No Compromises: The Boston Police Strike of 1919

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ABSTRACT

No Compromises: The Boston Police Strike of 1919
A thesis presented to the History Department
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
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Histories which have dealt with the Boston Police Strike of 1919 have largely failed to properly explain why the policemen chose to affiliate with the American Federation of Labor and ultimately chose to walk off the job. Instead, historians largely focus on the events of the strike itself. This approach makes the walkout an inevitable event caused by labor activism of the time. Instead of focusing on the lead up to the strike, this study focuses largely on the events and decisions before the strike, not only in Boston, but throughout the United States. Doing so allows for a greater contextualization of the relationship between the American Federation of Labor and labor in general and policemen throughout the country. Rather than seeing police unionization in Boston as an inevitable event brought about by Progressive reforms, this study posits that the refusal of Police Commissioner Edwin U. Curtis to deal with police grievances, leaving the American Federation of Labor, newly interested in unionizing police unions, a the only viable option for the policemen to seek redress.
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Introduction

On September 9, 1919, at 5:45 PM, 1,117 Boston police officers, 72 percent of the force, walked out of police stations or refused to report to work and went on strike in response to the suspension of nineteen patrolmen. The walkout was the climax in the patrolmen’s nine month struggle against Police Commissioner Edwin U. Curtis over wages and working conditions. The police worked exceptionally long hours with few days off, purchased their own uniforms and paid for their upkeep, contended with favoritism in promotions, and had to deal with deplorable sanitary conditions in their station houses. To the patrolmen, however, the key factor was that they were among the lowest paid workers in Boston. After numerous failed attempts to convince Curtis to address their concerns, the police decided to affiliate with the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

Shortly after the police went on strike, Boston erupted in riots and disorder for approximately two days. Almost immediately, any public support for the police evaporated due to the sensational descriptions of violence published in the newspapers, which laid the blame at the feet of the police\(^1\), rather than Curtis.

\(^1\) As of yet, no scholarly study has examined the riots in the wake of the Boston Police Strike to discover their motivating factors. While examining the riot is outside of the scope of this paper, I must add my voice to many other scholars who have cited the need for such a study.
who surely knew of the impending walkout. Making matters worse for the policemen on strike, the second Red Scare was beginning to overtake the United States. Finally, labor unions in Boston failed to come through with the support that they promised to the Policemen’s Union. While the strike dithered on for months, for all intents and purposes, by late September, the strike had shown itself to be an utter failure.\(^2\)

The Boston Police Strike of 1919 is an infamous, yet rather important, event in United States history. Though confined to one city, the strike and its eventual defeat sounded the death knell for police unions in the US until the 1960s (these unions are still unaffiliated with a labor body), set precedents for disallowing public employee to strike, and rocketed then Governor Calvin Coolidge to national prominence after he took credit for the defeating the strike and defending the city. On a local level, the defeat of the strike cost over 1,000 men their jobs, strengthened bureaucratic control over the Boston Police Department, and solidified the wedge between police and labor for decades to come.

\(^2\) While some argue that the period from 1919 – 1921 was the first Red Scare, in the wake of the 1886 Haymarket Riot, radicals throughout the country were arrested and harassed by police. Furthermore, in the wake of the bombing, newspapers fueled anti-immigrant and anti-radical sentiment to a fever pitch. Thus, while it may not have been as widespread, the backlash against radicals (both legitimate and perceived) was enough to mark it as the first such occurrence in the United States. See Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton University Press, 1986) and Timothy Messer-Kruse, *The Trial of the Haymarket Anarchists: Terrorism and Justice in the gilded Age* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). For more on the Red Scare, violence, and race riots which marked this time period, see Beverly Gage, *The Day Wall Street Exploded* (Oxford University Press, 2009) and William M. Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (University of Illinois Press, 1996).
The research question with which this project began sought to discover whether or not the police had developed a class consciousness prior to their affiliation with the American Federation of Labor. However, over the course of research, the focus shifted as the question as to why the strike occurred kept arising. Why Boston in 1919? The city did not have the first police union, nor was it the only police department with grievances and poor working conditions. Furthermore, while rumors of forming an AFL affiliated union proliferated in 1918, though it did not get off the ground. Why affiliate with the AFL? The Boston Social Club, an internal, unaffiliated union, existed in Boston since 1906 and had been somewhat effective until 1919. What, then, caused the men of the Boston Police Department to affiliate with the American Federation of Labor in 1919? The answer, simply put, is Edwin U. Curtis. From the day that Curtis assumed the position of Police Commissioner for the City of Boston, he alienated the men under his command. Curtis eroded the effectiveness of the Boston Social Club, insisted on his right to command the police force in whatever way he saw fit, and exacerbated existing tensions through a continued refusal to seriously address the men’s grievances and concerns. In turn, the men, who saw no other redress, sought to affiliate with the AFL in an attempt to regain a voice, as well as pride, in their work.

Most scholars who have dealt with the Boston Police Strike have either attributed to the police a burgeoning identification with the working classes or have failed to adequately explain why the police chose to organize altogether. For instance, in A Triumph of Bureaucracy: The Boston Police Strike and the
Ideological Origins of the American Police Structure, Jonathan Randall White argues that the police strike cannot be separated from the ideologies of the progressive era. These ideologies, according to White, are rooted in centralization and bureaucracy. Within this revisionist framework, he describes the Boston Police Department as the “epitome of bureaucratic organization” due to Stephen O’Meara’s reforms. Beginning in 1905, O’Meara centralized the police department under his command and tried to remove political influence from the hiring and dismissal of police officers. In this role, businesses in the progressive era used the police to break strikes and suppress worker unrest. In so doing, business leaders were able to alienate the police from other workers and convince them that their interests lie with the protection of the capitalist system. White quickly points out that rather than viewing this as a conspiracy, readers should understand that this relationship developed over time. Due to poor working conditions, the police, according to White, began to build solidarity with other workers. Their newly found class consciousness led the workers to seek affiliation with the American Federation of Labor. This affiliation and the subsequent strike “represented a challenge to the progressive order.” Thus, by going on strike, the police violated what business and bureaucratic leaders believed to be their proper role: protection of the capitalist system.³ While White does a convincing job of situating the Boston Police Strike and its repression into a framework which contextualizes the police in relation to the greater business community, it suffers from two main drawbacks. The first is

White’s treatment of police as a homogeneous group. He does not differentiate between the private, state and federal police, who often acted in the interests of the capitalist system, and local police, whose behavior varied depending on the social and political particularities of their towns. In midsize industrial towns, police tended to support the workers, in the west, police often repressed strikers. For instance, in November 1919, in Jersey City, New Jersey, courts had to order local police to allow strike breakers to work because the police “have refused to permit strike breakers to replace 800 striking meat handlers, whose principal demand is recognition of the union.”

The second problem with White’s work relates to his treatment of the question of class consciousness. White takes for granted the notion that the police developed a class consciousness. 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. The policemen of Boston admitted that they were part of the working class and they formed an alliance with an old adversary.” The notion that the police admitted that they were part of the working class is unsubstantiated; no source was given for the citation. Furthermore, no explanation as to how the consciousness developed is ever given. In this, White seems to contend that the police turned away from their bureaucratic backers and joined ranks with the working class with an alarming fluidity. Furthermore, White does not state why the police turned to organized labor, which implies that

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little or no difference existed between O’Meara and Curtis and the patrolmen’s reaction to them.⁵

Frederick Koss wrote his Ph. D dissertation *The Boston Police Strike of 1919*, in 1966. Koss’ work is a thoroughly researched and detailed narrative of the strike, but it suffers from the limitations of a straightforward narrative account. It begins by explaining the effects of the strike on US history, a brief background of the major figures involved, and then explains the strike and its aftermath. For almost its entire length, Koss simply focuses his story in Boston, ignoring outside context. Furthermore, the dissertation is lacking an introduction and any statement of an argument. The closest *The Boston Police Strike of 1919* comes to interpretation is the last chapter which evaluates the roles of the Commissioner, Mayor Peters, the police, and other major actors. Thus, while Koss’ dissertation provides a thorough narrative of events, it fails to contextualize the police strike beyond what the men listed as their grievances.

The most well-known history of the Boston Police Strike is *A City in Terror: Calvin Coolidge and the 1919 Boston Police Strike* by Francis Russell. In it, Russell tries to tell the story of the Boston Police Strike and tries to explain why it happened in the first place. Russell’s text is a straightforward chronological narrative of the events leading up to and culminating in the strike. While Russell must be given credit for his ability to describe events in a way which appeals to a popular audience, historians seriously need to question its usage as source material.

First, the book lacks footnotes, end notes, or parenthetical citations. The only documentation throughout the book is a selected bibliography. While I believe that well written and well documented popular history can and should be utilized by scholars, scholars need to scrutinize works that do not adhere to the historical method they include such works in academic research. For instance, Russell writes that the Soviet Union sent operatives “to Boston with eighty-five thousand dollars in funds to aid the strikers. Most of this money derived from the sale of Russian crown jewels smuggled into the United States.” Such outlandish claims do not appear in any of the major papers in their descriptions of the strike, nor do any other scholars make reference to such an action. One must wonder, then, from where this information came and, more importantly, what other serious factual errors did Russell commit. In essence, this calls into question the veracity of the entire book.  

