and “a perfect gentleman,” although the pay raise he promised was far below their expectations.⁵⁸

In essence, the fire fighters’ wage dispute had given Peters a perfect dress rehearsal for the police strike of the following year. (By coincidence, the policemen walked out on September 9, exactly one year after the firemen were scheduled to “resign.”) And given that Peters had weathered the earlier storm without either endangering the city or emptying its purse, it is no surprise that he should have attempted to employ the same tactics when confronted with an angry, unionized police force. In 1919, as in 1918, Peters obtained a postponement of action, to allow more time for negotiation, on the grounds that “a solution may be found.”⁵⁹ And, in 1919, he tried to be sympathetic to the policemen’s financial concerns. Practically his first statement on the growing police crisis was to explain the lack of funds available for a raise, just as he had opened up the books to the firemen in 1918.⁶⁰ Peters’s gentlemanliness and his sympathy for city workers is made evident by the warm regard for him that comes through in the generally angry account of the strike by the policemen’s lawyers, Vahey and Feeney.⁶¹

What is tragic about Peters’s attempt to resolve the police dispute on the model of his previous success with the firemen is that it almost worked. The citizens’ committee he created, led by Storrow, did its work, and by September 6, 1919, it had negotiated with Vahey and Feeney and produced the five- point

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, Sept. 9, 1918.

⁵⁹Storrow Report, 18.

⁶⁰Frederick Manuel Koss, “The Boston Police Strike” (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1960), 106, and *Herald*, Sept. 6, 1918.

⁶¹*Herald*, Sept. 26, 1919.

“basis of settlement,” which provided for an unaffiliated union.⁶² Written by the policemen’s lawyers, amended by the committee, endorsed by Peters and all but one of the morning newspapers, the plan almost certainly would have been approved by the policemen.⁶³ Only Commissioner Curtis’s lawyerly stubbornness made what would otherwise have been a drop in the ocean of 1919 labor disputes into one of the most famous strikes in American history. Remove Curtis from the scene, and the whole affair becomes just another job for Peters and Storrow.

The Attraction of Affiliation

The decision of the Boston policemen to abandon their 13-year-old unaffiliated association, the Boston Social Club, and form in its place a union affiliated with the American Federation of Labor was the critical decision in the police crisis. Perhaps a strike could have erupted over substantive issues, such as wages, even without the issue of affiliation. But as it happened, affiliation was the issue that caused the men to walk out. Despite its importance, the decision to affiliate has not been well understood. Koss merely reports the men’s decision to seek a charter from the A.F. of L.; he does not ask why that decision was made.⁶⁴ White sees the issue as one of alliances. He writes that the police “were forced to turn to organized labor and to identify with the labor movement in order to achieve economic success.”⁶⁵ But he does not explain the mechanism by which organization would provide economic success, either from the historian’s viewpoint or from the policemen’s. Russell refers to “the compulsive union enthusiasm of 1919,” as if the policemen joined the American Federation of

⁶²*Ibid.*

⁶³Storrow Report, 7.

⁶⁴Koss, “Boston Police Strike,” 2-3.

⁶⁵Jonathan Randall White, *A Triumph of Bureaucracy: The Boston Police Strike and the Ideological Origins of the American Police State* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1982), 154.

Labor due to a psychological disorder.⁶⁶ But the policemen's decisions, first to affiliate, then to strike, were not irrational. They may not have been wise decisions, but in the context of the American Federation of Labor's position in 1919, the reasoning behind those decisions becomes much clearer.

To establishment figures, the A.F. of L. signified both a chance at a negotiated settlement and the danger of a biased police force. At the same time, it held a strong attraction for the Boston policemen. Although at the moment of compromise, the police were willing to give up their charter, they felt strongly enough about it to consider disbanding the Boston Social Club, i.e., burning their bridges behind them.⁶⁷ And, as noted above, police forces all over the country jumped at the chance to get A.F. of L. charters after they were first offered in the summer of 1919. Affiliation with the A.F. of L. offered several advantages to the Boston force. First, it could help create a strong union of previously unorganized men. Second, it could facilitate the resolution of grievances within the department, both by establishing fair mechanisms of complaint and by providing legal and political support to unhappy officers. And if those mechanisms failed, the A.F. of L. was set up to provide support for striking locals.

Although during and after the strike A.F. of L. officials claimed that the Policemen's Union was to be prohibited from striking, the nature of the A.F. of L. at the time made the strike an indispensable weapon in the hands of a local and made strike support an essential function of the Federation and smaller groups of unions. The policemen could claim that they wanted a non-striking A.F. of L.-affiliated union, but no one was sure what this meant. Other A.F. of L. locals, including the carmen with whom Storrow had negotiated and the firemen with whom Peters had met, had only gotten their demands when they threatened to

⁶⁶Francis Russell, *City in Terror* (New York: Viking, 1975), 234.

⁶⁷Christian Science Monitor, Sept. 3, 1919, p.5.

strike. Despite the policemen's claims to the contrary, the nature of the A.F. of L. gave Bostonians cause to fear a police strike were the men allowed to affiliate, and of course, the affiliated union did strike shortly after its formation. No matter what the hopes for the future, the past history of the A.F. of L. meant that affiliation could, and did, add momentum to a movement toward a strike.

Prior to affiliation, the Boston policemen belonged to the Boston Social Club, a fraternal organization of police officers that had been created in 1906, when the popular Stephen O'Meara was police commissioner. Although the Social Club collected dues and elected officers, it did not provide insurance or other benefits.⁶⁸ When the policemen tried to use the Social Club to express grievances, particularly about pay, but also concerning hours and working conditions, it proved ineffective.⁶⁹ When Curtis became Commissioner following O'Meara's death in December 1918, he "refused to recognize the Social Club and substituted for it a plan of his own for dealing with union grievances."⁷⁰ According to Curtis's system, the police would voice their complaints through a "grievance committee," composed of one representative elected from each station. But President McInnes of the Policemen's Union claimed that in practice, some of the men on the committees were fraudulently elected, while others were afterwards punished for serving on the committee.⁷¹ By August of 1919, most police officers thought that the Social Club "had never been able to accomplish anything."⁷²

Having experienced frustration with the officially-sponsored Social Club, the policemen looked about for another means of gaining relief. They chose the

⁶⁸*Labor World*, Sept. 6, 1919, p.1.

⁶⁹Koss, 28-33.

⁷⁰Vahey and Feeney, quoted in the *Herald*, Sept. 26, 1919, p.8.

⁷¹*Herald* Sept. 9, 1919, p.2

⁷²*Ibid.*, Sept. 1, 1919, p.2

American Federation of Labor. What was it about the A.F. of L. that was so attractive to the police? What made them choose to affiliate almost as soon as charters were offered to police departments? What made them defy Curtis's amendment to Rule 35, which, after they already had their charter, forbade membership in the A.F. of L.? And why, even after their walkout had earned them the condemnation of most of the city, did the policemen still insist on the right to affiliate with the American Federation of Labor?⁷³

The primary consideration was the A.F. of L.'s proven ability to better the lot of workers in general and government workers in particular. While the Social Club struggled to coax a pay raise out of the mayor or the police commissioner, "the [policemen] looked about them [and] found that those who had been able to make their wages go up somewhere commensurate with the cost of living were those who had organized labor behind them."⁷⁴ In Boston, affiliation had, in the words of A.F. of L. organizer McCarthy and B.C.L.U. president O'Donnell,

been done by employes [sic] in the fire department, treasury department and a score of other departments, the employes in which have their unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor for years past, and are now in existence, and are and have been working harmoniously with the heads of all their departments. The Boston policemen simply wish[ed] for the same liberty of action in promoting their economic interests.⁷⁵

Interestingly enough, considering Mayor Peters's experiences, the police looked particularly to the already unionized fire fighters as having blazed a path for them to follow. Just as the police in Jersey City had organized a union after seeing the firemen of that city gain power by unionizing, so did the Boston police observe the firemen's experience and expect to be allowed to affiliate.⁷⁶

⁷³McInnes, quoted in the *Herald* Sept. 14, 1919, p.2

⁷⁴Vahey and Feeney, p.8

⁷⁵*Labor World*, Sept. 20, 1919, p.2.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, Aug. 9, 1919, p.2, and Vahey and Feeney, p.8.

Besides the bread and butter issues of pay, hours, and conditions, an affiliated union would offer the patrolmen a degree of independence from their superiors in the department. As noted above, part of the attraction of municipal-employee unions in general was that they served as a counterweight to the corruption that was so characteristic of urban government in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the August meeting in which the police voted to affiliate,

many patrolmen...referred to alleged petty persecutions by superior officers in the department and urged that the proposed union do something to stop these practices. Some of the men stated that they were afraid to make formal complaint as they feared that charges of some kind would be made against them and that dismissal would follow.⁷⁷

The men hoped that an affiliated union would give them a power base of their own. As one of them put it, “the men are tired of supporting an organization such as the Boston Social Club which it has been demonstrated has no ‘punch.’ The men want a red blooded organization in which they can formulate their own policies and not be subject to the dictates of the police commissioner and his assistants.”⁷⁸

But how, exactly, would affiliation with the A.F. of L. help the police? Frank McCarthy, New England Organizer for the A.F. of L. and the Federation official who was to spend the most time working with the police, was frequently vague in his descriptions of Federation plans.

What the future has in store, we do not know...we want to arrange matters to handle any situation that may arise...we must be prepared to exercise our rights and...call the attention of organized labor to the importance of this issue...We must maintain the principle of bargaining on labor and this

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, Aug. 9, 1919, p.1.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, Sept. 6, 1919, p.1.

direct challenge we must take up and assume an attitude that will make impossible the wresting of these principles from us.⁷⁹

Later on, McCarthy assured the Policemen's Union that "the American Federation of Labor, from President Gompers down, is solidly behind the policemen of this city in their fight for the right to belong to a union affiliated with that body."⁸⁰ "Being behind" and "assuming an attitude" are mere mental activities, and it takes a good deal of faith to risk one's job on a promise that an ally will "exercise rights" and "arrange matters." McCarthy's vagueness took a somewhat sinister tone after the men walked out. At a B.C.L.U. meeting in early October, he tried to silence two police officers, telling them that "while the policemen have had the undivided support of organized labor, the manner in which it will be given will be determined by the committee in charge of this strike."⁸¹

What McCarthy seems to have meant by these promises is that the A.F. of L. would provide what the 1990s would call "technical assistance," or what was known then as "wisdom and experience."⁸² Like Peters and Storrow, A.F. of L. leaders were veterans of many labor struggles. They knew how to negotiate. The Boston fire fighters in 1919 had been represented in their negotiations by Thomas G. Spellacy, president of the International Fire Fighters' Union.⁸³ The policemen had as their chief negotiators James Vahey and James Feeney, experienced labor lawyers whom they retained on their own and not through the A.F. of L., but who were quite familiar with A.F. of L. disputes.⁸⁴ In addition, the policemen had extra help in the negotiations by McCarthy himself and officers of the B.C.L.U.⁸⁵ The B.C.L.U. also flexed its political muscle on behalf of the policemen, at least

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, Aug. 23, 1919, p.2.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, Sept. 20, 1919, p. 1.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, Oct. 11, 1919, p.1.

⁸²*Ibid.*, Sep. 20, 1919, p.8.

⁸³*Herald*, Sept. 7, 1918, p.1

⁸⁴Vahey and Feeney, p.8.

⁸⁵*Herald* Sept. 7, 1919, p.6.

until the violence of September 9 forced it and the national organization to back water rapidly. The B.C.L.U. sent its officers to Coolidge to demand Curtis's dismissal;⁸⁶ had they been successful in replacing the police commissioner, the policemen might have been victorious. Surprisingly, the A.F. of L. did not provide the police with legal counsel, though had their case been taken to court it might have been an important test case in labor law. Perhaps the organization felt that the men were in good hands with Vahey and Feeney and did not need more help, or perhaps the relatively early legal surrender of Vahey and Feeney meant that the case would not reach a level where an important legal precedent would be set.⁸⁷

The one thing that the A.F. of L. did not want was a police strike. Despite the threats from the fire fighters, the many unions of government employees in Massachusetts had previously avoided strikes.⁸⁸ That any strike of public employees was against A.F. of L. policy was reiterated by the A.F. of L.'s vice president in October.⁸⁹ The editorial page of the *Boston Labor World*, the official newspaper of the B.C.L.U., repeatedly tried to dodge the issue of a police strike by insisting that the responsibility for the strike belonged to the police commissioner.⁹⁰ "One cannot imagine a striking police force, and so long as they are treated properly there is no necessity for such," the paper editorialized in August.⁹¹ But according to this logic, the chance of an industrial strike is also minimal, which was clearly not the case in 1919.

A different understanding of the likelihood of the police strike was revealed in another *Labor World* editorial, written after the walkout of September

⁸⁶*Labor World*, Aug. 23, 1919, p.1

⁸⁷*Herald*, Sept. 19, 1919, p.4

⁸⁸*Labor World*, Sep. 20, 1919, p.2.

⁸⁹*The Public*, quoted in *Labor World*, Oct. 11, 1919, p.7.

⁹⁰*Labor World*, Aug. 9, 1919, p. 8 and Aug. 23, 1919, p.8.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, Aug. 9, 1919, p. 8.

9. In describing the buildup to the strike from the viewpoint of the patrolman, the newspaper puts the case to its readers:

After [the patrolman] and his fellows have thus compromised themselves beyond all chance of retraction [by affiliating], the head of the department suddenly strikes, like a snake in the grass. What is he to do? He and they can but carry out their plans to a logical conclusion. But in doing so they will leave the city unprotected.⁹²

The official voice of the B.C.L.U. said that the “logical conclusion” of affiliation was a strike. And indeed, the very act of affiliation with the A.F. of L. created a momentum toward striking that was greater than union officials were willing to acknowledge. For while the A.F. of L. could provide moral support to its constituent unions, and could send negotiators, organizers, lobbyists and lawyers, the strike was a central weapon in its arsenal. Years before, Gompers had written that “the strike is the most highly civilized method which the workers, the wealth producers, have yet devised to protest against the wrong and injustice, and to demand the enforcement of the right.”⁹³ Article XIII of the A.F. of L. constitution limited legitimate strikes to those authorized by the president and executive council of the national Federation.⁹⁴ But this provision was ignored not only by the Policemen’s Union, but also by the constituent unions of the B.C.L.U., which provided financial support to the striking policemen in violation of the constitution.⁹⁵ And McCarthy, the A.F. of L. representative, initially responded to the policemen’s walkout with satisfaction, not condemnation,

⁹²*Ibid.*, Sep. 20, 1919, p.8.

⁹³Mollie Ray Carroll, *Labor and Politics: The Attitude of the American Federation of Labor toward Legislation and Politics* (1923. Reprint. New York: Arno & The New York Times, 1969), 67.

⁹⁴A.F. of L. *Report of Proceedings of the Thirty-Ninth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor*. (Washington, D.C.: The Law Reporter Printing Co., 1919), xxx.

⁹⁵*Labor World*, Sep. 27, 1919, p.8.

though his approval did not last long.⁹⁶ The A.F. of L. clearly did not always abide by its guidelines.