Such flaws give light to another problem throughout Russell’s book: the lack of any semblance of objectivity. Russell begins his partisan narrative with a nostalgic recollection of his father’s actions in the Massachusetts legislature and a childhood memory of the strike. Throughout the book, Russell supports Governor Calvin Coolidge, who took control of the volunteer force after the police went on strike and who took credit for breaking the Patrolmen’s Union. Furthermore, he also uncritically supports Commissioner Curtis’s actions and policies. Such bias leads to wild unsubstantiated claims, such as the crown jewel conspiracy. The striking police are treated as a homogenous group of men with

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no real humanity to them. Rather, Russell spends much of the book profiling the “big names” of the strike. Nowhere does he mention a rise of a class consciousness, though he wrote that the communists supported the strike. Thus, one must wonder why historians continue to rely on the book as a source material. The greatest use of *A City in Terror* for academic writing is the bibliography which does list some very useful sources.

What this work has in common with its predecessors is its reliance on newspaper accounts of events. Contemporary newspapers spent many pages covering the Boston police, their grievances, and the administrative response to the patrolmen’s efforts to organize. Until the patrolmen walked off the job, the *Boston Daily Globe* remained rather neutral in the debate as to whether police officers should form a union. Furthermore, previous accounts tend to ignore the *Globe* in favor of the *Boston Herald*. Not only did the *Globe* provide a neutral perspective as well as one different than that offered by previous scholars, but its digital archiving and availability made it an invaluable tool in understanding the police and their motivations, Curtis, and the events which led to the strike. Thus the newspaper accounts remain the primary source for this paper.

*The Boston Police Strike: Two Reports*, while used less frequently, is just as valuable as a source of information. *Two Reports* is the publication of the Commissioners year-end report for 1919 and the Citizens Committee report, also known as the Storrow Report. The Commissioner’s report offers Curtis’ retrospective account of the strike as well as a defense of his actions after the police went on strike. Its most valuable contribution is the insight it offers into the
actions and thoughts of Commissioner Curtis. The Storrow Report gives readers a more encompassing account of the lead up of the strike than the Commissioner’s report offers. It details the ways in which Curtis could have prevented the strike. However, from its outset, the Citizens Committee was the tool of Boston’s Mayor Peters, and while it is sympathetic to the police, it comes out firmly against police affiliation with an outside body.

One of the main differences between this work and previous works is the scope of this paper. Rather than focusing on the strike itself, as do other historians, the focus of this paper is on the events leading up to the strike itself. In doing so, this paper briefly discusses the urban police prior to the turn of the 20th century. Furthermore, unlike many other scholars, this work attempts to briefly layout the relationship between urban police and workers. These two pieces, when coupled with the O’Meara and Curtis Commissionerships, give us the greatest understanding of why the Patrolmen of Boston chose to affiliate with the American Federation of Labor and why they ultimately decided to walk off the job in support of their right to organize.
Bureaucratization of American Police

The police forces in the United States derived from the English policing system, which reaches as far back as the 13th Century. The constable-watch system was the primary tool of law enforcement before the creation of the modern police force. The constable was a paid position and his duties included arresting merchants who cheated their customers and entire townships that refused to care for the impoverished members of their community. The night watch, which was the responsibility of adult males in the community, patrolled the overnight hours in place of the constable. Unlike the constable, the watch, at its inception in the 13th Century, was a volunteer force. By the 16th Century, however, the night watch became the work of the old, the otherwise unemployable, and, in general, other undesirables. These men were paid a substitution fee from other members of the community who did not wish to perform their duties. Furthermore, the community expected all adult males to respond to the hue and cry, the shout that went up when a person witnessed a crime, and apprehend and hold criminals for their court hearing. If communities failed to do this, the court would fine the entire community, ensuring that the community policed itself.7

7 Monkkonen, Police in Urban America, 1860 – 1920 (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 32 – 33. This was based on the frankpledge system imposed by Norman conquerors on the Anglo-Saxons as a convenient method of social control.
The constable watch system crossed over to the colonies and remained in place in various parts of the United States until the late 19th century. In the United States, the constable was not only responsible for maintaining general order (answering to the complaints of victims and watching suspicious people), but his office also required him to any obstruction from roadways, and protect the public health (such as eliminating feral dogs). On top of these patrol duties, he was also expected to be an officer of the courts. He would arrest suspects, serve court papers, and bring in witnesses. Thus, the constables in a municipality served as both functionaries of the courts as well as public safety agents. The night watch, on the other hand, patrolled the streets detaining and questioning suspicious characters as well as reporting any disturbances. They contributed to public safety by reporting fires and lighting streetlamps. Like the constable, they reported any disturbances that occurred on their watch. What neither the constable nor the night watch did, however, was to solve crimes.⁸

In the City of Boston, which became incorporated as a city in 1822, the city council began reforming the police in 1838 due to a number of riots within the city. In one case, a volunteer fire department on its way back to its engine house encountered an Irish funeral procession. Both groups occupied the sidewalk. The Irish ordered the firemen to move, while the firemen advised the funeral procession to “conveniently move into the street, without disturbing the enginemen.” Neither party would give in, leading to a scuffle. The ensuing melee

⁸ Monkkonen, *Police in Urban America*, 33 – 34. The position of detective was not created until late in the 19th century by the National Pinkerton Detective Agency, a private police force. Furthermore, until the police reforms in the mid and late 19th century, thief catchers handled crimes against property. For more on this, see Monkkonen, *Police in Urban America*, 33 – 36.
“soon became general.” The Irish took over the engine house, and the firemen retreated into a church and rang the bells, signaling other companies to come to their aid. As the aggression increased, supporters came to the aid of both sides, with the general public siding with the firemen. Eventually, the Irish were pushed back into their neighborhood, whereupon the supporters of the enginemen broke windows, entered residences, and destroyed the property of Irish citizens. The Mayor then called out the militia, though it seems that the riot had calmed by then, and stationed a man at each church in Boston to assure that no false alarms would reignite the riot.⁹

In response to these riots, in 1838, the city hired six police officers who, instead of receiving pay from fees and fines assessed by the courts, as did the constable and night watch, received a salary from the city itself. However, these policemen did not replace constables right away. Instead, they had much of the same duties as the constables, reported to the marshal, who acted in the capacity of a police chief, and patrolled the streets during the day. Shortly after creating the day police, the City Council created a complimentary night force as well. Over the next one and a half decades, the city police grew to include 44 day police, 22 night police, and a detective division comprised of five detectives. While the police boasted a high arrest rate for vice in the city, some of which received spectacular media coverage, many police officers, and the night police

in particular, were involved with the crime they were sworn to stop. Not only did the police receive payoffs from men who controlled vice, but also participated in burglaries. In order to stop police involvement in criminal activities, the city council fired all of the night police and some of the day police but kept the night watch in place.\footnote{Monkkonen, \textit{Police in Urban America}, 36; 47 – 48; Johnson, “Taking Care of Labor,” 92; Edward Hartwell Savage, \textit{A Chronological History of the Boston Watch and Police: From 1631 to 1865; Together with the Recollections of a Boston Police Officer or Boston by Daylight and Gaslight, From the Diary of an Officer Fifteen Years in the Service} (Boston: 1865), 93 – 94. While it is outside the scope of this work, it is interesting to note that two of the riots in Boston in 1837 were of an anti-Irish nature. As the City Council began hiring officers on the city payroll, many Irishmen joined the police force. Johnson posits that this may have been in an attempt to defend and protect their community. Johnson, “Taking Care of Labor,” 92.}

Boston was not the only city facing problems in the early 1850s. All of them looked to the London Police as the department after which to model their burgeoning police forces. In 1852 James W. Gerard traveled to London in order to observe the London police. In 1853, he published his findings on the difference between the London and New York police. On his return to the United States, he argued for the adoption of police uniforms and the reorganization of the New York police. The London model, he felt, had two main advantages over the current model being used. The first benefit was the numerical superiority of London’s police on a per capita basis as compared with that of New York. As compared to New York’s 1,040 police officers, Gerard claimed that the London Police force had “between 7,000 and 8,000” men. Secondly, the London Police possessed uniforms which caused him to stand out from the crowd, so that “in every emergency you can find one at the instant and on the very spot where required.” In the United States, police tended to blend into the crowd. The
uniform allowed the London police to control citizens with a “moral more than their physical power.” 11

Another apparent cause of this moral power, according to Gerard, was the requirements for the becoming a patrolman in London. He observed that

The candidates for the place must be men of character and intelligence they must be young and vigorous, sober and ambitious, of a forbearing temper, and of unquestioned honesty. Before they are received they undergo a medical examination, to see that they are sound in body, and have a constitution which can stand the required duty.