Despite the A.F. of L.'s official position of not allowing affiliated public employees to strike, and despite the previous record of no public employee strikes in Massachusetts, the notion that an A.F. of L. local could win benefits for its members without being allowed to strike or threaten a strike seems a bit dubious. It is not impossible to imagine an effective union without that weapon; by giving the men an organization safe from Curtis's meddling, the A.F. of L. could have provided a great service to them, had their employer been willing to negotiate. But the employer, Curtis, was not willing to negotiate. And in the face of his determined opposition, the police were faced with the options of a humiliating surrender, an appeal through the courts with little chance of victory, or the use of that characteristic A.F. of L. tactic, the strike. By affiliating with the A.F. of L. as a non-striking union, the policemen had put themselves in the position of a non-combatant soldier: exposed to danger, provided with logistical support, but prevented from defending himself. That they felt it necessary to strike casts a shadow of doubt on the realism of the official A.F. of L. vision of a union without the strike.

In this chapter I have set forth the history of the American Federation of Labor prior to 1919 and examined what significance that organization held for two parties in the Boston police crisis: the team of Peters and Storrow, and the policemen themselves. When the policemen chose to affiliate, there were clear precedents showing Peters and Storrow how to negotiate with a moderate labor union. Of course, each case is different, and the actions of these two men were by no means knee-jerk responses. But the parallels are impressive. As time ran out

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, Sep. 13, 1919, p.2.

on the weekend of September 6 and 7, the days before Curtis was to sentence the 19 policemen he had tried, surely Storrow thought back to the day when he had signed the Elevated arbitration agreements with four minutes to spare. As Peters tried to navigate between the legitimate demands of government employees and the compelling need for public protection, the firemen's dispute must have entered his mind. And there had been many other conflicts with the A.F. of L., in Boston and nationwide, that had ended in negotiation. The A.F. of L. was also influential in determining the policemen's strategy. It held out to them a promise of immediate relief and more power in the future. But had they examined the organization's history more critically, they might have reached the conclusion that behind the A.F. of L.'s decision to extend charters to police unions, there remained unresolved contradictions. Particularly worrisome was the notion of an A.F. of L. local that would be banned from striking; such a union would be weak, if indeed it could exist at all. But the policemen's understanding of the A.F. of L. was imperfect, and they learned a hard lesson as a result.

CHAPTER 3: “BOLSHEVISM”

On September 11, 1919, as Boston still reeled from the shock of the riots that had followed the policemen’s walkout, the *Boston Evening Transcript* reported the following:

Senator Henry L. Myers of Montana declared on the floor of the Senate this afternoon that a Soviet government will be established in the United States before the next presidential elections unless firm action is taken. He called upon Congress to defeat all attempts to unionize the police force of the national capital, declaring that if such unionization is permitted, the police forces in every city and town of more than 2000 population will be unionized within sixty days, that such unionization will be followed by the unionization of the Army and Navy, and that immediately thereafter the Soviet government will be established. . . .

. . . [He continued:] The police strike in Boston will be followed by other strikes. . . . He intimated that some powerful force was behind the attempts of police in fifty cities to affiliate with labor unions.¹

Had Senator Myers been deliberately distorting facts and employing hyperbole for sordid political gain, it would not be anything new for the United States Senate. But although it is difficult to believe that the Boston policemen were attempting to replace the American system of constitutional government with a dictatorship of the proletariat, the fact remains that along with Senator Myers, many prominent figures and the majority of the nation’s newspapers did accuse the policemen of participating in or at least aiding Bolshevism. By doing so, they put the police strike in a context distinct from the growth of moderate labor organizations that was discussed in Chapter 2. This chapter will discuss this second context, the definition of the Boston Police Strike as one of a series of events that created a fear of revolution in the United States in 1919.

In any city in any year, a police strike that exposed the city to 48 hours of rioting and looting, causing several deaths, numerous rapes, and thousands of dollars in damaged and stolen property would be regarded with anger and

¹*Boston Evening Transcript*, 11 September 1919.

indignation, much of it directed at the striking police. The Boston Police Strike aroused such emotions among Bostonians and Americans nationwide. But in addition to seeing the strike as an unfortunate collapse of civil peace, some observers, frightened by other events in 1919, described the strike as a deliberate attack on the basic institutions of American government. It was this additional charge, not just of disregard for public safety but also of disloyalty to the nation's political institutions, that doomed the strikers to lose public support. It also allowed the mistakes of Police Commissioner Edwin U. Curtis and Massachusetts Governor Calvin Coolidge to go unnoticed, and which propelled the latter to the vice-presidency.

No one familiar with the police and their complaints could believe them to be Bolsheviks. The basic, substantial issues over which the policemen struck— a pay raise, better working conditions, and an improved channel for registering discontent— were not in themselves terribly threatening. Nor was the A.F. of L. considered a subversive organization by those who knew it well. But the cry of radicalism was made slightly credible by the labor situation in 1919. There *were* Bolshevistic labor organizers in the United States, and the vocal denunciations of the current political order that had been issued by various anarchist and socialist groups that year gave the violence in Boston—horrifying enough in its own right—a political hue that it otherwise would not have had, at least in the minds of the many editorialists who launched scathing denunciations of the “Bolshevistic” Boston police. Reading those newspaper attacks today, it is easy to imagine that Americans, both those directly involved in the strike and those watching from the sidelines, honestly believed that the policemen were subversive and planned their actions bases on that belief.

But significance is subjective, and the chief actors in the strike did not put the police crisis in the same context of radicalism that the press and blowhard

politicians did. Important figures, such as Commissioner Curtis and Governor Coolidge, certainly included the public fear of revolution in their calculus and took full advantage of it. But this was only a minor factor; they did not themselves believe the police to be radicals, nor did they rely heavily on the public perception of Bolshevism in Boston. Curtis and Coolidge formed their agendas based on their desire to maintain a strict, rule-based control of the police force, to preserve the police commissioner's power over the men within the department, and to avoid the interference by outsiders represented by the Storrow Committee. This strategy could have existed in 1916, before the world had learned the word "Bolshevism." That the strike took place at a time of hysteria over radicalism, leaving the policemen vulnerable to charges of treason, was merely a coincidental factor that strengthened the hand of Curtis and Coolidge and weakened the credibility of the police force.

Commissioner Curtis and Governor Coolidge may not have themselves believed the policemen to be associated with radical unionism as advocated by the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W., also known as "Wobblies") or with subversive Bolshevism. But the existence of these movements and the uncompromising stances assumed by other leaders in similar circumstances may have led them to adopt a policy of no compromise, and to paint the strike as a challenge to American democracy and capitalism. And the fact that radicalism had seriously damaged the image of the A.F. of L. put Federation President Samuel Gompers and other union leaders in the difficult position of trying to support the striking policemen while attempting to disassociate the A.F. of L. from any taint of radicalism.

Neither the formation of a union nor the threat of the strike provoked the strong reaction that the walkout and violence of September 9 did. Although a walkout was frequently mentioned as a possibility prior to the actual strike, the

opponents of a police union did not deploy their full rhetorical weaponry, charges of “desertion” and “anti-Americanism,” until after the policemen had walked out *and* the city had suffered riots and looting. Conversely, the tough-talking Boston Central Labor Union planned for a police walkout, but not for violence. Labor leaders immediately tried to blame the violence on the government authorities, and it appears today that Curtis and Coolidge bear the responsibility for failing to provide the promised protection despite warning that the police would strike. But at the time, the city, the nation, and particularly the press viewed the violence as a result of the policemen’s action, not the politicians’ inaction. It was the riots, and not the walkout, that opened the police up to charges of radicalism. And it was the nation’s experiences with radicalism in 1919 that made those charges so devastating.

Previous accounts of the Boston Police Strike place the strike in the context of a collective terror of revolution without critically examining the ways in which that terror did and did not influence the outcome of the strike. Francis Russell sets the stage for his narrative of the strike with a chapter about the American fear of radicalism in 1919,² but does not show precisely how that fear affected the police strike. Jonathan Randall White argues that the alliances formed to defeat the policemen's attempts to unionize were “coalitions of fear-- fear spawned by 1919.”³ He claims that Boston’s business interests were “motivated by the fear of Bolshevism in a year of fear.”⁴ But White provides no evidence for this claim.⁵ Indeed, the facts he does provide in his text tend to

²Francis Russell, *A City in Terror: 1919, the Boston Police Strike* (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), 7-25.

³Jonathan Randall White, *A Triumph of Bureaucracy: The Boston Police Strike and the Ideological Origins of the American Police State* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1982), 135.

⁴*Ibid.*, 157.

⁵White writes on page 143 that “The Boston Police did not perceive themselves to be revolutionaries striking out at the progressive industrial order. Unfortunately for them, the country did.” He footnotes this claim to Jonathan Daniels, *The Time Between the Wars: Armistice to Pearl Harbor* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), 24. Having carefully examined the Daniels book, I can find no statement on that page or any other that supports White’s claim. The Daniels book is a broad history of over twenty years of American history

suggest that the business community was inclined to support the efforts at compromise being made by Peters and Storrow, an inappropriate response had they believed they were facing determined revolutionaries.⁶ Both of these authors fail to appreciate the subjectivity of context. That some people, particularly newspaper editorialists, linked the strike to the radical events of 1919 does not mean that others, particularly those whose decisions were important, put the strike in the same context.

Mayor Peters and his allies clearly did not think the policemen were Bolsheviks, or else they would never have worked so hard to negotiate with them. But what of Curtis and Coolidge, who refused to compromise with the police? This chapter will examine what significance the radicalism of 1919 had to those men. And, since the policemen were accused of being motivated by Bolshevism, I will examine the validity of that charge. First, I will present a brief account of the events in 1919 which led many Americans to fear an imminent social revolution. Next, I will discuss the actions of Curtis and Coolidge before the walkout of September 9, to show that they did not believe the men to be radicals. After that, I will show that Coolidge in particular took advantage of the accusations of radicalism to boost his own popularity. And finally, I will raise the question of the significance that Bolshevism had for the policemen themselves.

Radicalism in 1919

The Bolshevik overthrow of Russia's provisional government in November of 1917 was, both to its supporters and detractors, a harbinger of things

with only brief mentions of the strike and is not a reliable source for information either on the policemen's intentions or the country's perceptions. In fact, it is probable that Daniels relied entirely on Mark Allen White's *Puritan in Babylon*, which he lists in his bibliography, for information on the strike.

⁶White, *Triumph of Bureaucracy*, 158. Here White concedes that the members of the Storrow Committee, including several prominent businessmen, were considerably more sympathetic to the police than was Curtis. But he repeats that 1919 "was a time of fear" without showing this alleged fear influenced any behavior.

to come. Within Russia, the Bolshevik regime was able to repel the counterrevolutionary forces supported by the West. More ominously, from the anti-Communists' viewpoint, other Marxist revolutions erupted in Germany and Hungary in 1918 and 1919, suggesting that Bolshevism, like the great flu of 1918, was transmissible across international borders. By 1919, many Americans were seriously concerned about the possibility of a radical attempt to overthrow the American government. How widespread or genuine this fear was cannot be neatly quantified. But *Red Scare*, Robert K. Murray's authoritative study of the phenomenon demonstrates that warnings of an imminent communist revolution were not limited to rightist extremists, but were perpetuated by many of the nation's leading politicians, patriotic groups, and newspapers.⁷ According to Murray, "through misreporting, exaggeration, misinterpretation of fact, and excessive claims and charges, what was a mere theoretical possibility of radical revolution gradually became in the minds of many a horrible reality."⁸ While the Red Scare is a fascinating subject in its own right, certain elements of the postwar hysteria were particularly influential in shaping responses during the Boston police crisis. The existence of a radical, industry-based labor movement--in opposition to the moderate, craft-based A.F. of L.--and a complementary socialist political movement made many conservative leaders suspicious of the police union.

The radical labor movement in North America during and immediately after World War I was embodied for most Americans by the Industrial Workers of the World. By mixing revolutionary ideology with a functioning, national organization of unions, the I.W.W. bridged the gap between Gompers and Lenin,

⁷Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980, originally published 1955), 83.

⁸*Ibid.*, 83.

and gave a seed of truth to the conservatives' charge that organized labor was subversive. While the A.F. of L. was seeking to establish a solid record of moderate patriotism, the I.W.W. was less compromising and therefore more threatening to established business and political interests. Founded in 1905, the I.W.W. was based on "industrial unionism," the belief that all the workers in a single industry, such as railways, textiles, or mining, should be organized into a single union, and that unskilled laborers should be included so that they could not be used as strikebreakers.⁹ During its fourteen years of significant activity, it organized workers throughout the United States and Canada, but its strongest base of support was always in the West, particularly among miners and lumber workers.¹⁰ Like the A.F. of L., it relied on the strike as an essential weapon against employers, and like the A.F. of L., it had a mixed record of success.¹¹ The I.W.W., however, represented a very different style of labor unionism.

One basic difference was the ideological vision guiding the I.W.W. Whereas the A.F. of L. did not challenge the existing political order, the Wobblies were "syndicalistic," aiming for a society that would be run by laborers, rather than a formal government.¹² Until a 1907 split, there were close links and shared membership between the I.W.W. and the Socialist Party.¹³ Even before the Bolshevik Revolution, the I.W.W. had links to international Marxism. And when news of the November Revolution arrived, the I.W.W. greeted it with enthusiasm.¹⁴

⁹Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States. Volume IV: The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1917* (New York: International Publishers, 1965), 14.

¹⁰Murray, *Red Scare*, 28.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 28-9.

¹²Roy T. Wortman, *From Syndicalism to Trade Unionism: The IWW in Ohio, 1905-1950* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985), 6.

¹³Foner, *Labor Movement*, 104.

¹⁴Murray, *Red Scare*, 39.

Compared with the A.F. of L., the I.W.W. always had a much more antagonistic relationship with the government and established interests, and the animosity was felt on both sides. The I.W.W. danced around the issue of patriotism, at times denouncing the American flag as symbol of the oppression of the workers,¹⁵ at times insisting that its concern with the common good was the essence of patriotism.¹⁶ Charges that the I.W.W. was subversive were particularly damaging during World War I, when public opinion was solidly behind the war effort and many citizens saw opposition to the war not as an alternative political opinion but as sedition and treason. While the A.F. of L.'s cooperation with the government reassured the public that the Federation would help maximize war production, the I.W.W. was accused of both encouraging draft resistance and slowing production, especially in the mining and lumber industries, which were both crucial to weapons production and were I.W.W. strongholds. In 1916, the Workers had resolved: "We condemn all wars, and for the prevention of such, we proclaim the anti-militaristic propaganda in time of peace, thus promoting class solidarity among the workers of the entire world, and, in time of war, the general strike, in all industries."¹⁷

When faced with American entry into the war in early 1917, a minority of I.W.W. members wanted the organization to oppose actively the war and the draft, though a more pragmatic majority steered the direction into deferring its ultimate confrontation with bourgeois government until after more workers had been organized.¹⁸ I.W.W. workers in Eastern ports loaded war transports without hesitation,¹⁹ and sabotage was no longer a sanctioned tactic after May, 1917.²⁰

¹⁵Foner, *Labor Movement*, 131.

¹⁶*Why and What is the I.W.W.? and What the I.W.W. is Not* (Los Angeles: Industrial Workers of the World, n.d.),

¹⁷*The I.W.W.: Its First Seventy Years (1905-1975)* (Chicago: Industrial Workers of the World, 1976), 110.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁹*The Truth about the I.W.W. Prisoners* (New York: American Civil Liberties Union, 1922), 8.

Yet although the I.W.W.'s stated intention was not to disrupt war production but merely to improve the lot of workers, it was vilified as a threat to the nation, and was attacked physically by both company-sponsored vigilantes and federal troops. In July and August 1917 gangs attacked I.W.W. strikers in the mining areas of Arizona, killing several. And in 1918, the federal government prosecuted I.W.W. leaders for sedition, sabotage, interfering with production, and opposing the draft, crippling the organization.²¹

In addition to being opposed to the government, the I.W.W. was often in conflict with the A.F. of L. The Wobblies often defined their organization in terms of opposition to the A.F. of L.'s high dues, moderate politics, and craft unionism. Among the founders of the I.W.W. were leaders of unions that had left or been expelled from the A.F. of L., mostly over the issue of industry unionism vs. craft unionism.²² At the founding convention of the I.W.W., William D. Haywood specifically criticized the A.F. of L., saying that "it is not a working-class movement. It does not represent the working class."²³ On occasion the two national organizations cooperated, as they did during the lumber strike of 1917. But during the World War I era, the I.W.W. did not cease publicly distinguishing itself from the A.F. of L..²⁴

New England residents got a firsthand look at the I.W.W. in action during the 1912 strike at Lawrence, Massachusetts. Despite the atrocious employment and living conditions of the 30,000 textile workers in the city, the A.F. of L. had not tried to organize any but a handful of the most skilled workers, on the grounds that the mostly foreign-born workers were too heterogeneous to be organized.²⁵

²⁰Foner, *Labor Movement*, 553.

²¹*The I.W.W.: Its First Seventy Years*, 124.

²²*Ibid.*, 9-10.

²³Foner, *Labor Movement*, 29.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 553.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 314.

But the I.W.W. was undaunted by the diversity of the mill workers, and on January 10, 1912, it held a mass meeting of Italian workers, who voted to strike in protest over a pay cut. On January 12, the strike began, and soon involved not only the Italians, but also the mill workers of many other nationalities. The strike was particularly well run, with the I.W.W. leaders employing techniques they had developed in the West.²⁶ Despite violence at the hands of the Massachusetts militia and the opposition of the A.F. of L., which sent its skilled members back to the mills before the unskilled majority had gained their demands, the strike was successful. After Governor Eugene Foss threatened to pull the rug from under the mill owners by withdrawing the militia, the owners and the I.W.W. were able to reach a settlement that was largely in favor of the workers.²⁷ Massachusetts had learned that the I.W.W. was a power in the East.²⁸

In sum, the I.W.W. was to most Americans the embodiment of scary organized labor. As one observer expressed it at the time, “the average man condemns the I.W.W. because he thinks that the organization is unlawful in its activity, un-American in its sabotage, unpatriotic in its relation to the flag, the government and the war.”²⁹ A large cross section of American society regarded the Wobblies with horror, and often expressed this horror with attacks--legal, verbal, and physical.³⁰ Americans saw two sides to unionism, one a moderate movement for better conditions, the other a radical movement for the overthrow of the existing order. When the Boston police announced their intention to unionize, the prospect of such a union had frightening implications to those who were not familiar with the different natures and goals of the two movements.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 318.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 342.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 347.

²⁹*I.W.W. Prisoners*, 9.

³⁰John Clendenin Townsend, *Running the Gauntlet: Cultural Sources of Violence Against the I.W.W.* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1986), 3-6.

In addition to the long-term trend of radical unionism, several specific events occurred in 1919 that suggested to some Americans that an attempted socialist or anarchist revolution in this country was a real possibility. Two of these events, the general strikes in Seattle and Winnipeg, have great bearing on the Boston strike, and are addressed in the following chapter. In addition, there were several other shows of force by American radicals in 1919. A series of letter bombs were sent to leading anti-communist figures in late April, and were followed by more bombs in June. On May Day, violence erupted between parading socialists and returned veterans. Reported by a sensationalistic press and discussed in public by powerful government officials, these events became, to some, the heralds of revolution.³¹ Certainly editorial pages became fond of condemning Bolshevism. Certainly Americans with radical political beliefs were little tolerated. But the tense atmosphere of 1919 did not affect the main actors in the strike, as other authors have suggested.

Before September 9

The ultimate outcome of the police strike--the replacement of the striking policemen with returned veterans--was primarily the work of two men: Police Commissioner Edwin U. Curtis and Governor Calvin Coolidge. Each of these men had his own background, attitudes, official duties, and personal agenda. But during the strike they functioned as a unit. Curtis made decisions and carried out actions, but could not have done so without Coolidge's constant support. Coolidge possessed the power necessary to defeat the compromise plan of Peters and Storrow, but generally he only acted through Curtis. The two men, both of whom were lawyers before they became politicians, made their case in formal, legal language, which can be seen as either a deceptive masking of their true aims

³¹Murray, *Red Scare*, 83.

or a noble defense of principle.³² Together they championed the cause of inflexibility. The image of the policemen as threats to the social order was less a motivation for their uncompromising stance than a weapon in their arsenal against the policemen, once they had adopted their policy.

Police Commissioner Curtis was the individual chiefly responsible for determining the overall shape of the Boston Police Strike. He made the key decisions. First, he ignored the Social Club and replaced it with ineffective grievance committees, sparking much of the dissatisfaction among the patrolmen. Next, he was first to oppose the creation of an affiliated police union. Perhaps most importantly, he rejected the Storrow compromise, which could probably have averted the strike and made the Boston Police crisis into an obscure event in the history of the department.³³ And finally, by taking responsibility for protecting the city in case of a strike and then failing to do so, Curtis was largely responsible for the violence that shook the city and put the strike on the front pages of the nation's newspapers and, decades later, in its history books. To understand his behavior is largely to understand why the crisis developed the way it did.

Given the extremely distasteful depiction of Curtis that has come down through the years, it is tempting to ascribe his rigidity and anti-unionism entirely to his personality. William Allen White scathingly called him "incarnate conservatism, a nineteenth century Republican," suggesting that Curtis was an anachronism.³⁴ Many of Curtis's actions and statements support a view of him as a petty dictator who torpedoed the Storrow compromise out of spite as much as anything else. Samuel Gompers was particularly critical, calling Curtis "his

³²I tend to believe the "deceptive masking" interpretation myself.

³³Who today has heard of the Boston Fire Non-Strike of 1918?

³⁴William Allen White, *A Puritan in Babylon: The Story of Calvin Coolidge* (1938. Reprint. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973), 153.

majesty, the autocrat of the people of Boston.”³⁵ Gompers’s harsh words seem appropriate in the light of Curtis’s rejection of the Storrow compromise on the grounds that it was irrelevant to the legalistic task of determining the guilt of the nineteen officers. “The commissioner cannot consider [the Storrow proposal] as having relation to the present duty of the commissioner to act upon the complaints now pending before him,”³⁶ Curtis writes, despite the fact that a key provision of the proposal was “that no member of the Boston Policemen’s Union should be discriminated against because of any previous affiliation with the American Federation of Labor.”³⁷ Curtis rejected the proposed settlement, an act which cost the jobs of over a thousand policemen, while hiding behind the excuse of “duty.” It is indeed hard not to condemn him personally.

Jonathan Randall White offers an intriguing alternative explanation of Curtis’s obstinacy. White argues that rather than being the arbitrary whim of a sour personality, Curtis’s autocratic rule of the Boston Police Department was part of a nationwide trend of bureaucratization of police departments, which entailed strict, even autocratic management practices. He traces the strictures under which the policemen chafed back to the department’s reorganization in 1906, when “the [police] commissioner was given virtually unlimited power.”³⁸ The first commissioner to enjoy this power, Stephen O’Meara, was benevolent enough to exercise near-absolute power without abusing it.³⁹ His successor, Edwin Curtis, “simply did not possess the personal attributes necessary to control the problems” in the department.⁴⁰ Even as he contributes an institutional

³⁵Samuel Gompers, “Samuel Gompers Before Boston Chamber of Commerce,” *American Federationist* 27, no. 2 (February 1920), 135.

³⁶*Report of Committee Appointed by Mayor Peters to Consider the Police Situation [Storrow Report]* (City of Boston, 1919), 21.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 20.

³⁸White, *Triumph of Bureaucracy*, 127.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 130.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 131.

perspective to Curtis's behavior, White does not stray too far from the consensus view that Curtis's rigid, unforgiving character was a primary cause of the police strike.

Either an institutional or a personal view is far sounder than a suggestion that Curtis regarded the policemen as anarchists or socialists. By the time the policemen received their A.F. of L. charter, Curtis had worked with the police for eight months and could be expected to know better than to see ideology where there was merely discontent. Furthermore, his condemnation of the police was always in terms of law, not ideology. He accused the police of violating one clause of a single rule of the department, not of conspiring against the United States.

Like Curtis, Governor Coolidge tended toward a policy of no compromise. This policy manifested itself as a vote of confidence in Curtis. By law, the governor alone had the power to replace Boston's police commissioner, so Curtis could not go too far without Coolidge's support.⁴¹ Coolidge's first official statement on the police situation, delivered on August 19, was that "Mr. Curtis is the police commissioner, entrusted by law with the duty of conducting the office. I have no intention of removing him and, as long as he is commissioner, I am going to support him."⁴² Coolidge's support allowed Curtis to carry through the no-compromise policy. "By his open refusal to interfere [Coolidge] really helped Curtis. A single word from his would probably have led to a compromise, but that word he would not utter."⁴³ Coolidge himself judged that his main

⁴¹Howard J. Zibel, "The Role of Calvin Coolidge in the Boston Police Strike of 1919," *Industrial and Labor Relations Forum* 6, no. 3 (November 1969), 305.

⁴²*Evening Transcript*, Aug. 19, 1.

⁴³Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge*, 211.

contribution was restoring Curtis to power, thus preempting any attempt by Peters to allow the policemen back.⁴⁴

Throughout the police crisis, Coolidge accepted Curtis's emphasis on the political and legal challenges of the police, rather than the issues of pay and working conditions. Thus, even while admitting that the policemen had worked under unacceptable conditions, he could argue that they were wrong to strike.⁴⁵ For Coolidge, obedience was an absolute: "I did not see how it was possible to arbitrate the question of the authority of the law, or of the necessity of obedience to the rules of the Department and the orders of the Commissioner."⁴⁶ Coolidge rejected repeated pleas to support the Storrow compromise.⁴⁷

Coolidge's inflexibility may have been motivated in part by suspicion of radical labor. He had dealt with the I.W.W. firsthand in 1912 as a state senator. William Allen White, a journalist who knew Coolidge when he was president, suggests that Coolidge had learned to fear the I.W.W. "As chairman of the committee which investigated the strike of the Lawrence Textile Mills workers, Senator Coolidge had first-hand knowledge of an incipient proletarian revolt led by Big Bill Haywood, I.W.W. Communist, an experiment in class consciousness."⁴⁸ In 1919, at which point Coolidge had become governor, a second strike at the Lawrence mills may have confirmed Coolidge's fears of the I.W.W.; on the other hand he does not appear to have been particularly alarmed by the second strike.⁴⁹ At the time of the first Lawrence strike, Coolidge wrote to his father that "the leaders there are socialists and anarchists, and they do not want

⁴⁴Calvin Coolidge, *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge* (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1929), 132.

⁴⁵Zibel, "Role of Calvin Coolidge," 307.

⁴⁶Coolidge, *Autobiography*, 128.

⁴⁷Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge*, 212.

⁴⁸White, *A Puritan in Babylon*, 137.

⁴⁹Claude M. Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge: The Man from Vermont* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1940), 203.

anybody to work for wages. The trouble is not about the amount of wages; it is a small attempt to destroy all authority whether of any church or government.”⁵⁰ Seven years later, when confronted with the police union, Coolidge was to frame that issue in much the same terms, saying the strike was political, not economic. White suggests that Coolidge also suspected radical political aims among the Boston telephone operators who struck in the spring of 1919, since, according to White, “revolution strikes first at sources of communication.”⁵¹ But this is White’s viewpoint; Coolidge himself may not have believed a revolution to be near.

Another explanation of Coolidge’s inflexibility and his emphasis on the political dimension of the strike is that he, like Curtis, simply had a legalistic outlook and a strong sense of duty, and he abhorred the police not because he thought they wanted to overthrow the government, not because they wanted more money, but because they were traitors to their duty. Such an attitude is not entirely distinct from a claim that the police were anarchists, but neither is it a position unique to 1919. Coolidge might well have held exactly the same point of view in 1918, when the mayor of Cincinnati deplored the police of that city, saying “policemen are soldiers and they should obey orders as they have sworn to do.”⁵² Indeed, the analogy between policemen and soldiers would become one of the chief arguments of the policemen’s opponents. Again, mutiny and anarchy are related concepts, but they are distinct. Anarchism--or Bolshevism--implies a concerted plan, an ideological vision, and links to a national or international movement. Mutiny can be committed by any group of untrustworthy men. The charge of treason could have been made in 1918 or 1909 just as effectively as in

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 111.

⁵¹White, *A Puritan in Babylon*, 150.

⁵²David Ziskind, *One Thousand Strikes of Government Employees* (1940. Reprint. New York: Arno & the New York Times, 1971), 37.

1919. To show that Coolidge's attitude was a response to the events of 1919--the bombs, the strikes, and the socialist parades--one would have to produce evidence that those men believed the policemen to be engaged in a conspiracy to overthrow the government, and such evidence is not apparent. Except for the two general strikes, which will be discussed in the next chapter, the radicalism of 1919 was not a significant cause of the antagonism between Coolidge and the policemen.

After the Riots

To say that Curtis and Coolidge did not believe that the policemen were radicals is not to say that these two lawyer-politicians were unwilling to make use of that charge when presented with the opportunity. Although they do not seem to have regarded the policemen as subversive before the strike, they exploited the common perception of the policemen's radicalism once that perception emerged. This tactic served Curtis and Coolidge well. For Curtis, and to some extent for Coolidge, it deflected any criticism of the delay in mobilizing the State Guard. If the police could be labelled Bolsheviks, they would take the heat for the riots, eclipsing Curtis's role in leaving the city undefended. And for Coolidge, the charge of radicalism gave national significance to his actions, ultimately leading him to the White House. Curtis and Coolidge described the police as subversive only after the violence of September 9 had led newspapers and others to do so. That during the weeks leading to the strike they did not cry treason suggests that such a description was more expedient than sincere.