The final test for acceptance was to test the candidate’s intelligence. When the candidate was accepted, he was drilled in a military fashion to teach him discipline and instruct him in close combat. Thus, the recommendations given by Gerald for the Police of New York were a larger presence, changing the appointment of police to one in which the appointment of police was up to “a Board of Commissioners, consisting of the Mayor, Recorder, and Chief of Police” rather than appointed by the aldermen. The third recommendation was merit based retention of police, rather than a political retention, which would allow the best men to remain on duty and rid the department of negative elements.12

It remains unclear whether the alderman in Boston read Gerald’s recommendation. However, they began implementing the reforms suggested in London and New York. Beginning in 1853, Boston’s police began to assume a military-like hierarchical structure. The chief of police headed the department, with captains under his direct command. Captains oversaw lieutenants, who

patrolled the streets to supervise patrolmen. In 1857, sergeants took over supervising patrolmen, leaving lieutenants to more administrative tasks. Furthermore, in 1885, the Massachusetts General Court tried to remove the power of hiring and dismissal from political decisions by placing the department under state control. Under this system, the Governor appointed a three-person commissioner board approved by the council.\textsuperscript{13}

On November 1, 1859, the Boston Police donned their uniforms. These uniforms “[consisted] of blue coat, Police buttons, blue pants and black vests, dress coat for Chief and Captains, and frock coat for Deputy and Patrolmen.” Gerard believed that if the police donned uniforms, their militaristic look would strike fear in criminals. He also believed that uniforms would make them “feel respectable” and “Their costume is a sure guaranty that they will never disgrace it.” He believed that because the eyes of the city would be upon them, even the police who have a lower moral standard would avoid disgracing their uniform.\textsuperscript{14}

Both patrolmen and the public resisted the uniforming the police. The public, which had traditionally feared a standing army, saw the increased militarization of the police as a threat to their liberties. Furthermore, many citizens opposed the cost of outfitting their uniforms (though some cities, like Boston, avoided this concern by having patrolmen purchase their own uniforms). Much of the resistance, though, came from the police and their supporters, who felt that


uniforms would actually damage the reputation of the police by placing them on par with servants. In more than one city, a police uniform was compared to the livery a servant would wear and was said to be something no free and independent man would wear. In New York, policemen claimed that their uniforms were at odds with “their notions of independence and self-respect” and one patrolman even sought to test the constitutionality of uniforms by bringing a case before the New York State Supreme Court. In Philadelphia, fifteen policemen resigned to protest the implementation of the uniform. Furthermore, some policemen in Philadelphia would wear their uniform to the station at the beginning of their shift, change into street clothes while on duty, and then change back into their uniform before they returned to the station at the end of the day. By the end of the 19th Century, police uniforms were well established and were met with little to no resistance by police officers or the public.\footnote{Qtd. in Monkkonen, \textit{Police in Urban America}, 45; 42; 45 – 46; “Police Uniforms.” \textit{Daily National Intelligencer}, (Washington, DC) Wednesday, January 04, 1854; Issue 12,748; col F. http://infotrac.galegroup.com.resources.library.brandeis.edu/itw/infomark/388/430/146955763w16/purl=rc1_NCNP_0_GT3017771848&dyn=3!xrn_4_0_GT3017771848&hst_1?sw_aep=mlin_m_brandeis.}

By the last decades of the 19th century, the Massachusetts legislature unified all police under one department structure headed by a three commissioner panel which made administrative decisions about the police force. A chief ran the daily operations with a military style hierarchy in place. Patrolmen, who wore standardized uniforms, patrolled the city in two shifts. Though city government tried to reform the police department and standards for police, hiring and dismissal of policemen was a political decision. Furthermore, pressure on
city government changed the duties of the police from community safety to fighting crime. This evolution and centralization culminated in the appointment of Stephen O’Meara as the first Police Commissioner of the Boston Police Department in 1906. By giving one man almost unlimited power over the police force, Boston’s city government laid the foundations for the Boston Police Strike.
Out of all the men who controlled the Boston Police around the turn of the century, Stephen O’Meara was the most influential. O’Meara was born in 1854 in Prince Edward Island, Canada. After relocating to Charlestown, Massachusetts in 1864, he graduated from high school in 1872. The day after his graduation he became a reporter for *The Globe* and joined the *Boston Journal* in 1874. At the *Journal*, O’Meara “served five years as reporter, two years as city editor,” and ten years as news editor before becoming the editor and general manager of the paper (except for a stint between March and December, 1895, which he spent traveling). He became the controlling shareholder in the *Journal* upon his return to managerial duties and editorship, as well as taking over the role of publisher, in December 1895. He sold *The Journal* in 1902. Though he gained enough political capital to be influential in Boston society as a newspaper man, O’Meara was active in various causes.\(^\text{16}\)

Chief amongst his causes were civic activities. O’Meara spent two years as the president of the Charlestown High School Association, three years as the president of the Boston Press Club, three years as treasurer of the New England Associated Press. He was a member of the executive committee of the

Republican Club of Massachusetts and a trustee of the Massachusetts state library. Furthermore, he received an honorary Master of Arts degree from Dartmouth College in 1888. Both his civic service roles and his editorship of the *Boston Journal* made Stephen O'Meara an influential man and put him in line for a prominent position as a civil servant. In fact, in 1904, Republicans tried to convince O'Meara to accept the nomination for the Eleventh Congressional district, and though he declined at first, he nominated himself when no other republican would run.\(^{17}\)

When Governor Curtis Guild, Jr. began looking for a possible candidate for the new position of Police Commissioner, O'Meara seemed a likely candidate. Guild announced his decision on May 24, 1906. On June 4, O'Meara took the oath of office, though the position was set to begin on July 1 which put the Commissioner in charge of all divisions of the police force. On his assumption of the office of Police Commissioner, O'Meara stated he took the position “independent of all considerations except these resting upon law, common sense, and the ordinary conditions of life.” Independence and an almost dictatorial control would characterize O'Meara’s twelve years as Police Commissioner.\(^{18}\)


Early in his tenure, O’Meara ensured complete independence of control over the police of Boston. In a publicized debate with Mayor John F. Fitzgerald in June of 1906, O’Meara demanded that the Mayor let him run the Police Department as he saw fit. According to O’Meara, Fitzgerald attempted to “[exorcise] a power of direction which the law places exclusively in the hands of the commissioner.” To curb the Mayor’s usurpation of police powers, O’Meara released a statement to the public stating his case and seemingly winning public approval. Throughout the rest of his twelve years, O’Meara would ensure that his department would remain under the control of the Police Commissioner and subject to no other authority, except the governor.19

During O’Meara’s first year as Commissioner, the patrolmen in the department created the Boston Social Club. The Boston Social Club, created to act as an internal union for police officers, only allowed patrolmen and excluded all superior officers. The aim of the club was “to maintain a club for social purposes, and to see that a square deal for every member of it is made the concern of all.” Furthermore, the Social Club created a fund for legal defense as well as to provide aid for patrolmen if they should need it and be deemed worthy to receive it. For instance, if a patrolman with an exemplary record was brought up on charges of misconduct, the Social Club could provide funds to hire counsel for his defense. Thus the Boston Social Club acted on behalf of the Boston Police in their dealings with the city government. Throughout O’Meara’s tenure, the Boston Social Club became an invaluable tool for the patrolmen on the police

force due to the Commissioner’s willingness to meet with its representatives to discuss grievances which affected the police force as a whole. Thus, O’Meara’s sanctioning of the Social Club made Curtis’ later disregard for it far more egregious to the patrolmen.\(^{20}\)

Though for all intents and purposes, the Boston Social Club was an independent internal police union, the patrolmen had to frame it as a fraternal organization because previous attempts at police unions had failed. For instance, in 1893, labor leaders approached Chicago police to encourage them to organize. Though it seems that this effort did not lead to organization, the police considered unionizing as a move “to be put on equal footing with the police of New York city, Denver, Brooklyn and Philadelphia,” cities which had better conditions for their policemen.\(^{21}\)

If the Chicago police had been unionized, organized labor would have gained the membership and possible allegiance of one of the most antiunion police forces in the country. Since the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, the Chicago police had been quick to use violence against strikers and agitators. For instance, on May 3, 1886, Cyrus H. McCormick, Jr. locked out union workers from his factory, the McCormick Reaper Works, and replaced them with nonunion laborers. When the scabs left the factory for the day, the picketing union men forced them back inside the factory and pelted the walls with stones. In response, a patrol wagon and approximately 75 policemen on foot arrived at the factory and began beating the picketers with their clubs. Some of the picketers

\(^{21}\) “Prospects of a Police Union,” *The Daily Picayune*, February 26, 1893
began to throw stones at the police, then shot recklessly into the crowd. Freely using clubs and guns was the Chicago Police’s typical response to any provocation by strikers, who fought back in response. These actions created some of the most contentious labor battles in the history of the United States.\footnote{Avrich, \textit{The Haymarket Tragedy}, 188 – 189; for more on Chicago Police violence, see}

Though Chicago was among the worst for violence against protesters, strikers encountered police violence in other cities as well. For instance, in March 14, 1894, Patterson, New Jersey policemen charged a crowd of picketers with their clubs because “violence was feared.” At one point, a police unit had 1,000 picketers pressed against a fence and continued to beat them with clubs for not obeying the order to disperse quickly enough. Again at Olneyville, Rhode Island, on May 3, 1895, a crowd of strikers gathered in front of a mill to heckle a nonunion worker. In response, police, on horses and on foot, charged into the crowd and began clubbing the strikers. Worse yet, in Latimer, Pennsylvania, on September 11, 1897, deputies fired upon a group of strikers, killing 22 of them and seriously wounding another 36. The strikers had planned to march through a mill in town and ask others to join their ranks. While not all cities were hostile to strikers or labor agitators, the overall feeling in the decades before the Boston Police Strike was that police defended capitalists in direct opposition to labor. Thus in 1897, when police in Cleveland, Ohio requested an AFL charter, the AFL rejected the application because, as the AFL stated at its annual congregation, “It is not within the province of the trade union movement to specially organize policemen, no more than to organize militiamen, as both…are too often controlled by forced inimical to the labor movement.” In other words, the violent
history and often oppositional relationship between the police and organized labor prevented the AFL from wanting to issue union charters to policemen's unions.\textsuperscript{23}

The same year in which O'Meara took control of the Boston Police Department and patrolmen created of the Boston Social Club, the American Federation of Labor began to organize various public sector unions when it issued a charter for the first affiliated local of the National Federation of Post Office Clerks (NFPOC) in 1906. Several factors seem to come together during this period which explains why the AFL, after years of refusing to do so, began organizing public sector unions. Chief among them are the reforms which took place at the turn of the century. By 1900, the US public began calling for reforms. Progressive candidates won elections based upon promises of responsible and proactive government. Rather than letting businesses and machine politicians run governments and allowing \textit{laissez-faire} economics to control the market, progressive candidates promised greater protections for workers, and increased regulation of the economy, and, as it was one of the most important demands of reformers, a living wage for workers.\textsuperscript{24}

Furthering the cause of public sector workers was the passage of civil service reform laws, such as the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act. With such


reforms, the stigma which associated government jobs with sinecures handed out based upon loyalty rather than merit began to decline. Instead, workers, in both the private and public sector, began to view themselves as sharing a common cause. Union members and began to see similarities in the conditions of both government and private workers. Thus, around the turn of the 20th century, government jobs became respectable jobs which unionists felt needed protection from the fluctuations of party politics.25

From the beginning, O’Meara strove to clean up the police force of political influence and corruption. Prior to his reforms, the Boston Police Department would often change personnel after each election, making policing jobs subject to the spoil system of politics. Between 1906 and 1918, newspapers reported that O’Meara lectured and fired numerous police officers for various offenses. He also lectured his men on using abusive or harsh language and warned “inefficient men” that he would terminate them. Furthermore, the Commissioner also fired various men for both on and off the job violations. For instance, one policeman was found guilty of being unfit for duty due to alcohol consumption. On another occasion, O’Meara dismissed a man for causing a public disturbance on his day off. He dismissed more men for tipping off suspects of an impending raid, neglecting duty, and other offences.26

At other times, the Commissioner came to the defense of the men in his department. When Harvard President Charles William Eliot claimed that “police complicity in some of the modern vices was perhaps one of the worst” contemporary evils, the Commissioner had his reply published in the city papers. He stated

I have been police commissioner for the city of Boston two years. I took the place free from police prejudice, with my full share of suspicion and with as little credibility as a man is likely to have at the end of 30 years of daily newspaper work. I have watched through these two years for this ‘complicity’ of which Pres Eliot speaks, and I have failed to find it. I have received many anonymous letters, many spiteful letters, but not one letter and not one oral communication upon which even a charge of such ‘complicity’ could be based, much less a conviction.

He went on to blame “inmates” and “hangers-on” as well as “the complete ignorance of the public” as the main methods by which people discredited the police. Though O’Meara could be harsh, all records indicate that he truly believed in providing the public with the best policemen he could find, as well as truly respecting the patrolmen who worked hard and brought honor to the force.²⁷

During his tenure as Police Commissioner, O’Meara enacted multiple reforms which increased the efficiency and bureaucratization of the Boston Police Department. One of the most noticeable changes was that he greatly increased the number of patrolmen and reserve men on the force from 1,119 to 1,248, including the addition of 77 men at a single roll call, the largest single increase in his early years on the force. One reason for the increase was to comply with the law which stated that each policeman would have one day off in every fifteen days, as well as to provide the city with a greater level of police

presence. In 1917, O'Meara promulgated a rule which stated that police officers were to have one day off in every twelve days with a promise of one off in every eight days beginning on February of 1918 plus an even greater increase of men on the force.  

Though the increase in the police force was the most visible change, O'Meara enacted less noticeable but more important changes. First among these changes was the removal of the spoils system from police administration. To be appointed to the force, a candidate had to pass the Massachusetts civil service exam, meet a weight and height requirement, and then pass a physical fitness exam. Their names were put on a list of reserves for 1.5 to two years before being considered for a permanent place on the force. Under O'Meara, men were no longer hired, dismissed, and promoted due to political alliance. Instead, O'Meara instituted a system of merit in which an patrolman’s performance combined with his commanding officer’s recommendation determined if the candidate received the promotion. While this was an improvement from the previous spoils system, it still allowed for favoritism to determine who received promotions. Furthermore, due to the increasingly centralized system, any grievances or complaints were lost within the police bureaucracy. In this system, a patrolman would report a complaint to his commanding officer. That policeman would in turn pass it up the chain of command. Anywhere along the line, a complaint could be withheld, effectively stopping it from reaching a party who

could address it, or simply forgotten or lost. Thus, the Commissioner did not necessarily hear an individual patrolman’s complaints.\(^{29}\)

O’Meara’s reforms amounted to a professionalizing move of the police force. Removing external party politics from the hiring and promotion of officers (though he failed to remove personal or departmental politics from affecting these decisions), the increase of the force to abide by the law, assuring the autonomy of the police force, and his other reforms seems to have given the police a sense of job security. By requiring candidates to pass various exams, those who received positions probably felt a sense of entitlement as the best possible candidates for the job. No longer could just anyone join the force. Instead, a candidate had to have a requisite set of skills, thus giving police work an aura of skilled labor.

Though individuals may have been disgruntled with their duties, it seems that discontent remained relatively low in the O’Meara years. While conditions cannot be said to have been great, it appears that O’Meara was making strides to address the men’s concerns by trying to increase the force to give the men one day off in every twelve, and later every eight, days. Furthermore, it appears that he met with the Boston Social Club to discuss general grievances every month, and if able, that he brought the concerns, many of which revolved around pay, to the Mayor, who held the power of finances over the police department. However, on June 28, 1918, O’Meara responded to “printed rumors’ that police officers are discussing the advisability of forming a union to be affiliated with the A. F. of L.” O’Meara issued a General Order forbidding the police from joining a

union affiliated with an outside body. He wrote that while the rumors of affiliation with the American Federation of Labor were probably false, the issue had to be addressed. He stated that while unions benefitted private employees, police had a duty to impartial service to the community. Furthermore, he stated that policing, unlike private industry, was beholden to laws and that collective bargaining could not coerce a change in policy of pay or conditions in the management of the police force. Because of its peculiar position, O’Meara wrote

I cannot believe that a proposition to turn the police force into a union, subject to the rules and directions of any organization outside the police department, will ever be presented formally to its members, but if, unfortunately, such a question should ever arise, I trust that it will be answered with an emphatic refusal by the members of the force who have an intelligent regard for their own self-respect, the credit of the department, and the obligations to the whole public which the undertook with their oath of office.

By issuing the General Order, O’Meara set the precedent which Curtis would later try to follow in his opposition to AFL affiliation, down to the reasons given for his opposition. It appears that the greatest difference between the two Commissioners was O’Meara’s empathy towards the men under his command.³⁰

While there seems to be no record of the “printed rumors” that led to O’Meara’s General Order, his fears were not without precedent. In 1917, the AFL began receiving requests for affiliation by patrolmen wanting to form unions. The Executive council decided to revisit their previous ruling. In May of 1918, the Executive council ruled that organizing policemen would be “inexpedient.” This

ruling showed that the Executive Council continued to worry that the policemen would remain under control of the “inimical forces” regardless of their union affiliation. Furthermore, the Council must have questioned whether other workers would support policemen in strikes given the workers’ feelings towards police, a question resoundingly answered during the Boston Police Strike.\(^3\)

Elsewhere in the world, police strikes made headlines in Boston months before the Boston Police called their own strike. At midnight on August 29, 1918, the London Metropolitan Police went on strike for higher wages and to demand that the recognition of their police union, the National Union of Police and Prison Officers (NUPPO). On August 31, the government met the strikers’ demands, giving the police a minimum wage scale, a pension after twenty six years of service, and recognition of their union as a federation rather than a trade union. Furthermore, the government reinstated a constable dismissed for his union activities. The London Police also went on strike on July 31, 1919 to protest a reorganization of the department which would prohibit the NUPPO from affiliating with an outside labor body. Furthermore, the reorganization was to also prohibit the police from striking for any reason. The 1919 London Police Strike failed and the NUPPO was replaced with a company union.\(^2\)

\(^3\) Slater, “Public Workers,” 10.
Events similar to the situation in Boston took place in Toronto. On December 19, 1918, 67% of the Toronto police went on strike demanding the reinstatement of 12 members of the police dismissed the previous day by the Commissioner and recognition of their union. They returned to work four days later after being promised that a Royal Commission would be established to decide whether or not a police union was appropriate and the reinstatement of the twelve police officers. Five months later, the Royal Commission found that since police are not producers, their union was undesirable, causing the Trades and Labour Congress to revoke the union’s charter. While it is impossible to say that the Boston Police modeled their strike after these strikes, they knew of the strikes and their outcomes.  