Many historians of the strike share an opinion that by not calling out the State Guard promptly, Curtis and, to a lesser extent, Coolidge share a responsibility with the striking police for the violence that hit the city. Claude Fuess, for example, writes that "a less obstinate man [than Curtis] might have

saved money and bloodshed” by calling out the Guard earlier.⁵³ Mark Allen White adds, “Commissioner Curtis still was sure an hour before the walkout that the strike would not occur.”⁵⁴ On September 8, Coolidge refused Peters’s request to call out the State Guard. “Apparently he was determined to wait until actual trouble started before calling out the troops.”⁵⁵ On the ninth, Coolidge expressed his faith in Curtis’s assurance and, overriding Peters, personally dismissed two units of the State Guard.⁵⁶ Peters, too, relied on Curtis’s estimate of the situation, though not entirely voluntarily. In his inaugural address of 1920, he recalled that at noon on September 9,

I consulted with the Police Commissioner. Mr. Curtis said that he had the situation well in hand, had made adequate provisions for any emergency and assured me that there was no occasion for alarm. I asked him whether it would not be wise to have the State Guard mobilized in order that sufficient forces might be on hand in case of an emergency. Police Commissioner Curtis stated in no uncertain terms that he did not wish their aid at that time.

The Governor also pointed out to me plainly that no one had any authority to interfere with the Police Commissioner.⁵⁷

Of course, it was in the interest of Coolidge and Peters to pass the buck, but it does seem that Curtis was primarily responsible for leaving the city without protection.

In his official annual report released a few after the strike, Curtis gives three reasons for not having the State Guard and volunteer policemen ready when the policemen struck.⁵⁸ First, the volunteer policemen could not be put in place

⁵³Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge*, 218.

⁵⁴White, *Puritan in Babylon*, 158. See also Frederick Manuel Koss, “The Boston Police Strike” (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1960), 315 and 338.

⁵⁵White, *Puritan in Babylon*, 158.

⁵⁶Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge*, 217.

⁵⁷“Address of Mayor Andrew J. Peters to the City Council, February 2, 1920,” *Documents of the City of Boston for the Year 1920, Vol I* (City of Boston Printing Department, 1921), 17.

⁵⁸Commonwealth of Massachusetts. *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Police Commissioner for the City of Boston, Year Ending November 30, 1919*. Public Document No. 49. (Boston: Wright and Potter Printing Co., 1920), 15-20.

before the policemen struck. Second, the police department's captains had predicted that 800 officers would remain on duty, rather than the 400 who actually did. And third, the Police Commissioner lacks the statutory authority to call out the State Guard unless "a tumult, riot or mob" exists or is threatened, and the "secrecy of the proceedings" by the policemen prevented him from knowing when to mobilize the Guard.⁵⁹ As Koss points out in his "Judgments" chapter, none of these reasons can excuse Curtis for having voluntarily taken on the responsibility of protecting Boston and then failing to do so, but does not hazard a guess about which of the reasons actually explains Curtis's behavior.⁶⁰ The first and third reasons are absurd. Curtis had specifically ordered the policemen to hand in their nightsticks so that a volunteer force could be equipped before the policemen walked out, and the "secrecy" of the policemen did not prevent the *Boston Herald* from running a banner headline on the morning of September 9 reading, "Police Vote to Strike Today: To Quit at 5:45 P.M. Rollcall."⁶¹ Thus it seems probable that Curtis relied too much on the estimates of his captains and overestimated his own popularity.⁶² The result was that the State Guard was not mobilized until the morning of the tenth, by which time the city had been subjected to a night of rioting and the mob violence, always easier to prevent than to extinguish, had begun. Had the Guard been called out more promptly, perhaps the violence could have been avoided altogether, as was the case in Cincinnati.

Although in retrospect it seems fair to blame Curtis and Coolidge for the rioting, at the time the city and the nation blamed the violence on the striking policemen, sealing their fate more than anything else. In other words, the

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁰Koss, "Boston Police Strike," 315-318.

⁶¹*Herald*, September 9, 1919, 1.

⁶²Compare Julius Caesar, gasping out with his last breath his astonishment at Brutus' treachery, or Joseph Stalin, suffering a nervous breakdown out of shock upon learning that he had been betrayed by his ally, Hitler.

inaction--even negligence--of these two officials made them into heroes and destroyed their enemies. According to Coolidge, calling out the State Guard on Tuesday to prevent violence

probably would have saved some property, but would have decided no issue. In fact it would have made it more difficult to maintain the position Mr. Curtis had taken, and which I was supporting, because the issue was not understood, and the disorder focused public attention on it, and showed just what it meant to have a police force that did not obey orders.⁶³

This statement is slippery because Coolidge does not come out and say “just what it meant to have a police force that did not obey orders.” Does it mean that a unionized police force may occasionally fail to guard the city against violence? Or is the statement stronger, implying that a unionized police force was a direct threat to government? Before the actual strike, Coolidge did not suggest that a unionized police was a serious challenge to the political order. But once the riots had broken out and the police had been condemned by the national press and national office-holders, Coolidge stepped up his rhetoric and began to use the language of radicalism against the strikers. And long after the strike, Coolidge’s opposition continued to intensify, so that he could write in his 1929 *Autobiography* that his famous telegram to Gompers made it

clear that if voluntary associations were to be permitted to substitute their will for the authority of public officials the end of our government was at hand. The issue was nothing less than whether the law which the people had made through their duly authorized agencies should be supreme.⁶⁴

Actually, Coolidge’s telegram did not go so far as to predict “the end of our government,” but we can allow a retiring president some embellishment.

Violence changes things. The violence of September 9 and the subsequent days redefined the issue at hand; the first looting marked the victory of Curtis’s

⁶³Coolidge, *Autobiography*, 131.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 134.

definition of the dispute as being about obedience, and not about low wages, long hours, and unsanitary living conditions.⁶⁵ Newspapers in Boston and around the country went berserk, falling over each other in their condemnation of the police and charging that the police had Communist intentions. The *Los Angeles Times* warned that “no man’s house, no man’s wife, no man’s children, will be safe if the police force is unionized and made subject to the orders of the Red Unionite bosses.”⁶⁶ The *Philadelphia Public-Ledger* added, “Bolshevism in the United States is no longer a specter. Boston in chaos reveals its sinister substance.”⁶⁷ These papers were soon joined by Republican politicians. U.S. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts wrote,

Policemen are like soldiers and sailors. . . and they must not have the liberty of striking. They do not differ essentially from the army and navy. It is a tremendous issue, and if the American Federation of Labor succeeds in getting hold of the police in Boston it will go all over the country, and we shall be in a measurable distance of Soviet government by labor unions.⁶⁸

Perhaps the most damning statement came from President Woodrow Wilson, the friend of the A.F. of L. Asked to comment on the police strike on September 11, he called it a “crime against civilization.”⁶⁹

Only after such statements had been made did Coolidge accuse the policemen of opposing democratic government, in increasingly dramatic terms. On September 12, Coolidge referred to the walkout as “desertion of duty.”⁷⁰ In his famous September 14 telegram to Samuel Gompers, Coolidge referred to

⁶⁵An exception is the *Boston Evening Transcript*, which as early as August 16 concentrated on the political aspects of the policemen’s attempt to unionize, editorializing that an affiliated police union would lead to Russian-style “Bolshevism.” Aug. 16, 12.

⁶⁶Russell, *City in Terror*, 169.

⁶⁷Murray, *Red Scare*, 129. On page 307, in note 16 to Chapter 8, Murray gives other examples of American newspapers which claimed that the Boston Police intended to establish a Soviet government.

⁶⁸Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge*, 224.

⁶⁹*Evening Transcript*, September 12, 1919, 4.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 5.

Wilson's statement and vowed to "defend the sovereignty of Massachusetts."⁷¹

Ten days later, after the nation's press had made him a hero and he had been flooded with laudatory correspondence,⁷² Coolidge took the opportunity to go further, proclaiming,

In the deliberate intention to intimidate and coerce the Government of this Commonwealth a large body of policemen, urging all others to join them, deserted their posts of duty, letting in the enemy. This act of theirs was . . . long discussed and premeditated, and with the purpose of obstructing the power of the Government to protect its citizens or even to maintain its own existence. Its success meant anarchy. . . .

. . . To place the maintenance of the public security in the hands of a body of men who have attempted to destroy it would be to flout the sovereignty of the laws the people have made. . . . Those who would counsel it join hands with those whose acts have attempted to destroy the government. There is no middle ground. Every attempt to prevent the formation of a new police force is a blow at the Government. That way treason lies.⁷³

The charges of "anarchy" and "treason," much stronger stuff than had been brandished at the police before the walkout, delighted the conservative press and cemented Coolidge's popularity.⁷⁴

In hindsight, it is clear that the outbreak of violence was a great help to Curtis and Coolidge. Like the outbreak of war, it silenced dissent among a majority of citizens. Once men had been shot, women raped, and stores looted, the policemen's inadequate wages and shoddy station houses were forgotten. Curtis and Coolidge realized the effect of the violence quickly, and were able to ride the wave of popular outrage to make the strikers into demons. The lawlessness of that week played so nicely into the hands of Curtis and Coolidge that it raises the question of premeditation: did the two men intentionally delay the mobilization of the State Guard to bolster their own support? Gompers

⁷¹Zibel, "Role of Calvin Coolidge," 317.

⁷²Koss, "Boston Police Strike," 246.

⁷³Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge*, 228.

⁷⁴Koss, "The Boston Police Strike," 246-49, 265.

implied as much, several months after the strike,⁷⁵ but such coldheartedness is unlikely.⁷⁶ Both men had spent their careers as public servants, and were not likely to have deliberately sacrificed human lives in their struggle with a recalcitrant police force. A simple miscalculation by Curtis is a more plausible explanation.

The Policemen and Radicalism

The Boston policemen walked off their jobs at 5:45 p.m. on September 9, 1919. For a few hours, the city remained peaceful, though it was patrolled by only the few non-striking police--about one-fifth of the force--plus a handful of Metropolitan District Commission officers. Had the State Guard been mobilized in these golden hours, the police might have been able to retain their jobs. Perhaps the strike would have turned out like the one in Cincinnati, where the police had walked out but been immediately replaced by troops, allowing the police to make a dramatic gesture of frustration without the city erupting into violence. With such prompt replacement, the Cincinnati police had been able to negotiate a return to their jobs after three days, not gaining their demands, but keeping their jobs.⁷⁷ Like the Cincinnati police, the Boston police tried to return to their jobs a few days after striking. But there were three crucial differences between Boston and Cincinnati. First, Curtis's optimism had delayed the mobilization of the State Guard, exposing the city to rioting. Second, when the Boston police left their jobs, the demobilization of millions of American troops had made it much easier to find replacements for the strikers; there was quite literally a "reserve army of the unemployed." And finally, the Boston police had struck in 1919, a year when a police strike was, to some, even more alarming than

⁷⁵Gompers, "Before Boston Chamber of Commerce," 136.

⁷⁶Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge*, 231, and Koss, "Boston Police Strike," 336.

⁷⁷Ziskind, *One Thousand Strikes of Government Employees*, 37.

the wartime strike of the Cincinnati police. Of these three factors, the last was perhaps the least significant; there is little evidence that the shrill cries of Bolshevism actually affected the outcome of the strike, though they may well have been important in determining the *effect* of the strike over the next several decades, a subject not addressed in this essay.⁷⁸ None of these factors was directly under the control of the Boston police. But they were decisive in determining their fate.

Most historians agree that the policemen themselves had no particular sympathy for Bolshevism, socialism, anarchism, or any ideology; all they wanted was an improvement in their pay and working conditions.⁷⁹ If the policemen had become at all acquainted with radical political beliefs, it was most likely during street battles in which the police and the radicals were on opposite sides.⁸⁰ Yet two authors do claim that there were real links between the police and serious revolutionaries. According to Benjamin Gitlow, a leading American Communist writing 29 years after the strike, “an outstanding figure in the policemen’s union of Boston, a policeman of Irish extraction, was a close sympathizer of the Communist party and collaborated with the communists in the conduct of the strike.”⁸¹ Gitlow also claims that once the strike began, “communist organizers were rushed to Boston. Rank-and-file members who were foot-loose were directed to go to Boston to help the local comrades intensify the strike violence, to work for the calling of a general strike, and to politicize the strike by directing it against the government.”⁸² Francis Russell quotes Gitlow and elaborates on

⁷⁸The association of a police union with treason, as well as rioting, may have increased the degree to which the memory of the Boston Police Strike served as an unassailable argument against police unions for many years.

⁷⁹Good examples are Murray, *Red Scare*, 134, and White, *Triumph of Bureaucracy*, 136.

⁸⁰Russell, *City in Terror*, 21.

⁸¹Benjamin Gitlow, *The Whole of Their Lives: Communism in America--A Personal History and Intimate Portrayal of its Leaders* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 55.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 56.

Communist involvement in the strike, alleging that the Soviet government sent \$85,000 via the American Communist party “to pay for halls, printing, propaganda, and in some cases subsidies for the families of the striking police. Most of this money derived from the sale of Russian crown jewels smuggled into the United States.”⁸³ Russell provides no documentary evidence for this claim, nor does he consider it a major factor in determining police strategy.⁸⁴ Other accounts of the strike do not mention any Soviet involvement.

Were these charges true, they would raise numerous questions. Why did the Soviet government think the Boston police situation was so important that it was willing to contribute a fair amount of what must have been a limited supply of hard currency? Did the communist financing, coupled with the B.C.L.U.’s failure to strike in support of the police, cause the policemen to reevaluate the relative merits of radical and moderate labor movements? And was Gitlow’s “outstanding figure” influential enough to lure the policemen into a strike he wanted because of his communist ideology? Given the haziness of these charges and lack of supporting evidence, it is necessary to forego a full investigation here and accept the more probable hypothesis that Gitlow’s “communist organizers” were ineffectual ideologues who, if they did in fact travel to Boston, did little more than stand on the sidelines and cheer the looting mob, convincing themselves that the pillage was evidence of a rising class consciousness, not petty commodity fetishism.⁸⁵

⁸³*City in Terror*, 115.

⁸⁴This is but one example of Russell’s maddening practice of making provocative statements without any obvious evidence. His book, the only widely available book-length account of the strike, lacks footnotes.

⁸⁵In my own experience I have photographed many student demonstrations and anti-war marches at which communists, without having organized the event and though a tiny minority of the demonstrators, have been equipped with the loudest bullhorns and the best made signs. These communists act as hermit crabs, living in shells that they did not create. Perhaps Gitlow’s “organizers” of 1919 did the same by attaching themselves to the Boston strike, already in progress.

On September 22, 1919, Police Superintendent Crowley sent out a memo to “All Divisions” reading,

Putting aside for the moment the possibility that the police may have been led by a communist sympathizer and financed by the Kremlin, the policemen do not seem to have been much aware of the possibility that observers of the strike might associate them with the communists whom they had so often fought. Prior to September 9, no one had called them Bolsheviks, and this lack of warning may have led them to miscalculate the effect that a strike would have on their support among the public. As Fuess puts it,

The chief agitators had apparently no conception of the hostile feeling which a strike would arouse. Unconsciously they had chosen to give battle at a moment when their chances of victory were as slight as those of Burnside at Marye's Heights or Pickett at Gettysburg. But it is easier to be a prophet after the event than before it.⁸⁶

While the policemen certainly had but a slight chance of victory as soon as the violence began, it might be better to compare them with a different Civil War general: John Pope. Unlike Burnside and Pickett, who had a good idea of what they were getting into when they began their frontal assaults, Pope was unaware that he was facing both Jackson and Longstreet when he attacked at Second Bull

Paper slips, printed in red, which read as follows:

INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY
THE MASTERS FEAR IT
THE WORKERS NEED IT
THE I.W.W. WILL GET IT!

are being posted throughout the city.

You will instruct officers to have a sharp lookout for persons pasting these slips on buildings, poles, and windows. If any person is found pasting said slips, arrest and prosecute in court. (Samuel D. Parker, Police Strike Papers, Houghton Library.)

Such postering does not indicate any serious radical involvement in the strike; it could have been the work of a single individual who had no contact with the striking police. But had the itinerant posterer been apprehended, one wonders what crime he would be charged with. The tone of Crowley's memo suggests that the prosecution would have been based entirely on the content of the speech, a further illustration of the intolerance for radical political views that Murray has so well documented.

⁸⁶Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge*, 216.

Run. Similarly, the policemen were ambushed by rioting that was primarily the fault of Curtis and by charges of Bolshevism that appeared out of nowhere.

It is undeniable that the police were accused of anarchism and Bolshevism, and the accusations were more passionate the farther from Boston they were. But the fact that some newspapers and politicians sensationalized the strike for all its worth does not show that many Americans seriously believed that the police were attempting to begin a revolution, or, in Russell's words, that "Boston . . . now in the eyes of nervous Americans had come to seem [America's] Petrograd."⁸⁷ And even if the screaming newspapers did alarm some readers in Los Angeles and Topeka, it is hard to find evidence that these charges significantly affected the outcome of the strike. They may have magnified the perceived heroism of Calvin Coolidge, helping him get his nomination for the vice presidency. Or perhaps they intensified the public distrust of unionized police, and thus helped retard police unionization until the 1960s. But it is hard to find evidence that the atmosphere of hostility to communism and anarchism greatly altered the course of the strike.

⁸⁷Russell, *City in Terror*, 170.

CHAPTER 4: THE GENERAL STRIKE

As Chapter 3 argued, previous historians have overemphasized the importance of radical labor organizations and the fear of “Bolshevism” during the Boston Police strike. Their focus on such events as the founding of socialist parties in the United States and the bomb campaign against anti-communists suggests that the link between these events and the Boston strike was much stronger than it actually was. At the same time, the overemphasis on actions carried out by avowed revolutionaries in effect de-emphasizes and presents a distorted view of two other events of 1919: the general strikes in Seattle, Washington and Winnipeg, Manitoba. Previous accounts of the Boston Police Strike have put the two general strikes of 1919 in the context of radicalism, a placement that leads to a misreading of the attempted general strike in support of the Boston police. The general strike, though perceived by many as a purely radical technique, was in 1919 also a tactic of moderate labor organizations. To understand why a general strike almost took place in Boston, and to understand why it did not, it is necessary to put the general strike in a context of its own.

As was the case with the American Federation of Labor, the general strike had different meanings to different actors. When the Boston Central Labor Union threatened to call a general strike, the minds of both laborers and middle-class citizens recalled the general strikes that had frozen Seattle in February and Winnipeg in May. To the laborers, the general strike was a potentially powerful yet largely untested means of forcing employers to meet the demands of one union by involving all the unions in a city in the struggle. To the A.F. of L. leadership, general strikes were for use only in extreme conditions, because the national organization feared that they could get out of hand. And for employers and other business interests, a general strike was not only a serious disruption in business but a tactic that was associated with European socialism and radicalism.

Of all the events in the Boston police crisis, the nearly successful attempt by some of the more hotheaded unions to call a general strike was in fact the most truly radical. And the decision not to call a general strike was critical to the ultimate result of the strike; it is fairly clear that once the B.C.L.U. definitively decided against a general strike, “any real chance of a successful outcome to the police strike was gone.”¹

General Strikes before 1919

The idea of a “general strike,” which can be serviceably defined as “the strike of a majority of the workers in the more important industries of any one locality or region,”² originated and was developed in Europe. The essential premise behind a general strike is that labor can bend employers to its will if instead of stopping production in a single industry, it shuts down work in an entire city or region. This concept has its beginnings in the second decade of the nineteenth century in England, and was first applied in that country in 1842.³ This first strike began with a strike by coal miners against a reduction in wages, but developed, through the efforts of labor leaders, into a mass protest by workers in many industries and across several English counties in favor of the People’s Charter, a proposed law that would increase the representation of the working classes in Parliament.⁴ This strike was opposed by the established trade unions, and failed after about two months, when hunger and government deployment of troops and artillery forced the workers to return to their jobs.⁵ Although eight

¹Francis Russell, *A City in Terror* (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), 198.

²Wilfrid Harris Crook, *The General Strike: A Study of Labor’s Tragic Weapon in Theory and Practice* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1931), vii.

³Crook, *General Strike*, 4, 22. In a later book, *Communism and the General Strike* (Hamden, Conn.: The Shoe String Press, 1960), Crook raises the question of whether the walkout of several unions in Philadelphia in 1835, which was conducted without a guiding strike committee, constitutes the world’s first general strike. (19) There is no particular reason to debate the point in this essay.

⁴Crook, *General Strike*, 24.

⁵*Ibid.*, 25-27.

decades and an ocean away from the Boston of 1919, this first general strike already shared certain crucial elements with future general strikes: a grievance in one industry spreading to others, the political nature of a general strike, the refusal of the most powerful national labor organizations to support the strike, the military response by the government, and the ultimate failure of the strike.

Throughout the nineteenth century, advocacy of a general strike was associated with radical, revolutionary ideology. From 1864, when the Marxist First International was formed and first supported the general strike, European revolutionaries debated the purpose and advisability of the tactic. The most enthusiastic proponents of a general strike were French revolutionary socialists, but their endless debates did not result in a single major general strike in the nineteenth century.⁶ On the other hand, the major general strikes in Sweden in 1909 and in Belgium in 1913 were called for strictly reformist ends.⁷ Both of these strikes were essentially failures. Perhaps the most successful mass strikes were the revolutionary strikes in Russia in 1905 and March 1917, the latter of which was instrumental in the overthrow of tsarism.⁸

In North America, as in Europe, support of the general strike was mostly limited to radicals, such as the Industrial Workers of the World. “From its inception at the first convention in 1905, the Industrial Workers of the World had carried as one of its major aims the ‘Social General Strike’ as the final solution of the class struggle.”⁹ I.W.W. leader William Haywood in 1911 declared that “if I didn’t think that the general strike was leading on to the great revolution which will emancipate the working class, I wouldn’t be here.”¹⁰ As we will see, the

⁶*Ibid.*, 32-38.

⁷Phil H. Goodstein, *The Theory of the General Strike from the French Revolution to Poland* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1984), 179 and 203.

⁸Goodstein, *Theory of the General Strike*, 243.

⁹Crook, *General Strike*, 215.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 216.

A.F. of L. was very hesitant to talk about general strikes, yet its central labor unions organized several, while the I.W.W. considered the general strike a central element in its plan, but was unable to begin one.

The first American general strike, the St. Louis strike of 1877, was organized by the Workingmen's Party, a Marxist organization.¹¹ This small faction was able to take a strike among railroad workers and, through speeches and organization, transform it into a strike by thousands of workers in several industries for the eight-hour day and a ban on child labor.¹² This strike collapsed after four days due to disorganization on the part of its leaders, the lack of food for the strikers, and the arrest of those leaders by police and militiamen.¹³ Its goals were not achieved, though it may have achieved incremental gains for labor.¹⁴

The general strike was a component of radical ideology, and was introduced to America by a Marxist group in St. Louis. But later general strikes on this continent were organized by moderate labor unions. The general strike occupied a gray area between the poles of moderate, loyal labor and radical, revolutionary movements. Neither their sponsors nor their opponents were entirely sure what to make of this dual nature. This paradox is essential to understanding the conduct and reaction to the Boston Police Strike.

The first general strike sponsored by an American Federation of Labor central labor union--the organization of all A.F. of L. locals in a city--took place in 1892 in New Orleans. On November 8, 1892, the Workingmen's Amalgamated Council, the local American Federation of Labor central labor

¹¹David R. Roediger, "America's First General Strike: The St. Louis 'Commune' of 1877," *Midwest Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1980), 197-98.

¹²Roediger, "America's First General Strike," 198-99.

¹³*Ibid.*, 202-4.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 205-6.

union, called a general strike in support of three of its member locals--the "Triple Alliance" of teamsters, scalesmen, and packers--who were trying "to gain a preferential closed shop," among other demands.¹⁵ The unions turned out, and "more than 20,000 men, who with their families made up nearly half the population, stopped work for three days."¹⁶ The strike committee called off the strike after nine days, in the face of a threat of martial law.

Although the strike resulted in some improvement for the workers, it did not achieve its primary demand for a closed shop.¹⁷ Had the strike succeeded, it "would have marked the greatest victory of the American Federation of Labor in its early career. . . ."¹⁸ As it happens, its failure may have steered the national A.F. of L., which had supported the strike, away from the use of the general strike.¹⁹

Despite the setback in New Orleans, the Philadelphia Central Labor Union in 1910 was willing to call a general strike in support of the streetcar operators, who were striking to protest the dismissal of many union members, apparently for union activities.²⁰ On February 27, the C.L.U. voted to call a general strike on March 5 if the streetcar strike had not been settled by then. When the traction company refused the strikers' demands, tens of thousands of workers walked out. Vital services, such as the delivery of milk, bread, and ice, were uninterrupted by order of strike headquarters.²¹ By March 9, a convention of the Pennsylvania State Federation of Labor voted to call a walkout of every industry in the entire

¹⁵Bernard A. Cook, "The Typographical Union and the New Orleans General Strike of 1892," *Louisiana History* 24, no. 4 (1983): 379.

¹⁶Roger Wallace Shugg, "The New Orleans General Strike of 1892," *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (April 1938), 547.

¹⁷Cook, "Typographical Union," 380.

¹⁸Shugg, "New Orleans General Strike," 559.

¹⁹Cook, "Typographical Union," 388.

²⁰Crook, *Communism and the General Strike*, 27.

²¹*Ibid.*, 30.

state in support of the carmen, and their was even talk of a national general strike.²² But the president of the State Federation was opposed to a statewide strike, and he pocket-vetoed the statewide vote on the issue.²³ The first defection of striking union workers came on the twenty-second, when bricklayers and textile workers began returning to work. These unions arrived at the decision to return in contrasting ways; the textile workers were ordered by their “Executive Committee” to go back, while the bricklayers’ union seems to have been swayed by a desire from the journeymen, at the bottom of the hierarchy, to resume work.²⁴ These defections contributed to the decision not to have a statewide strike,²⁵ and the city’s general strike was called off on the twenty-seventh. The Philadelphia strike had been carefully thought out and almost succeeded in forcing a settlement when the political boss of Philadelphia took the side of the strikers, but in the end the power of the traction company and the lukewarm support of the State Federation prevented the strike from succeeding.²⁶

The general strikes in St. Louis, New Orleans, and Philadelphia help today’s student of the Boston Police Strike understand some of the issues that were raised by the threat of a general strike in Boston. In the first two cases we see the original dispute in a single, but vital industry (the railroad of East St. Louis and the port of New Orleans were central to those cities’ economies.) Although not directly involved in the dispute, other unions joined a general strike

²²*Ibid.*, 31.

²³*Ibid.*, 31, 33.

²⁴*New York Times*, March 23, 1910, 20. It is unclear from the *New York Times* article whether the “Executive Committee” was a local body or the governing board of the international textile workers’ union.

²⁵*Ibid.*, March 24, 1910.

²⁶Crook, *Communism and the General Strike*, 32-5. Crook notes that when his first book on the general strike was published in 1931, “it seemed to be common belief in labor circles that the first general strike in North America had occurred in Seattle in 1919, followed in the same year by that in Winnipeg.” (18) In *Communism and the General Strike* he takes his account of the St. Louis strike from David T. Burbank, and credits Roger Wallace Shugg with having “uncovered” the New Orleans general strike. (22) But for the Philadelphia strike, he cites contemporary *New York Times* articles directly, suggesting that he did the primary research himself, and I have not been able to find any other secondary accounts. Crook describes the collapse of the general strike, but fails to record what ultimately happened to the striking carmen.

because they felt the outcome of the dispute would affect the welfare of all organized labor. Both strikes were organized by a citywide organization, and both the deployment or threatened deployment of state militias contributed greatly to their defeat. Except for the fact that there was no actual general strike in Boston, this model matches the Boston events closely. The Philadelphia strike provides a somewhat different angle, in that the transit industry was not as central to the city's economy²⁷ and the strike failed more due to a collapse from within rather than the intervention of troops.

But St. Louis and New Orleans do not seem to have been much on the minds of the major actors in the Boston Police crisis. In contrast, the two North American general strikes of 1919 were obvious points of reference to the Boston Central Labor Union leadership, the government and conservative forces opposed to the policemen, as well as anyone scrutinizing the Boston Police Strike today. An examination of Seattle strike of February and the Winnipeg strike of June and July allows one to understand what was at issue when the B.C.L.U. threatened a general strike, and provides some idea of what might have happened had the Boston unions gone through with their pledge of a sympathetic strike on behalf of the police.

Seattle and Winnipeg, 1919

The Seattle strike began with a strike by shipyard workers on January 21, 1919. Some of the more radical, I.W.W.-influenced members of the Seattle Central Labor Council, the A.F. of L. organization of local unions, were able to use the absence of many of the council's leaders to push through a vote to support

²⁷Though streetcar strikes were inconvenient, they were fairly common in that period and cities had always managed to survive them. Philadelphia was not structured around its transit industry the way East St. Louis and New Orleans were dependent on commerce.

the shipbuilders with a general strike.²⁸ After three days of warning, the strike began on February 6. 60,000 workers in all fields stayed home, and the city's economy was paralyzed, though the General Strike Committee ensured that essential services, such as milk delivery and electricity, continued uninterrupted.²⁹ The General Strike Committee even policed the city, using unarmed veterans who were members of unions.³⁰ Partially because of the efforts of these men, there was an almost total absence of violence during the strike. Despite the calm of the city, the strike was denounced nationwide as the beginning of a Bolshevik-style revolution.³¹ In the face of an enormous buildup of police and military force as well as downright hostility to the strike on the part of the A.F. of L. leadership, the strike collapsed on February 10.

The use of a general strike, "the first major general strike in U.S. history,"³² in Seattle made February's events a significant episode in the development of strike tactics and of responses to strikes. The Central Labor Council's decision to support the shipbuilders by having all the unions in the city strike "in itself. . . marked a serious departure from customary American labor tactics."³³ An A.F. of L. Central Labor Union, whose duties under the A.F. of L. constitution were largely limited to organizational activities, had slipped its leash and ventured into the unexplored territory of the general strike.³⁴ After the strike

²⁸Murray, *Red Scare*, 59. Robert L. Friedheim, *The Seattle General Strike* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), 81-2.