Commissioner Stephen O’Meara died at his home in Boston on December 14, 1918. Over his 12 years as Police Commissioner, O’Meara gained a reputation for neutrality which allowed him to remain in office through governorships of both Republicans and Democrats. It was under him that police gained a sense of pride in their profession and began to see themselves as more than a political appointment, subject to the ebb and flow of politics. These were the shoes that Police Commissioner Curtis tried to fill after his appointment to the role of Commissioner in the late December of 1918.

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Before being appointed as Commissioner, Edwin U. Curtis had an extensive career as a civil servant. Curtis was born in Roxbury, Massachusetts in 1859 to a wealthy family. In 1889, Curtis was elected as city clerk, a position at which he served two terms. In 1894, at thirty-five years old, the people of Boston elected Curtis as Mayor, making him the youngest mayor in Boston's history. During his term as Mayor, Curtis reorganized the Public Institutions Department and the Fire Department under single heads. Furthermore, he improved the Boston's Metropolitan water system. In 1906, Curtis became Assistant United States Treasurer at Boston and from 1909 to 1913, Curtis became the Collector of the Port of Boston. On December 21, 1918, Governor Samuel W. McCall appointed him to the position and Curtis took office on December, 30.35

In late December, the Boston Social Club made one of its first demands on the new administration. On December 26, 1918, four representatives of the Boston Social Club met with the new Mayor, Andrew James Peters. Rather than accepting the $100 per year raise that O'Meara had secured for them, due to inflationary pressures caused by the war, which increased the cost of living exponentially, the police demanded $200 per year. The men pointed to other cities, where policemen went on strike when those cities refused to meet wage demands. The spokesmen for the patrolmen also threatened mass resignations. One of the reasons for demanding an increase was the fact that the cost of living and the cost of uniforms, which the men purchased themselves, had raised to the point that their scheduled $100 raise would not cover the costs. In response to

the patrolmen’s demands, Mayor Peters stated that he was unable to provide the extra money to the patrolmen due to the increasing strain on the city’s budget.36

For the patrolmen, the problem stemmed from the date at which city officials had set their wages. In 1898, Boston officials set the wage for the Boston Police, which was to take effect in 1913. According to Koss, in Boston, between 1898 and 1919, the cost of living in Boston rose 106% and between 1913 and the end of 1918, the cost of living rose 79%. In 1918, the weekly pay of a patrolman ran between $21.09 for a first year policeman and $30.68 for a six year veteran of the force. This meant that a policeman made between twenty one and twenty five cents per hour. Factory workers, on the other hand, made approximately 70 cents per hour for a 46 hour work week. This put Boston police work on the low end of blue collar work in Boston. To make matters worse, each man had to purchase his own uniforms, which cost $207 each. The cost associated with the position, combined with rules forbidding them to seek outside employment, and the strikingly low wages meant that policemen in Boston had a difficult, if not impossible, time making ends meet. One of the greatest advantages of police work, especially since the Commissioner took control of the hiring and dismissal of patrolmen was the fact that a patrolman’s job was regular, year round employment. Unlike many other blue collar jobs, the police department was not prone to slowdowns or layoffs. Furthermore, in theory, police

offered a greater promise of promotion than other lines of blue collar work. Thus, the patrolmen did not want other jobs. Instead, they wanted a living wage.\textsuperscript{37}

On the night of December 30, Curtis made his first order as Police Commissioner. In it, Curtis addressed the patrolmen’s demand for higher wages. He stated that “No increase can be given by the Police Department except by the concurrent action of the Mayor and the Police Commissioner,” which he promised he would address shortly thereafter. He continued,

Meanwhile everyone should talk and act with moderation in regard to the matter. Knowing the members of the department by reputation, I believe that they will gracefully accept our final decision. If, however, any member of the force is so dissatisfied that he cannot continue to discharge his duties faithfully, honestly and cheerfully, he can resign.

This statement had two effects on the policemen of Boston. First, it demonstrated his belief that he had the right to run the department in whatever way he saw fit to do so. He did so by stating that even though he had very little interaction with the men, he expected them abide by his decisions without complaint or further thought. Secondly, Curtis’ disregard of the patrolmen the day he took office not only showed his disdain for the men under his command, but it also did little to engender positive feelings for him or the possibility for cooperation in the future. Whereas O’Meara was open to discussion, Curtis stated that his decisions were final and that he was unwilling to compromise.\textsuperscript{38}


\textsuperscript{38} “Curtis Issues First Order As Police Commissioner,” \textit{Boston Daily Globe}, December 31, 1918; Koss, \textit{The Boston Police Strike of 1919}, 32; 34.
Curtis’ other early commands demonstrated that he meant to continue O’Meara’s iron-fisted control of the department, though without O’Meara’s empathy for the men. In his first address to the men, Curtis detailed what he expected of his men. He stated that all uniforms should be clean and brushed at all times with polished shoes. Furthermore, he forbade them from leaning against buildings, posts, or fences because it “gives the impression of laxity.” In the case of patrolmen being on strike duty, he admonished them that “You should neither sympathize with the employer nor with the employee, but preserve order at any cost,” a statement which seems to stem from the Irish ethnicity of the patrolmen, rather than any real cases. While the police in Boston do not appear to have brutalized striking workers, as often happened in other cities such as Chicago, they did not allow the strikers to run riot nor attack strike breakers. Moreover, though he had not served in the position of Commissioner for a full day, he insinuated that members of the police accepted or demanded payment in kind for favors and forbid them from doing so. He also warned that “Transfers in the department will be made from time to time, without reasons therefor being given.” He finished his speech by stating that “Every rule and order sent out to the department by my predecessor is to stand in full effect until the same is annulled or modified by me.” By issuing statements which bordered on accusing the patrolmen of bias, laziness, and corruption, Curtis did much to harm his standing with the policemen needlessly. Curtis could have built rapport with the men if he had cited specific cases or waited until a patrolman committed an offense before calling for corrections which may not have been needed. In all, Curtis’ first acts
as Police Commissioner alienated the men under his command, made them defensive, and gained him naught but their animosity.39

Grievances

On January 8, 1919, Curtis decided that he would not deal with the Boston Social Club. Instead, he created a committee of twenty-one policemen, one from each station, plus a representative each from the Bureau of Criminal Investigation and the superintendent's office. Patrolmen from each station house elected their representatives. At their original meeting with the Commissioner, when each man's name was called, he "was allowed to say anything he had in mind without fear of it 'being used against him,'" though the $200 salary increase was the main subject discussed. At the first meeting, Curtis made the grievance committee membership permanent and promised to meet with them once per month.\(^4^0\)

Though their first meeting left the patrolmen with greater morale, the grievance committee became one of the grievances on the men's list. First, while the men seemingly elected their representatives, high-ranking officers counted the votes and some made accusations of ballot box stuffing. Secondly, though Curtis promised to meet every month, the meetings of the grievance committee were erratic, rendering the committee ineffectual. Furthermore, when the committee did meet, Curtis often disregarded the complaints of the men in under his command. Lastly, though Curtis promised that patrolmen who continued to

join the Boston Social Club would realize no negative consequences by bringing grievances because of their affiliation, John McInnes, who would become the president of the Boston Police Union, stated that those who joined the Club after Curtis established the grievance committee received undesirable duties. Thus, Curtis failed to address the grievances of the patrolmen.  

Another major grievance was the hours that the men spent on the job. Though O’Meara promised one day off in twelve, that promise was never realized. Patrolmen worked seven days per week, with one day off every fifteen days. On average, this meant that day men worked 73 hours per week, night men worked 83 hours per week, and wagon men worked 99 hours per week. Often, when not on patrol, policemen had to remain at the station house as reserve units. At times, the men even worked 17 hours per day. Making matters worse, even on their days off, police officers needed permission from their superior officers to leave town.