²⁹Murray, *Red Scare*, 61.

³⁰Dennis E. Hoffman and Vincent J. Webb, "Police Response to Labor Radicalism in Portland and Seattle, 1913-19," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (1987), 361.

³¹Murray, *Red Scare*, 65. One of the highest-level officials to speak of the Seattle strike in these terms was Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson, who claimed that in Seattle and other places, "a deliberate attempt was made to create a social and political revolution that would establish a soviet form of Government in the United States and put into effect the economic theories of the Bolsheviks of Russia." *New York Times*, March 4, 1919, 4.

³²Hoffman and Webb, "Police Response to Labor Radicalism," 351.

³³Murray, *Red Scare*, 60.

³⁴See Article XI of the Constitution of the American Federation of Labor, 1919-1920, in *Report of Proceedings of the Thirty-Ninth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor*. (Washington, D.C.: The Law Reporter Printing Co., 1919), xxix-xxx.

was over, the Council was rebuked by the *American Federationist*, the official organ of the A.F. of L.:

The general strike inaugurated by the Seattle Central Labor Union was an undertaking in violation of the rules and regulations of the American Federation of Labor. The greater number of the local unions did not have the approval and sanction of their international unions and did not receive their moral or financial support. Born in a spirit of insubordination, disregarding of all rules and regulations adopted by trade unions for orderly procedure and the safeguarding of the rights and privileges of their members and jeopardizing the funds of all local and international unions by subjecting them to the will and whim of officers of central labor unions, this strike was bound from its inception to die an early death.³⁵

Despite this condemnation, the Central Labor Council had shown that a central labor union could not only act independently of the A.F. of L.'s national leadership, but could run an entire city for several days without shortages or violence. Although the strike had failed, the Boston Central Labor Union could draw promising lessons.

So could governments. The Seattle strike had shown that a central labor union could shut down a city and restart it on its own terms, but it also demonstrated that a general strike could be defeated with force and determination. This strategy was embodied in the mayor of Seattle, Ole Hanson. At the very beginning of the strike, he had assembled an army of policemen and troops to deter violence on the part of the strikers, and promised to call upon, if necessary, "every soldier in the Northwest to protect life, business, and property."³⁶ He had then used this massed force to give power to his ultimatum to the strikers, whom he termed "anarchists" and "revolutionists."³⁷ Hanson had not tried negotiation; he relied on pure, uncompromising, military intimidation. And it worked. The

³⁵Matthew Woll, "More Lessons Than One in Seattle Strike" (editorial), *American Federationist* 26, no. 3 (March 1919), 243-4. Although this article is a signed editorial, Woll occupied a high position in the A.F. of L.'s national hierarchy, and his comments can be confidently assumed to represent the feelings among the top A.F. of L. leadership.

³⁶Hoffman and Webb, "Police Response to Labor Radicalism," 353.

³⁷Murray, *Red Scare*, 63, and Hoffman and Webb, "Police Response to Labor Radicalism," 360.

show of force was instrumental in convincing the strikers to go back to work.³⁸ By March, Hanson was viewed as “Seattle’s deliverer from revolution,”³⁹ and a national hero.⁴⁰ Politicians across the country could take note of the potential rewards to be reaped by crushing “Bolshevism.”

A second general strike began in Winnipeg, Manitoba on May 15 and lasted for over a month. In this case, the organizing body was the Winnipeg Trades and Labor Council, again the A.F. of L. body responsible for coordinating the various affiliated unions in a city, but not empowered with calling a general strike.⁴¹ The Winnipeg council followed mirrored the organizational scheme of the Seattle strike committee, which suggests that it was consciously modeling its strike on Seattle’s.⁴² The initial conflict in Winnipeg was between three foundries and their workers, who wanted to establish collective bargaining between the foundries and the Metal Trades Council, a coalition of several craft unions.⁴³ On May 6, the Trades Council called for a vote on a general strike to support not only the metal workers but also striking builders, and on May 13 the result was announced: the city’s union workers had voted to strike on May 15.⁴⁴

The Winnipeg general strike involved what was essentially the strike of a unionized police force. Winnipeg’s police could not have been A.F. of L. affiliates; no charters were granted to police unions until June, after the general strike had begun. But they were unionized, and in April 1919 they had even

³⁸Hoffman and Webb, “Police Response to Labor Radicalism,” 361.

³⁹“Mayor Ole Hanson, Who ‘Sat Tight’ at Seattle,” *Literary Digest* 60, no. 10 (March 1919), 47.

⁴⁰Murray, *Red Scare*, 65.

⁴¹ Crook, *General Strike*, 528. Although called “the American Federation of Labor,” the A.F. of L., like the I.W.O., was really an international organization, representing workers in both Canada and the United States. This is reflected in the names of many of the A.F. of L.’s constituent unions, such as the *International Association of Fire Fighters*, and in the fact that the A.F. of L. held its 1920 convention in Montreal.

⁴²D. C. Masters, *The Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), 47.

⁴³Crook, *General Strike*, 544.

⁴⁴David Jay Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1974), 113-14.

voted to strike for higher wages, only to call off the strike when the city had agreed to their demands at the last moment.⁴⁵ While the raise averted an April strike, it apparently did not win the utter devotion of the force. A few weeks later, presented with a plea for assistance from the metal workers, the policemen voted overwhelmingly to join the general strike.⁴⁶ Once the strike began, on May 15, the police took orders from the strike committee; they were told to continue their work, for police work was considered essential, like milk and bread delivery.⁴⁷ This situation left the police in a very odd position. On the one hand, they could hardly be called loyal to the elected government, for they were taking orders from the strike committee. On the other hand, they were doing their jobs as they always had, and proclaimed their readiness to mete out equal justice to striker and strikebreaker alike.⁴⁸

For a few weeks the police remained on duty, and until May 31 the city was quite placid; after that date, the strikers' angry marches were still attended by little violence.⁴⁹ But the business interests of Winnipeg, embodied as the Citizens' Committee, did not meekly accept the decision of the police to obey the strike committee's orders. The Committee pressured the City Council to take action against the city's employees who were cooperating with the strike.⁵⁰ On May 26, the City singled out public employees, particularly policemen and firemen, for attack. The council passed one resolution prohibiting the firemen from joining any organization to which they might owe allegiance and from ever joining a sympathetic strike--surprisingly, the Council seems to have been willing

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 111.

⁴⁶Crook, *General Strike*, 545.

⁴⁷Masters, *Winnipeg General Strike*, 50.

⁴⁸Norman Penner, ed., *Winnipeg 1919: The Strikers' Own History of the Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto: James Lewis & Samuel, 1973), 45.

⁴⁹Masters, *Winnipeg General Strike*, 96.

⁵⁰Penner, *Winnipeg 1919*, xv.

to allow the firemen to form an unaffiliated union and even to strike after arbitration had failed.⁵¹ Furthermore, the Council approved “the dismissal of all employees in civic services who had struck on May 15.”⁵² On May 29, the same rules were extended to policemen, and on May 30 the police were given 24 hours to sign a pledge not to join an affiliated union and not to engage in a sympathetic strike. The policemen refused to agree, and on June 9 the city government dismissed the police force, replacing it with “special police.”⁵³

The “specials” who were hired to replace the police were mostly returned soldiers. While many had combat experience, they lacked the policeman’s skills of traffic direction, crowd control, and the use of non-lethal force.⁵⁴ As would later happen in Boston, men without uniform and with only military training who were attempting to fill the complex role of peace officer proved to be irresistible targets of angry citizens who resented being policed in such a fashion and were eager to test the mettle of such an unfamiliar power. At the same time, the specials had not learned the restraint of the regular police, and were apt to respond with too much force to provocation.⁵⁵ Thus when the specials first appeared on the streets on June 10, they were attacked by mobs hurling missiles and pulling the mounted specials off their horses.⁵⁶

In the end, the Winnipeg Strike was defeated by the application of massive military force. Not only were there nine times as many “special” police as there normally were police, but the specials were paid a higher salary.⁵⁷ The police

⁵¹Masters, *Winnipeg General Strike*, 74.

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³*Ibid.*, 96.

⁵⁴Penner, *Winnipeg 1919*, 128.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 133.

⁵⁶Masters, *Winnipeg General Strike*, 97.

⁵⁷Penner, *Winnipeg 1919*, 127.

were never rehired.⁵⁸ The national leadership of the American Federation of Labor condemned the Winnipeg unions for seeking “one big union,”⁵⁹ and revoked the charters of some of its affiliates there.⁶⁰

In the great drama of an entire city striking, the Winnipeg policemen’s role attracts little attention, either in accounts of the Winnipeg strike or of the Boston Police Strike. But we see in Winnipeg a union council whose complete control of the city extended to the police force, which as a member organization of the council had voted overwhelmingly for a general strike. Depending on one’s viewpoint, this was an impressive, if ultimately failed demonstration of the power of labor or the beginning of a revolution against lawful government. Like Seattle, Winnipeg remained orderly and secure under the reign of labor. And while the Seattle strike committee had depended on union members who had fought in France to replace the union-busting police force, Winnipeg’s was able to command the police.

The Winnipeg and Seattle strikes appear at first glance to have been ruinous defeats for organized labor, but they were not necessarily perceived that way in 1919. In the spring and summer of 1919, the I.W.W. and the A.F. of L. considered nationwide general strikes in support of labor leaders who had been imprisoned for alleged subversion. This strategy--fighting charges of radicalism with a radical action--had been raised by the I.W.W. in 1906, when that organization considered, but rejected, the idea of launching a general strike in support of Haywood, who was on trial for murder.⁶¹ In March 1919, Eugene V. Debs, the famous radical leader who had been convicted for violating the

⁵⁸Masters, *Winnipeg General Strike*, 136.

⁵⁹The One Big Union movement was a Canadian effort at industrial unionism, much like the I.W.W. There is a parallel between Seattle and Winnipeg in that the A.F. of L. centrals in both city’s appear to have been influenced by more radical unions.

⁶⁰*New York Times*, June 8, 1919, 3.

⁶¹Crook, *General Strike*, 216.

Espionage Act, threatened that “by May 1, the day on which I begin my sentence, a general strike will have culminated.”⁶² Debs expected the miners of Indiana to start the strike, but it did not come about. Similarly, a proposed nationwide general strike in support of Thomas Mooney, who had been convicted of participating in a 1916 bombing was rejected by the A.F. of L. and failed to materialize.⁶³ Although these strikes did not begin, they show that the idea of the general strike had not died in Seattle or Winnipeg.

The history of the general strike in Europe and North America and the events in Seattle and Winnipeg shed light on several important questions about the threatened general strike in support of the Boston police. First, why did the Boston Central Labor Union consider a general strike, when general strikes by A.F. of L. centrals in New Orleans, Seattle, and Winnipeg had failed to achieve their goals and had severely weakened the labor movements in those cities? Second, how did the threat of a general strike affect government response to the police crisis before and after the police walkout? And third, what caused the B.C.L.U. and its constituent locals to abandon their plans for a general strike, leaving the policemen to their fate?

Preparations for a General Strike in Boston

Before answering these questions, it is necessary to set forth a brief chronological account of the general strike that did not take place in Boston in September 1919. The first indication that other A.F. of L.-affiliated locals might strike in “sympathy” with the police, i.e., leave work although they had no particular complaint against their own employers but in order to support the police

⁶²*New York Times*, April 1, 1919, 4.

⁶³*Ibid.*, June 18, 1919, 5. Murray, *Red Scare*, 116.

in their struggle with Commissioner Curtis, is an August 16 article in the *Evening Transcript* stating that at police meetings on the previous day,

Policemen were assured that labor would handle their case with the police commissioner and that 80,000 labor union members of Boston would stand by them. There was talk of calling out the Boston firemen, the Elevated carmen and the telephone operators if Commissioner Curtis carried out his threat. No meetings of these three unions have been called, however, to consider sympathetic strike possibilities, but numerous firemen were seen about Fay Hall last night, evidently advising the policemen not to falter.

There was also talk that the teamsters of Boston and the unions of city employees would join a sympathetic strike if necessary, to push the policemen's movement over. The labor leaders [Frank H. McCarthy of the A.F. of L., City Councillor and labor advocate James T. Moriarty, and B.C.L.U. business agent P. Harry Jennings] told the policemen that they must remain firm for organization, for the eyes of the whole country are upon them.⁶⁴

Two days later, on the seventeenth, at the weekly meeting of the B.C.L.U. made the possibility of a general strike slightly more official. "Before a large number of delegates the C.L.U. manifested its readiness to call a general strike of all the organized labor of the city in this fight."⁶⁵ And the next day, three locals, the Plumbers' Union, Local 12; Machinists' Lodge 391, and Boilermakers' Union, Local 585 "voted full support to the Boston Policemen's Union, even to the extent of quitting work, if necessary."⁶⁶ On August 24, the B.C.L.U. voted to "support" the police and to call meetings of every local in Boston to vote on support of the police. "The [B.C.L.U.] delegates predicted that every important union in the city would respond to a strike call, if one were issued."⁶⁷

During the next two weeks, the building police crisis and the frantic efforts of the Storrow committee eclipsed the possibility of a general strike, at least in the press. But once the policemen had walked off their jobs, the specter of

⁶⁴*Evening Transcript*, August 16, 1919, 1.

⁶⁵*Labor World*, August 23, 1919.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, .

⁶⁷*Evening Transcript*, August 25, 1919.

a general strike reemerged. The peak of excitement about a general strike-- feverish anticipation among union members and terror among conservatives-- came in the days immediately following the police walkout of September 9. On September 11, the *Evening Transcript* ran as its lead story the headline, "General Strike Impends."⁶⁸ Unlike the *Transcript's* ravings about Bolshevism, this article was based partly on fact. It reported:

Boston is threatened with the catastrophe of a general strike. Late this afternoon there appeared to be no way of averting such a misfortune unless the authorities surrender absolutely to the demands of the policemen. Whether a general strike will be called among the bodies affiliated with the American Federation of Labor depends much upon the outcome of a meeting of the Central Labor Union that is in session. The mayor has refused to yield, and labor men have said that there is no hope of averting a general strike.⁶⁹

On September 13, a sympathetic strike of at least some unions was still likely. The telephone operators seemed particularly inclined to strike in sympathy with the police, and the *Labor World* reported that

There is also the possibility, which labor leaders consider a probability, that the carmen of the Boston Elevated Railway Company, the stationary firemen, men employed in the building trades and perhaps others will become involved in the strike. The situation is little short of critical, and the next few days may bring a crisis in the city's history. There is some disposition among the members of the fire department to strike in sympathy with the police.⁷⁰

The article was right about one thing: the next few days were critical.

The winds shifted on September 14. In New York, Guy Oyster, Gompers's secretary, objected to a general strike before leaving for Boston. At the same time, an A.F. of L. official told reporters that Gompers "does not want a general strike and the Federation does not want a general strike." On Tuesday,

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, September 11, 1919, 1.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

⁷⁰*Labor World*, September 13, 1919.