Exacerbating the problem of hours was the issue of wages. While Curtis could not have raised the salary of the patrolmen on his own (the Mayor would have had to approve such an increase) Curtis refused to lobby for his patrolmen in a way which garnered the approval of the patrolmen. With the cost of living increasing due to inflationary pressures, the patrolmen found themselves increasingly unable to pay their bills, feed their families, afford the upkeep of their uniforms, and other unable to afford other basic needs. The only hope for the

patrolmen to receive a salary increase was through promotions. Promotions, though, were often controlled by superior officers who promoted their favored men for the most desirable permission, while giving those in disfavor the worst jobs, such as strike duty. Patrolling strikes was an especially hated job for the policemen. Not only did it require them to patrol a relatively small area or stand in place, but it put them in direct confrontation with angry protestors which could easily become violent, putting the policeman in harm's way. Instead of mandatory rotations, superior officers chose the patrolmen who would perform strike duty. Not only did this allow visible favoritism, but it potentially sowed dissension amongst the policemen who never received orders to patrol picket lines and those who did.⁴³

On top of the favoritism, commanding officers also made patrolmen undertake work which the men of the force found degrading and humiliating. For example, some officers required patrolmen to purchase and deliver their newspapers, sometimes without reimbursing the purchaser. Other times, the patrolmen had to fetch meals and drinks for their superiors. Policemen also felt that some of their duties belonged to other city employees, such as delivering unpaid tax bills. They felt that by acting as a delivery boy or a messenger that their professionalism and manhood were being insulted. In this, Curtis either refused to hear of such practices or found them as trifling matters, not worthy of his consideration. Poor and insulting treatment by superiors left patrolmen with

low morale and wounded pride, which led them to resent their superiors and their job.\footnote{Burpo, \textit{The Police Labor Movement}, 4; Koss, \textit{The Boston Police Strike of 1919}, 6 – 7.}

The last major grievance was the deplorable and unsanitary conditions in the station houses. Numerous station houses were infested with roaches, which the men complained they carried back to their houses in their uniforms. The station houses also lacked enough toilets for the number of men using them and those were rarely cleaned. Furthermore, when patrolmen remained at the station houses on reserve duty, as many as three men used a single bed before the linens got changed. Individual station houses also had their share of poor conditions. For instance, station house 2 had one bath for 135 men. State Guardsmen who policed the city during the strike reported that in station 10, the stove was “an assemblage of junk which was still connected with the gas supply, but which had not been used for a considerable period of time.” A mess sergeant trying to cook for the troops was only capable of producing a small flame on what was once a burner. For the men who had to spend time much of their time in the station houses, these conditions made even their already demanding job unbearable.\footnote{Koss, \textit{The Boston Police Strike of 1919}, 9; Gregory, “No Bolshevism for Boston,” 124; Lyons, “The Boston Police Strike of 1919,” 149; “Dates, Data and Ditties: Tour of Duty, A Company, 11th Regiment Infantry. Massachusetts State Guard, During the Strike of the Boston Police, Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” (The Company, 1920), 11.}

Though Curtis tried to fill the O’Meara’s shoes, his disregard for the concerns of the men under his command pushed them to seek alternative methods to redress their grievances. While one cannot say whether or not the police would have joined a union, had Curtis addressed or even listened to the
men’s grievances, the situation probably would have turned out vastly different. O’Meara, though he was somewhat tyrannical at times, seemed much more involved with the force and their concerns. This is evidenced by the fact that many of the conditions existed under O’Meara. For instance, in 1909, an investigation uncovered unsanitary conditions in the station houses. Though the substandard conditions existed under O’Meara, he was able to stay the first talk of affiliation with the American Federation of Labor in Boston’s police force by publically disapproving of affiliation while acting as advocate for many of the patrolmen’s concerns. On the other hand, by demeaning the men, ignoring their concerns, and failing to correct even the unsanitary conditions in the station houses, Curtis drove the men towards affiliating with the American Federation of Labor.⁴⁶

Creating the Union

In 1919, the American Federation of Labor revisited the decision to issue charters for police unions. Due to overwhelming pressure of police who requested affiliation with the AFL, the Executive Council reversed their decision at their June convention. By September of 1919, merely 3 months later, the AFL had issued thirty-seven charters for police locals. Samuel Gompers, founder and President of the AFL, stated that the AFL had never issued so many charters to a single trade in such a short period of time. Because of this, the AFL instructed its organizers to put particular emphasis on police organization.\textsuperscript{47}

Curtis’ continued refusal to address the grievances of the men drove them closer to affiliation with the AFL. For instance, on July 21, 1919, the Boston Social Club wanted to schedule a conference with Curtis “in order that his aid might be secured toward establishing a relationship that would lead the adjusting of differences and the maintaining of a higher morale.” The Commissioner never acknowledged the request. By July 23, the Boston Social Club had gathered at least 500 signatures on a petition to the American Federation of Labor asking

\textsuperscript{47} Slater, “Public Workers,” 10. \textsuperscript{47} Burpo states that police had affiliated with the AFL since 1913, while Slater states that it wasn’t until 1919 that police began to affiliate. Newspaper reports indicate that while other police had some contact or affiliation with organized labor, 1919 was the first time the AFL began issuing police charters. Burpo, \textit{The Police Labor Movement}, 4; For newspapers mentioning affiliation, see “Boston Policemen Ask Union Charter,” \textit{The Boston Daily Globe}, July 23, 1919, pg. 6.
them to grant a charter. Shortly thereafter, Curtis began interviewing members of
the Social Club asking about the petition.48

The next day, the Commissioner released his first statement on the police
union, relying on O'Meara’s statement calling it “inconsistent with [their] oath of
office.” To back up his words, he reissued O'Meara's original order stating that it
was his position as well. After realizing “that the men back of the movement were
disregarding the Commissioner’s views,” on July 29, Curtis issued his own
General Order. In it, the Commissioner again reiterated O'Meara's Order and
then added that he felt that by joining a union, police could not faithfully carry out
their oath of office and that

the men to whom carrying out these laws is entrusted should not
be subject to the orders or the dictation of any organization, no
matter what, that comprises only one part of the general public…It
is difficult to see, under these circumstances, what a policeman can
hope to gain by the proposed affiliation…

He went on to state that “As Police Commissioner for the City of Boston I feel it
my duty to say to the police force that I disapprove of the movement on foot; that
in my opinion it is not for the best interests of the men themselves; and that
beyond question it is not for the best interest of the general public, which this
department is required to serve.” He also pointed to the grievance committee,
and stated that “It would indeed be unfortunate if any ill-advised action should

48 “Women Take a Hand in the Police Strike,” The Boston Daily Globe, October 16, 1919,
Pg. 1; “Boston Policemen Ask Union Charter,” The Boston Daily Globe, July 23, 1919,
pg. 6; Two Reports, 9.
destroy the efficiency of that committee, which admittedly has secured many advantages for the patrolmen.”

The policemen did not heed Curtis’ warning, however. On August 1, the Boston Social Club met to “receive the report of the committee which has been investigating the advisability of affiliating with the A. F. of L.” Over 1,400 out of approximately 1,600 policemen, one of the largest gatherings of patrolmen the Social Club had ever had, attended the meeting and newspapers reported “that the members…were unanimous in” their desire for a union. Michael Lynch, president of the Social Club, invited Curtis to attend the meeting, though he declined citing poor health. This meeting gave the strongest indication to date of how many policemen supported the bid for an AFL charter.

One should note that the men praised Curtis at the meeting of the Social Club. “Every speaker” lauded Curtis for trying “to improve the working conditions of the men and obtain a ‘living wage’ for them.” Furthermore, all of the speakers “were sorry that affiliating with a labor union must come during his administration, but something must be done to protect the men.” Such praise for Curtis seems at odds with his negligence and lack of effort on behalf of the police force. However, one must consider the implications and repercussions against these men had the Commissioner decided to attend the meeting. If, as some patrolmen complained, “they made a complaint against existing conditions they might last six months in their positions, but it would not be longer before charges were made against

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them and they would be dismissed,” one can imagine how Curtis would have treated an subordinate who blamed him for the need to ask the AFL for a charter. Such men would not likely have even lasted six months on the job.51

Even after Curtis’ General Order stating reiterating O’Meara’s stance on affiliation, the patrolmen refused to desist in their effort to get their charter. Though the AFL rejected their first petition for a charter, the patrolmen returned with a petition with over 1,200 names on it. The patrolmen wired the petition to the AFL on August 8. The AFL received it on August 9 and the American Federation of Labor granted the charter on August 11, 1919. The formal recognition ceremony was set for August 15, at Fay hall in Roxbury, Massachusetts.52

Around the time that Curtis issued the General Order stating his opposition to any affiliation attempt, a public debate took place in Boston. It seems that police unionization in itself was not particularly controversial. Neither Commissioner Curtis, nor Governor Calvin Coolidge, nor even O’Meara had opposed a company union; but they strongly opposed affiliation with the American Federation of Labor. From the beginning, those opposed to the affiliation stated that they feared that if the police affiliated with the AFL, they would privilege citizens who belonged to unions over those who did not. This is the basis for all of the “dual loyalties” rhetoric which can be found in Curtis’ General Orders as well as repeated throughout editorials, speeches, and

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correspondence from August through the end of the strike. For instance, Mayor Peters released a statement on August 27 in which he stated that “policemen are...public officials, charged with the duty of impartiality enforcing law and order, whose allegiance in their public capacity should be to their public duty alone.” In other words, those opposed to police affiliation, the Police Commissioner, Mayor Peters, Governor Coolidge, the Chamber of Commerce, and others, believed that the patrolmen were inherently different than private employees.  

Those who supported the police union, the Boston Central Labor Union, organized labor, as well as some citizens of the city, had two arguments. The first cited Massachusetts' law against “yellow-dog contracts,” contracts which forbade workers from joining unions. They pointed to “Section 19, Chapter 514 Acts of 1909 --- ‘No person shall himself or by his agent coerce or compel a person into a written or oral agreement not to join or become a member of a labor organization as a condition of his securing employment or continuing in the employment of such person.’” They accused Curtis of violating this law, which, they pointed out, carried criminal penalties. By pointing appealing to law, these supporters hoped to avoid the entanglements which appeals to morality or solidarity would create. In fact, it seems probable they wanted to avoid the question of police involvement in the labor question.  