September 16, the fireman's union became the first to back away from its pro-strike stance, out of submission to orders from above and in the face of replacement fire fighters in the State Guard. After the firemen stated that they would not strike, other unions declared that they would not strike first.⁷¹

A general strike was effectively averted at the Sunday B.C.L.U. meeting on September 21. Most of the labor unions in the city had voted on the question of joining a general strike. But the leadership of the B.C.L.U. decided to keep the results of the vote a secret. They claimed that this tactic was intended to deprive the opposition of advance warning, but the result was to delay the chance of a strike further, as the national condemnation of the striking policemen mounted. As tempers cooled and the policemen's strike appeared broken, the chance of a general strike quickly faded after the twenty-first.

This progression of events--the promise of a general strike, a period in which a general strike appeared imminent, and the ultimate decision not to call a general strike--is puzzling at first glance. The B.C.L.U.'s broken promise to support the police with sympathy strikes might be read as simple treachery. But by viewing the events in the context of other general strikes, and by determining what meaning those previous strikes had for the people involved, we can better appreciate the complex forces that created this tension. In the following section, I will first compare the Boston situation with other general strikes will show that several factors may have made a general strike seem like a good idea to the B.C.L.U.. Next, I will show that those same strikes suggested tactics that government officials, notably Governor Coolidge, could use to prevent strikes. And finally, I will examine the firm opposition to general strikes on the part of the national leadership of the American Federation of Labor, which was perhaps the

⁷¹Facts in this paragraph are from Russell, *City in Terror*, 193-96.

critical factor in preventing a general strike in Boston. These different perceptions--of the B.C.L.U., of the government, and of the A.F. of L.--of past general strikes pulled the B.C.L.U. in various directions, resulting in contradictory and inconsistent policies. These inconsistencies should be regarded not as simple perfidy on the part of fair-weather friends, but as the product of different interpretations of complex events in the past.

This brings us to the first question: why did the B.C.L.U. consider a general strike, given the apparent failures of this tactic elsewhere?

To the B.C.L.U., the lessons of past general strikes may not have been as unequivocally discouraging as they appear today. The New Orleans strike did gain some benefits for the unions, though not the crucial ones. The Seattle and Winnipeg strikes, though ultimate failures, were very impressive shows of strength in that they were essentially takeovers of major cities by a temporary workers' government.⁷² An indication that the B.C.L.U. was contemplating such a takeover, in which the central labor union would provide the city with its basic needs, came during the week of September 15, at a meeting of the Policemen's Union. A *Labor World* article reported,

had been requested, however, officials of the Central Labor not to strike or declare any intention to do so. As has already been it is the intention of the Central Labor Union leaders to exempt unions from striking in case a general walkout is decided upon. The men's Union is one of these. Another is the Milk Wagon Drivers' Union, and other unions are those composed of men in the city departments. The purpose of this is not to imperil the health and well being of the city.

⁷²History Committee of the General Strike Committee, *The Seattle General Strike*, (Seattle: The Seattle Union Record, 1919), 62-3. Despite the national perception that the Seattle strike was defeated, this history of the strike prepared by the General Strike Committee tells a different story. It says that of the striking workers, "the vast majority struck to express solidarity," rather than to win any concrete gains in wages, and that "they succeeded beyond their wildest expectations." Moreover, the Seattle strike had advanced the cause of the general strike, by exploring its possibilities. One could argue that this perspective was merely labor's way of putting a good face on a disastrous defeat, but I do not think it should be dismissed so quickly. As the book points out, the logistical feats of the Seattle workers in keeping a large city, safe, fed, and peaceful for several days were and are quite impressive, and in 1919 could have been seen as pointing the way to a more powerful labor movement.

Probably the Boston Street Carmen's Union may also be included in the list.⁷³

This was the sort of practical planning that prevented violence and starvation in New Orleans, Seattle, and Winnipeg and could have made a general strike in Boston effective. (In contrast, the Workingmen's Party in St. Louis lacked the resources to feed the strikers or prevent violence.)⁷⁴ It now seems incredible that a general strike could have increased the public's sympathy for the striking policemen, but the efficiency of the Seattle and Winnipeg unions in essentially running those cities became believable because it actually happened. In 1919, the possibilities must have appeared real.

Organized labor would probably not have come so close to using so powerful a weapon had it not believed that the result of the policemen's struggle would prove crucial to the fate of the city's other unions. In Philadelphia and Winnipeg it is not immediately clear why union members not directly affected by the streetcar and metal strikes, respectively, were willing to risk their jobs for the sake of another union.⁷⁵ But in New Orleans and Seattle, the issue of union recognition was essential in persuading unions to join a general strike. The New Orleans Workingmen's Amalgamated Council called a general strike not only on behalf of the "Triple Alliance" but also "because the strength of unionism and perhaps its survival depended on the extension of the closed shop."⁷⁶ Advocates of a general strike among the printers' union there circulated a notice that argued that "the issue was not 'one of mere matter of hours and wages, but one of recognition of Unionism.'"⁷⁷ Likewise, the Seattle C.L.U. had been persuaded to

⁷³*Labor World*, September 20, 1919. Gaps in the text indicate illegible sections of the microfilm. The article does not indicate which day the plans for exempting some unions were announced.

⁷⁴Roediger, "America's First General Strike," 202.

⁷⁵See Crook, *Communism and the General Strike*, 28, and Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 110, for accounts of the general strike votes in these cities.

⁷⁶Shugg, "New Orleans General Strike," 554.

⁷⁷Cook, "Typographical Union," 381.

call a general strike in part by a speech in which a representative of the strikers said that if the shipbuilders' union were defeated, the smaller unions could be easily picked off later.⁷⁸

Two facts in the Boston policemen's dispute may have convinced Boston workers that that strike was as vital to their interests as the Triple Alliance strike had been to the unions of New Orleans and the shipbuilders' strike had been to those of Seattle. First, the police battle was, as the New Orleans printers had put it 37 years earlier, not "one of mere matter of hours and wages, but one of recognition of Unionism." A government victory would conclusively deny police in Boston and elsewhere the right to affiliate with the A.F. of L., and perhaps could deal a serious blow to public-sector unionism in general.⁷⁹ Second, the Boston unions stood to gain quite a bit if the police were unionized. Beginning in 1885, when the Commonwealth took charge of the Boston police, the force had been used to protect property during strikes.⁸⁰ "In 1919 [the police] had used an extensive show of force during three separate strikes by the Market Teamsters, the Boston Elevated Railway Employees and the telephone employees."⁸¹ Publicly A.F. of L. and B.C.L.U. officials insisted that a unionized police force would be as impartial as ever during strikes. But since it seems implausible that the B.C.L.U. would be prepared to launch a general strike for the sake of just any group of 1300 workers, it is tempting to speculate that the B.C.L.U. was in part

⁷⁸Friedheim, *Seattle General Strike*, 83.

⁷⁹With the exception of a mutiny by the armed forces in time of war (the calamity that hit France in 1917) a police strike is perhaps the most dangerous type of labor stoppage. But the American Federation of Labor unions may have feared that a denial of the policemen's right to organize could be extended to other public employees, such as telephone operators, whose strikes could imperil cities. There were even arguments at the time that railroad strikes should be made illegal because they threatened cities with starvation. As it happened, the policemen's defeat delayed police unionism for decades. I do not know what effect the Boston police strike had on other public sector unions, but since this essay is not about the effects of the strike such a discussion is not relevant here.

⁸⁰Bruce C. Johnson, "Taking Care of Labor: The Police in American Politics," *Theory and Society* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1976), 93.

⁸¹Jonathan Randall White, *A Triumph of Bureaucracy: The Boston Police Strike and the Ideological Origins of the American Police State* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1982), 154.

motivated by the hope that a unionized, affiliated police force would be more sympathetic during work stoppages.⁸² And although B.C.L.U. officials were to stridently disavow the notion that the police could ever be called on to join a sympathy strike, they did have before them the precedent of Winnipeg, where a central labor union had had a trained police force obeying its orders. There is no direct evidence that the Boston union leaders smiled at night with happy dreams of controlling Boston: police, milk delivery and all. But there is no denying that the police could have been useful allies.

In addition to these rational calculations, an important factor in the union's behavior was the emotional power and momentum of the call for a general strike. It was very easy for rank and file union members to become very excited about the possibility of a general strike without fully considering the consequences. The firemen, who, it will be remembered, went through a struggle similar to that of the policemen a year before, had a somewhat emotional basis for supporting the police. They, along with the telephone operators, were the policemen's staunchest supporters among Boston's A.F. of L. unions.⁸³ The role of emotion was evident when the B.C.L.U. meeting of October 5 was, in the words of the *Labor World*, almost "stampeded into taking the vote" to call a general strike.⁸⁴

The government officials on the other side of the dispute were no doubt affected by emotion as well. On September 8, the day before the policemen struck, "Diamond" Jim Timilty, a labor leader and politician, told Coolidge that as the head of a major union, he would see to it that Coolidge need "not to worry over all this mush about a general strike."⁸⁵ But subsequent actions were to show

⁸²White, *Triumph of Bureaucracy*, 154.

⁸³*Evening Transcript*, August 22, 1919.

⁸⁴October 11, 1919.

⁸⁵William Allen White, *A Puritan in Babylon: The Story of Calvin Coolidge* (1938. Reprint. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973), 157. White cites for this event a letter from *Boston Post* reporter Robert Brady, who was told about it by Timilty years later.

that Coolidge still believed that a general strike was a possibility. As for Curtis, just prior to the police strike he berated Coolidge when the governor considered compromising with the police. Curtis exclaimed, “if we give in now, there will be no army, no police force, no government and this whole great country will fall to pieces--look what happened in Seattle!”⁸⁶ Curtis never spoke of Bolshevism or anarchism in the strike, but the Seattle strike appears to have made a deep impression upon him. Coolidge and Curtis knew that predictions of proletarian revolution were fanciful. But a general strike could happen.

Both to try to avert a general strike and to cope with one if it could not be diverted, Coolidge took a page out of Seattle Mayor Ole Hanson’s drill manual: he ordered in massive military force. The Boston police force numbered a total of 1,544, of whom 1,117 walked out on September 9.⁸⁷ These men could have been replaced with 1,000 State Guard troops drawn from three regiments stationed in Boston, supplemented perhaps with members of the volunteer police force which had been recruited over the past few weeks.⁸⁸ But instead of calling out these troops alone, Peters, on the tenth, asked Coolidge for 3,000 additional troops.⁸⁹ Coolidge not only agreed to the extra troops, but upped the ante, mobilizing the entire State Guard of 4,768 men.⁹⁰

There are several reasons why Peters and Coolidge may have felt it necessary to mobilize the entire guard. Unlike the policemen, the State Guard troops were not trained for police functions, and so could not have been expected

⁸⁶Frederick Manuel Koss, “The Boston Police Strike” (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1960), 331. Koss cites an interview with Curtis’s daughter

⁸⁷Claude M. Fuess, *Calvin Coolidge: The Man from Vermont* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1940), 218.

⁸⁸Koss, “Boston Police Strike,” 187.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 195.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 196.

to be as efficient as the striking policemen they were to replace.⁹¹ Furthermore, it takes more force to impose peace than to maintain it, and by the time the Guard was mobilized, the policemen's absence had inspired riots and looting that would take days to calm.

In addition to these two reasons, the threatened general strike was an important factor in Coolidge's military planning. Fearing that since the entire State Guard was apparently just able to control the city with only one union striking, Coolidge sent a public telegram to Washington, saying,

At the present time the city of Boston is orderly. There are rumors of a very general strike. I wish that you would hold yourself in readiness to render assistance from forces under your command immediately upon application, which I may be compelled to make to the President.⁹²

The Secretary of War complied with Coolidge's request, and soon had ten thousand troops ready on short notice.⁹³ As if this were not enough, Coolidge reactivated a demobilized Guard regiment and ordered that the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia, absorbed by the National Guard in 1917, be reactivated.⁹⁴ In sum, Coolidge had at hand over 5,000 men--volunteer police and State Guard troops--was prepared to send up to 25,000 more. In contrast, Hanson had used 1,500 policemen, 1,500 troops, and the threat of "every soldier in the northwest" to quell the Seattle strike, while the Winnipeg strike was crushed with 10,000

⁹¹The guardsmen's lack of police training is indicated in a memorandum from Police Superintendent Michael J. Crowley to "All Divisions and B.C.I.," September 15, 1919. Samuel D. Parker Papers, Houghton Library. Contemporary newspaper accounts record numerous instances in which the unfamiliarity of Boston residents with the guardsmen and the guardsmen's inexperience combined to spark violent confrontations where a seasoned police officer could have merely used his voice and facial expression to intimidate the potential miscreant. A tragic example is recorded in the *Evening Transcript* on September 13. A man tried to snatch a guardsman's rifle and was shot in doing so; the bullet passed through his body, killing him, and continued on to wound a bystander. This demonstrates the inability of even armed troops to instill as much respect for law as the familiar policeman, as well as the inappropriateness of the infantry rifle as a weapon for policing crowded cities.

⁹²*Evening Transcript*, September 11, 1919, 3.

⁹³Russell, *City in Terror*, 176.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 177.

civilians, 3,600 special police, and a few hundred troops.⁹⁵ This is not to say that Coolidge's preparations were an overreaction. Intimidation is as valid a stratagem as stealth, and Coolidge may have been trying to cow the labor unions into remaining at work by threatening them with a troop deployment that would dwarf the forces that had defeated two general strikes that year.

But even as he tried to avert a general strike with noisy, public gestures, Coolidge was making secret preparations in case the general strike went through anyway. One particularly worrisome possibility was the chance that a walkout by the firemen could leave the city vulnerable to conflagration. If any union struck in sympathy with the police, it would most likely be the firemen. In late August, as the police crisis developed, "the superior officers in the Fire Department [were] confident that the firemen would vote to go out on the slightest provocation, and [were] making their plans accordingly."⁹⁶ The firemen continued to make noise about supporting the police through a walkout of their own.⁹⁷ Meanwhile their boss, Fire Commissioner John R. Murphy, was writing confidential memos to General Samuel D. Parker, the commander of the State Guard forces. Murphy fretted that the city's fire alarm cable system was vulnerable, and begged Parker to keep the First Motor Corps available for fire protection.⁹⁸ At the same time Coolidge arranged for a team of electricians to board a naval vessel and steam to Boston's main electrical power house, to maintain the city's power supply in case the workers there were to strike in sympathy with the police.⁹⁹ Thus, the threat of

⁹⁵Murray, *Red Scare*, 63, and Crook, *General Strike*, 555.

⁹⁶*Evening Transcript*, August 22, 1919.

⁹⁷Koss, "Boston Police Strike," 225.

⁹⁸Murphy to Parker, September 16 and 18, 1919. Parker Papers.

⁹⁹Calvin Coolidge, *Autobiography* (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1929), 133. Somehow, this use of a navy ship to control a city seems vaguely reminiscent of the Bolsheviks' use of the Aurora during the November Revolution, begging the question: who were the real Bolsheviks of the Boston Police Strike?

a general strike provoked both stern, public measures and nervous, behind-the-scenes planning among the state officials.

These preparations no doubt contributed to the eventual non-occurrence of a general strike. So did the overwhelmingly hostile opinion of the police held by the public and by the press.¹⁰⁰ This hostile atmosphere set the Boston situation apart from Seattle and Winnipeg, where the strikers could count on a few allies. But in addition to the external hostility faced by the B.C.L.U., internal factors dictated against the calling of a general strike. The structure and internal dynamics of the A.F. of L. and B.C.L.U. were not the only reasons there was no general strike. But to understand why there was no general strike, they must be examined.

First, despite the generally enthusiastic welcome the policemen received when they joined the A.F. of L., the Boston unions were not unanimously or consistently friendly to the new union. Some had specific grievances against the police, who had previously been their opponents in many strike situations. A reporter noted that

while the telephone operators give the police credit for the very friendly attitude shown toward them in the recent strike, the carmen have never had the notion that the police were friendly. Frankly, they do not like the police. . . and, while they hope the police will win, they do not favor the prospect of losing their weekly wages to help them.¹⁰¹

Perhaps a history of scrapes with the police inspired labor leader Timilty's comment about "these damn cops." Whether out of dislike of the policemen or a desire to help Coolidge, Timilty used his muscle against a general strike.¹⁰² And at the same time it was swaying the populace in general against the police, the

¹⁰⁰Every Boston newspaper, except, of course, the *Labor World*, and a good many papers outside of Boston condemned the striking policemen in various terms of moral disgust. As for the public, several writers point out that the gubernatorial election of 1919 became largely a referendum on Coolidge's handling of the strike, and Coolidge was overwhelmingly reelected.

¹⁰¹*Evening Transcript*, August 22, 1919.

¹⁰²White, *Puritan in Babylon*, 163.

rioting may have made other union members question the cause of the policemen, as did the firemen.¹⁰³

Second, the Boston Central Labor Union was not particularly well designed to call and run a general strike. After studying dozens of general strikes on several continents, Wilfrid Crook writes, “in the majority of cases so little thought has been given to the matter that no definite aim or strict limit of duration has been set to the general walk-out before it commenced--an oversight that almost invariably has led to disaster.”¹⁰⁴ Putting aside the fact that it never commenced, the Boston general strike was no exception. From the initial pledge of support by the plumbers, machinists, and boilermakers on August 18, to the policemen’s walkout on September 9, the B.C.L.U. had over three weeks in which to plan a general strike and announce under what conditions it would call a general strike, and under what conditions it would call off a strike. The failure of the organization to use those weeks effectively left it unready to cope with fast-moving events once the police struck.

The full effect of the lack of a clear structure for calling a general strike became apparent at the meeting on September 21, when the B.C.L.U. pocket-vetoed the strike ballots in a manner reminiscent of the Pennsylvania State Federation of Labor in 1910. If you are afraid of the result of a vote, simply refuse to count the ballots. Labor leaders employed a similar tactic on October 5, when “two representatives of the striking policemen appeared before the delegates and demanded a ‘showdown’ as to the support the parent body was to give the Police Union.”¹⁰⁵ Organizer McCarthy silenced the representatives with a parliamentary technicality--they lacked official delegates’ credentials and

¹⁰³Russell, *City in Terror*, 196.

¹⁰⁴Crook, *General Strike*, viii.

¹⁰⁵*Labor World*, October 11, 1919.

therefore did not have the right to speak--and the police were not heard from again.

Third, and most importantly, the A.F. of L. as a national organization was against general strikes, and this attitude doomed the effort in Boston more than anything else. The A.F. of L. constitution specifically stated that

no Central Labor Union. . . shall have the authority or power to order any organization affiliated with such Central Labor Union. . . on strike, or take a strike vote, where such organization has a national organization, until the proper authorities of such National or International organization have been consulted and agreed to such action. A violation of this law shall be sufficient cause for the Executive Council to revoke the charter.¹⁰⁶

This is a very strong provision, written into the very constitution of the A.F. of L., which would, if regarded, give the internationals veto power over any general strike. Because of the A.F. of L.'s emphasis on craft unionism, a given central would have to have the approvals of dozens of internationals before it could even ask its constituent member unions to vote on a general strike. No wonder that in August, when a group of city councillors "were prepared to condemn the police when they read in the papers of the threatened strike of 80,000 in support of the newly formed union," they were reassured by the provision that the internationals would have to consent to any general strike.¹⁰⁷

On the other hand, the A.F. of L. constitution had had a similar provision since at least 1910, and that did not prevent the general strikes in Philadelphia, Seattle, and Winnipeg. This fact made rather hollow the gesture of O'Donnell and McCarthy when they gave Coolidge and Storrow copies of the constitution to prove that "no other union or officer in the American Federation of Labor from President Gompers down would or could direct the Policemen's Union to take

¹⁰⁶*Proceedings of the Thirty-Ninth Annual Convention*, xxix.

¹⁰⁷*Labor World*, August 23, 1919.

action of any kind.”¹⁰⁸ O’Donnell and McCarthy were in effect trying to prove with a piece of paper that an A.F. of L. central could not direct a policemen’s union, though that is precisely what had happened in Winnipeg a few months earlier. The national A.F. of L. may have sincerely wished that it could control its centrals--as indicated by the condemnation of the Seattle Strike in the *American Federationist* --but it appears unable to have achieved that wish.

Were the Boston policemen betrayed? It is not the intention of this essay to evaluate the behavior of various actors on a moral scale.¹⁰⁹ But other authors have, in their zeal to expound their views of honorable conduct, mislaid the responsibility for there not having been a general strike. Russell accuses Oyster, Gompers’s secretary, of peaking in “weasel words.”¹¹⁰ Koss attacks the A.F. of L. at greater length. He writes, “if the police were the victims, organized labor from Samuel Gompers down is the nearest thing to a villain in the piece.”¹¹¹ Baffled as to why the A.F. of L. “encouraged” the policemen to strike, he concludes that “the A.F. of L.’s behavior is difficult to explain except on the grounds that it was using the Boston police Union for a test of strength.”¹¹²

The A.F. of L.’s moral culpability is not an issue in this essay, but its tactics are. Koss’s notion that the A.F. of L. deliberately chose the Boston police for a “test of strength” and then abandoned them to the wolves is dangerously misleading, because it presumes that the A.F. of L., “from Gompers down,” was a unified body, with a single set of goals, and a single base of knowledge. In fact, the A.F. of L.’s alleged duplicity in promising the police a general strike if necessary and then breaking that pledge can only make sense when one

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, September 20, 1919.

¹⁰⁹The author’s moral compass has become thoroughly demagnetized in his four years at Harvard, and he sees no profit in passing judgment.

¹¹⁰Russell, *City in Terror*, 197.

¹¹¹Koss, “Boston Police Strike,” 340.

¹¹²*Ibid.*

understands that the national leadership had much less control over its constituent parts than it wished to or than its constitution indicated. This is an organization that used its own periodical to attack its Seattle affiliate, and had to revoke charters to punish the Winnipeg locals. What emerges from a more careful study is a B.C.L.U. that may well have gone through launched the third general strike of 1919 had it not been reined in at the last minute by the A.F. of L., and an A.F. of L. that was lukewarm to police unions in the first place, and was opposed to public employee strikes and general strikes all along.

However, there was one link between the pro-general-strike B.C.L.U. and the anti-general-strike A.F. of L.: Frank McCarthy, New England organizer for the A.F. of L. As noted in chapter 2, McCarthy could be maddeningly vague in his promises and inconsistent in his attitudes. Just as McCarthy's ambiguous speeches may have helped prod the police into striking, so did they confuse the B.C.L.U. about the advisability of a general strike. Much of the confusion stemmed from the word, "support;" when McCarthy promised support, he was probably not thinking of a general strike, but his audiences were.

It is impossible to adequately understand the forces tending toward and away from a general strike in Boston without examining what meaning such strikes had for their adherents, mainly local unions, and their opponents, both government officials and national labor leaders. Because earlier strikes were experimental, largely unplanned, and unauthorized, and ended with mixed results, it is natural that they would be interpreted differently by different people. And it is because the interpretations of past strikes varied so widely that when another general strike loomed on the horizon, it provoked a variety of responses. This variety should not be understood as cruelty or treachery. Rather, it was the result of subjective interpretations of history.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

The preceding chapters have attempted to explain behavior during the Boston Police Strike by putting the events into three contexts. These contexts-- the position of moderate labor, the threat of radicalism, and the use of the general strike-- form a picture of the state of organized labor in America in 1919. Examining them separately clarifies the effect that each had on the Boston Police Strike. But this separation should not obscure the connections between the three. Many Americans interpreted the Seattle and Winnipeg strikes as radical actions. The American Federation of Labor was constrained by the need to distance itself from radical labor. And the general strikes could never have taken place had it not been for A.F. of L. organizations. In the course of examining the Boston Police Strike, I have tried to give a clear picture of the extremely complex position of organized labor in the nineteen teens.

A history organized around these three contexts, though less straightforward than a chronological narrative, can uncover connections and reveal reasons that lie hidden in a history constrained by chronological order. A contextual approach can explain differences in the behavior of various actors in the strike, such as the gulf between Peters's attempts at compromise and the inflexibility of Curtis and Coolidge. Context can also explain inconsistencies that might otherwise be dismissed as mere hypocrisy, such as the broken promise of a sympathy strike. Because of these functions, providing context is an essential requirement for explaining historical behavior.

Context exists in two forms. First, there is contemporary context, which is created in the minds of people as an event is going on. For example, Sen. Myers put the police strike in the context of Bolshevism. Second, there is historiographical context, the context created by historians long after an event. Jonathan Randall White has done this, putting the increased bureaucratization of

the Boston police department in the context of a national movement, even though it may not have been perceived that way by the policemen who had to suffer its effects. By pointing out a new context for an event, an historian may provide clues in reconstructing the perceptions held by people at the time. That is, context can reveal meaning. In this vein, I have tried to show, for example, why the unions forming the Boston Central Labor Union may have been tempted to call a general strike. But it is important to keep in mind that the historian's context may bear little relation to the contemporary context. Simply because it made sense in 1955 for Robert Murray to write about the strike in the context of American radicalism does not mean that anyone at the time attributed the same meaning to the events described by Murray. The two forms of context often work together, but they are not identical.

The contexts examined here, plus those emphasized by previous writers, do not comprise a comprehensive understanding of the strike. More work could be done placing the strike in other contexts. Particularly, I would like to see an analysis of the legal issues involved in the strike, since none of the authors I have read provides a satisfactory answer to the question, why did the police try to resolve their dispute in court? It seems that such a tactic would have been hopeless, but it would be worthwhile to discover what legal and historical precedents had made such lawsuits ineffective. Another area where more research is needed is the violence that sprung up in the absence of police as well as the tactics used to extinguish it. A comparison of the Boston riots with other riots in American cities, both in terms of the rioters and the military response, would be very helpful in explaining what Peters, Curtis, and Coolidge had in mind as they dickered about mobilizing the State Guard.¹

¹Russell suggests that Coolidge's "instinct that to call out the militia prematurely is political suicide" was largely responsible for the defenselessness of Boston on the night of September 9. How had Coolidge

Another need is an analysis of the tactics of moderate labor organizations in the early twentieth century. As mentioned in the final footnote in Chapter 2, there is apparently no study of the American Federation of Labor's methods, either strikes and alternatives to strikes. A fair amount has been written about particular strikes, but what is needed is a synthesis that examines both strikes and situations where a union elected not to strike. And crying for attention is the tactic of the general strike. There has been a fair amount written about general strikes with revolutionary intent in theory and practice. But general strikes by moderate labor organizations, such as those that took place in Belgium, in Sweden, and in North America have been regarded as anomalies by historians who have the preconceived notion that a genuine general strike must have a revolutionary, pacifist, or other ideological content. Four general strikes were led by A.F. of L. centrals in the space of twenty-seven years, and in that same span moderate labor organizations in Belgium and Sweden sponsored general strikes. Meanwhile, Boston was probably not the only instance in which a general strike almost occurred. But these strikes have not been studied, and many questions remain.² A study that would compare the general strikes by moderate labor that did take place with those that did not would shed light on the nature of moderate labor in the early twentieth century.

The number of questions raised by this essay confirms the claim by Weber and Geertz that no event will ever be thoroughly placed in context because context is infinite. But far better an incomplete account of an event that

acquired that instinct, one asks. Francis Russell, "The Strike That Made a President," *American Heritage*, 14, no. 6 (October 1963), 90.

²A search for literature on general strikes by moderate labor organization, using the Harvard Library catalogs and *America: History and Life* revealed only those books and articles cited in Chapter 4, plus a few more written specifically about Seattle and Winnipeg. A broader history of such strikes might answer such questions as: Why did unions continue to use this tactic despite repeated failures? What was the role of the internationals--the national craft unions that existed occupied the space between the national A.F. of L. and the centrals--during general strikes? Did the national Federation ever speak positively about general strikes?

acknowledges its gaps than one that glosses over the holes. A general strike, or the decision to affiliate with a national labor organization, have never been natural, logical, inevitable consequences of other events. When they appear in the historical record, they must be explained, and that explanation can only be accomplished by further investigation into the record. Putting events in their contexts is a difficult and an infinite process. But in order to understand behavior, it is absolutely necessary.

This essay has challenged the ability of not only of the existing accounts of the Boston Police Strike, but of many conventional narratives, to explain the events they describe. A critical reading of many texts will reveal leaps of logic. For example, prior accounts of the strike tend to introduce the B.C.L.U.'s consideration of a general strike without pausing to ask why this tactic could be considered after the apparent defeats in Seattle and Winnipeg. Of course, there are many problems with the approach I have taken, not the least of which is the necessity to switch back and forth between contextual sections and analyses of the event in question.³ But there are two considerable advantages. First, this organization can provide answers to many questions that arise in the course of trying to understand human behavior. But perhaps more importantly, it can encourage a critical reading of history, a dissatisfaction with accounts that try to be self-contained, or define a single context for an event. Human behavior may be guided by memories of events far removed from the matter at hand. To explain that behavior, to thicken the description, one must investigate the precedents, the context.

³Ideally this essay, and any other analytical history, would be presented not as a series of paper pages, bound permanently in a fixed order, but as a collection of electronic cards on a CD-ROM disc. A reader could peruse a quick summary of an argument, and, if there were any section she wished to challenge, touch the screen to get supporting evidence and arguments. Were there any point in the supporting level that she wished to know more about, she could touch again and go down to a further level.

Perhaps the most misleading view of context is the suggestion that a given event has a context. It does not; it has several contexts. A study such as White's, which emphasizes only one context, can be extremely valuable, so long as both author and reader are aware that only part of the picture is being shown. Alternatively, several contexts can be offered together, emphasizing the complexity of human events at the expense of chronology. The approach taken in this essay is much like the method used by astronomers to photograph a galaxy. First, one filter is used to photograph the dense central section of the galaxy. A second filter shows the outer parts, which emit different spectra. And a third filter picks up the distant, swirling extremities. No one of these images can provide a clear picture of what the galaxy is like as a whole, but when the images are combined, they form a composite that surpasses any view through a single filter. This essay provides a truer view of the Boston Police Strike than could be created with any one context in mind.

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