The second argument took the opposite approach and argued that the police were, in fact, laborers, and as such deserved and needed union

54 “Calvin Coolidge’s Monopoly of Law and Order,” pg. 3.
protections. Samuel Gompers was outspoken in his support for police unionization. He argued that denying police the right to bargain collectively was similar to Theodore Roosevelt’s executive order banning federal employees from unionizing, which stated

> All officers and employees of the United States of every description serving in or under any of the Executive Departments and whether so serving in or out of Washington are hereby forbidden either directly or indirectly, individually or through associations, to solicit an increase of pay, or to influence or to attempt to influence in their own interest any legislation whatever, either before Congress or its Committees, or in any way save through the heads of the Departments in or under which they serve, on penalty of dismissal from the government service.

In other words, Gompers suggested that by denying their right to organize, Curtis violated a fundamental principle of rights hard won by laborers in the United States. In response to concerns that unionized police would favor union members, Gompers responded by saying that the AFL did not want police to back the workers, rather, the goal was for police to remain neutral in all conflicts. Gompers never discussed the advantages that might come from unionized police. This stance seems somewhat disingenuous, though. More radical supporters openly called for the police to align with and protect the working class. In the summer of 1919, these two sides, the police who wanted a more a share in their workplace and their supporters opposed to those who feared divided loyalties, clashed over the political, social, and economic landscape of American policing.55

On August 11, at the night roll call, Curtis promulgated General Order 110, the strongest General Order on the unionization drive. He stated that the Police Department could not fulfill its duty to the entire public if its members are subjected to the direction of an organization existing outside the department. It is a well recognized fact that a police officer is not an employee but a state officer. He is charged with impartial enforcement of the laws under the direction of a commissioner, who is himself a statutory officer.

The following rule interferes in no wise in a policeman’s interests and activities as a man and a citizen. It does, however, forbid him and the department from coming under the direction and dictation of any organization which represents but one element or class of the community. If troubles and disturbances arise where the interests of this organization and the interests of other elements and classes in the community conflict, the situation immediately arises that always arises when a man attempts to serve two masters – he must fail either in his duty as a policeman or in his obligation to the organization that controls him.

Curtis’ statement reveals the depth of the labor problem in 1919. By pointing to the division between classes, Curtis demonstrates the popular fear that class antagonisms had become a permanent facet of society. More telling, though, is his fear of the police having to decide between “two masters.” If Curtis was confident that in the event of a conflict between labor and management, the patrolmen would have chosen to follow the dictates of the Commissioner over the mandates of the AFL, it seems unlikely that he would have felt conflicted about the men “serving another master.” In other words, Curtis feared that the men would gain a greater sense of identity with the working class and that they would decide to support other workers rather than obeying the Commissioner’s commands. Moreover, one can also see Curtis’ desire to maintain complete and singular control over the police force though his proclamation. Thus, at the root of
his statement, Curtis believed that class conflict would continue, he wanted to prevent the patrolmen from gaining a sense of solidarity with other workers, and he feared that the AFL would assume partial control over the patrolmen.56

Based on his argument, Curtis added Section 19 to Rule 35 of the Rules and Regulations of the Boston Police Department, which stated that “No member of the force shall join or belong to any organization, club or body composed of present or present and past members of the force which is affiliated with or a part of any organization, club or body outside the department” The only exceptions were “a Post of the Grand Army of the Republic, the United Spanish War Veterans and the American Legion of World’s War Veterans,” which he stated could be formed within the department. By issuing the General Order modifying Rule 35, Curtis hoped to use bureaucratic channels to achieve the results that his influence alone could not achieve.57

The modification to Rule 35 strengthened resistance to Curtis both within the police department and within labor circles in Boston. Labor leaders called the General Order “not only unfair and coercive, but unsound in law and the principles of Americanism” and predicted that Curtis had “started the bitterest labor fight that has even been waged in this section.” Furthermore, Frank McCarthy, the New England organizer for the AFL, called Curtis’ arguments “the construction of the flimsiest straw man that has not one fact upon which to stand…” In response to Curtis’ charge that the police would have to serve two masters, McCarthy stated that “he [Curtis] is creating in his mind a condition that

56 “Forbids Policemen Joining New Union,” Boston Daily Globe, August 12, 1919; pg. 1
57 “Forbids Policemen Joining New Union,” Boston Daily Globe, August 12, 1919; pg. 1; Koss, The Boston Police Strike of 1919, 47.
is impossible, because no member of the American Federation of Labor is under any obligation that will or can in any manner interfere with the full and complete performance of the service his position requires that he render.” In other words, McCarthy stated that the AFL could in no way force the police to undertake any actions, as each Local remained autonomous even while affiliated. Issuing General Order 110 not only exacerbated tensions between Curtis and the policemen, but also caused greater tensions with organized labor in general.\textsuperscript{58}

The patrolmen remained intransigent and Curtis took steps to show that he would not give in to the policemen’s union. On August 14, the day before the men officially received their AFL charter, Curtis had a Boston printer print and deliver 2,000 discharge and suspension slips. He did so publically, with a release to press and a large daytime delivery, as a warning to the patrolmen and the public of his power and resolve. Though Curtis’ rush order caused morale to plummet, it did not have a serious effect on the union effort. On August 15, the Boston Social Club gathered to vote on whether or not to accept the union. 940 out of 1544 voted for the union, with no dissenting votes. Thus, the patrolmen created The Boston Policemen’s Union, No. 16,807, of the American Federation of Labor.\textsuperscript{59}

Leading to the Strike

Four days later, on August 19, the Boston Policemen’s Union elected a Division 2 Patrolman, John F. McInnes, as president. On August 20, Curtis summoned the eight newly elected union leaders to his office. Later that day, they met with Superintendent Michael H. Crowley, who asked them “eight specific questions regarding their status in the matter of the union, and whether they knew of rule 35 of the police regulations and the amendment to that rule.” The superintendent asked the men their names, how long they had been on the force, if they recently joined an organization outside the Police Department, if it was a known labor union, if they were active in its formation, when did they hear of it first, where they discussed the union (in the station house, on their own time, on the street, on or off duty), and did they know that rule 35 had been amended. Boston newspapers and the other policemen expected that Curtis would immediately suspend the eight men questioned. 60

The prediction that Curtis was to suspend the eight men came true the next day. In the late afternoon of August 21, Curtis announced that he had brought up the eight suspected union officers on charges for violating Rule 35. The next day, the Superintendent questioned another eleven men in the same

manner as the first group. Curtis decided to try the first eight men and postpone trying the other eleven. The following Tuesday, the men were to have a hearing before a trial board comprised of three captains. Curtis also declined to bring the question of a police union before the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, deciding instead to deal with the matter quickly, hoping to stop the union before it could gain more recruits or influence.\footnote{“Charges against Eight Patrolmen,” \textit{Boston Daily Globe}, pg. 1, 5; Koss, \textit{The Boston Police Strike of 1919}, 78.}

The trial began on August 26, 1919. The day before the trial began, at the request of John P. Feeney and James H. Vahey, attorneys for the accused patrolmen, Curtis decided to try the case himself, rather than relying on a three captain panel. After the initial hearing, Curtis stated that he would not rule on the case immediately, due to his busy schedule. This allowed Curtis to delay suspending the men. This delay seems to be another attempt at brinksmanship. Likely, if the patrolmen abandoned the union, they would not have been fired. The problem with this strategy is that Curtis still refused to give the patrolmen a viable channel with which to redress their grievances.\footnote{“Policemen’s Trials Open This Morning,” \textit{Boston Daily Globe}, August 26, 1919; “No Suspension of Accused Police,” \textit{Boston Daily Globe}, pg. August 27, 1919, pg. 1, 2.}

The next day, Mayor Andrew J. Peters appointed a thirty-four member Citizens Committee to represent the Mayor and the Commissioner in meetings with the police union to forestall the union drive and find an acceptable compromise. The committee was chaired by James J. Storrow. One of Storrow’s first acts was to request a meeting between the Citizens Committee and McInnes, Vahey, Feeney, and other police officers. After five days of meetings,
the citizens committee and the Boston Policemen’s Union failed to find an acceptable compromise. Storrow and the Committee took a moderate stance, stating that “he recognizes the right of any laboring men to form a union, to protect themselves and use the union weapon, the strike…policemen who go out armed to protect and arrest, if necessary to shoot, had no right to reserve the right to strike.” The police, on the other hand, held that they had every right to affiliate with the American Federation of Labor. During the meetings, the police often “stressed the long hours, the inadequate pay, the six years of service before the full rate of pay was attained, and the discomfort and unfitness of many of the station houses” as well as the inadequate representation of the Boston Social Club.63

Despite the efforts of the Policemen’s Union and the Storrow Committee, Curtis insisted on continuing his own efforts to defeat the union. On August 29, Curtis announced charges leveled against the other eleven patrolmen, bringing the total numbers of men on trial up to 19. Curtis chose these men based on their position as union leaders, though two of the nineteen were rank and file members. Curtis announced that he would hand down his decision on September 4. The morning of the 4th, Curtis announced that at the request of Mayor Peters, he would postpone his verdict until Monday, September 8 so that the Committee and the representatives from the Policemen’s Union could reach

a satisfactory agreement which would obviate the need for a verdict. The Committee believed that if Curtis handed down his decision against the nineteen patrolmen, it would push the men towards a strike and would prevent the men from abandoning their AFL charter. Instead, the Committee hoped to reach a satisfactory settlement over the weekend.64

Over the next two days, expectations of a strike increased as meetings searching for a compromise faltered. After a conference which lasted approximately twelve hours on September 6, Storrow, who had remained positive over the weeks, stated that he “was not as optimistic' as he had been, but that he “still had hope” for a settlement. For the people of Boston, the lack of compromise meant that the police would most assuredly go on strike, which they expected the Policemen’s Union to begin on Tuesday, September 9. The tension seemed to be felt most acutely by “banks, business men and storekeepers,” which began to hire private police in preparation for the strike.65

Meanwhile, the Storrow Committee had been working on drafting a compromise with Vahey and Feeney. The Citizens Committee and the attorneys for the Policemen’s Union finalized a plan on September 6, which they subsequently sent to Mayor Peters. The text of the agreement stated

(1) The Boston Policemen’s Union should not affiliate or be connected with any labor organization but should retain its independence and maintain its organization for the purpose of

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assisting its members concerning all questions relating to hours and wages and physical conditions of work.

(2) That the present wages, hours and working conditions require material adjustment and should be investigated by a committee of three citizens, who shall forthwith be selected by the concurrent action of the Mayor, the Commissioner and the Policemen’s Union, and their conclusions communicated to the Mayor and the Police Commissioner, and that thereafter all questions arising relating to hours and wages and physical conditions of work which the Policemen’s Union desires to bring before the Commissioner shall be taken up with the Police Commissioner by the duly accredited officers and committees of the Boston Policeman’s Union, and should any difference arise relating thereto which cannot be adjusted it shall be submitted to the three citizens of Boston selected by agreement between the Mayor, the Police Commissioner and the Boston Policeman’s Union. The conclusions of the three citizens thus selected shall be communicated to the Mayor and the Police Commissioner and to the Citizens of Boston by publication. The provisions of this section shall not apply to any questions of discipline [sic].

(3) That nothing should be done to prevent or discourage any members of the Boston police force from becoming or continuing the officers or members of the Boston Policemen’s Union, and that there should be no discrimination against them or preferential treatment of them or their officers because of membership in the Union.

(4) That there should be no discrimination on the part of the members of the Boston Policemen’s Union, or any of them, against a police officer because of his refusal to join the Boston Policemen’s Union. Or to continue a member thereof.

(5) That no member of the Boston Policemen’s Union should be discriminated against because of any previous affiliation with the American Federation of Labor.

The agreement would essentially create an independent internal police union which would bring any grievances to the Commissioner. If the Commissioner failed to address the grievances, the police could bring them to a three person committee who could make recommendations, though without enforcing power. Lastly, no party could discriminate against another due to his affiliation with the union. In other words, this agreement formalized the Boston Social Club into a recognized union, though without the ability to strike, which could bring their
grievances before an advisory committee and the public. Furthermore, the plan makes no mention of wages or hours because the Committee and union representatives had not discussed these issues. Thus, the plan offered a basic strategy with which to end affiliation with the American Federation of Labor while providing the patrolmen with a means to address their grievances.66

On the sixth, in an effort to forestall the strike, the Storrow Committee tried to get Curtis to agree to the compromise. That afternoon, the Committee informally presented Commissioner Curtis with a copy proposal “for his consideration, criticism and suggestion.” The Committee, though, received no response from the Commissioner. Mayor Peters then decided to formally submit the proposal to the Commissioner later that night. As Peters waited for Curtis’ response on Sunday, tensions began to rise. The Commissioner was due to hand down his verdict on 9:15 AM the next day, which the Committee was sure would precipitate the strike. Therefore, Peters distributed the agreement to the daily papers, and all but one endorsed the plan.67

The Policemen’s Union, which was scheduled to meet Monday evening, had not approved the plan, though Feeney and Vahey advised the union officials to accept the compromise and planned on attending general meeting to convince the policemen to accept the deal. Thus, the hope of the Citizens Committee, Mayor Peters, and the attorneys for the Policemen’s Union was that Curtis would

accept the compromise and delay his verdict pending the decision of the Policemen’s Union. Still, Curtis refused to take any action on the compromise.68

Boston’s organized labor had supported the policemen’s bid for unionization since mid-August. The Boston Central Labor, a body affiliated with the American Federation of Labor which represented over 80,000 men and women in the Boston area, voted to support the police on August 17. In the resolution, which passed unanimously, the CLU called Curtis’ modification of Rule 35 “a tyrannical assumption of autocratic authority,” called on him to rescind the order, and promised the Policemen’s Union “every atom of support that organized labor can bring to bear in their behalf in the even that they should need such support.”. After the CLU resolution passed, the committee in charge of mustering support for the Policemen’s Union brought the issue before Boston’s local labor unions. On August 24, over 300 attendees at a special meeting voted to support the policemen’s efforts, which brought a vote to over 500 local unions as to whether they would support the Policemen’s Union. Over the following weeks, the citizens and newspapers of Boston were sure that the Central Labor Union would call a general strike in support of the police, should they go on strike.69

By the morning of September 8th, when Commissioner Curtis planned to hand down his verdict on the nineteen defendants, everyone in Boston hoped for an 11th hour to avoid a general strike which would shut down the city. At this point, Commissioner Curtis could have accepted the compromise proposed by

the Citizens Committee and reduced tensions within the Police Department, organized labor in the city, and Boston as a whole. Curtis, who had never accepted a challenge to his authority, had also demonstrated a lack of concern for the men under his command. Instead of accepting a compromise, Curtis handed down his decision on the morning of Monday, September 8, 1919.

Curtis found all nineteen men guilty of violating Section 19 of Rule 35 of the Rules and Regulations. His verdict stated that all men admitted to joining a union affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. Because of their affiliation, Curtis rejected the argument that the police were employees of the city, but that each man “was a public officer charged with the duties of such an official…” Furthermore, as to the validity of the rule, Curtis held that “the rule is not in conflict with or in denial of any Constitutional rights of the accused, even if they be strictly and only those of an employee with his employer” due to freedom of contract laws. He went on to discuss legal precedents which he felt supported the legality of his rule. Curtis claimed that since he took office that he “encouraged and sustained the organization of the men within the department in a body made up of its own members.” Finally, he stated that he found the nineteen defendants guilty and suspended them from duty.70

The criticisms of Curtis’ refusal to accept the compromise, which the public overwhelmingly supported, began soon after papers published his verdict. In his yearend report, Curtis defended his decisions. He stated that he refused to act on the plan because it “was not prepared by the men, and the attitude of the

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men in regard to it was in no way indicated.” He further wrote that had he known the attitude of the men, it would only have been important in the mitigation of their sentences, as “the plan gave no evidence whatever of any change of heart or attitude” on behalf of the men. Furthermore, he questioned “why anyone who approved the rule and condemned the violation of it could have expected me to dicker with its violators, or that I, rather than they, should make the offer of compromise.” This last statement sums up Curtis’ attitude through his tenure as Police Commissioner. Rather than doing what was best for the citizens of the City of Boston, he allowed his arrogance to dictate his actions. The thought that he should accept a compromise which the patrolmen did not present to him seems to have raised his ire. In other words, the only acceptable solution would be a clear victory for him.71

Even if he had accepted the compromise, Curtis would not have absolved the nineteen defendants of their guilt. He stated that the plan “was intended as a basis of compromise of the cases on trial it had no connection with these cases, and its merits could properly come up for discussion only after the men on trial had purged themselves of their violation of a rule of the department.” More importantly, though, Curtis stated that

As to the arbitration features of the plan, it should be said that nowhere in the statute by virtue of which the Police Commissioner holds office is there any language that authorizes or permits him to divide his authority and responsibility with any one. The proposal that he should do so is both novel and fundamentally incompatible with the responsibility to the public which the law casts upon the Commissioner for the government of a police force, and with the sense of responsibility to to the Commissioner which the members of the force must feel if proper discipline and efficiency are to be

maintained. The plan was a reversion to the state of divided responsibility, vacillating policy and dilatory action, which prompted the Legislature to first take control of the police force of Boston from three commissioners appointed by and subservient to the mayors of Boston, and to place that control in a board of three appointed by the Governor and then, later, to still further concentrate responsibility by transferring the control to a single commissioner, under the present law.

Curtis either misunderstood or purposely misrepresented section 2 of the Citizens Committee plan to defend his refusal to accept the compromise. Most telling in his defense is his refusal to “divide power.” Rather than having a three person advisory committee investigating police grievances, Curtis tried to jealously guard his power as Police Commissioner.72

On the night of September 8, the Boston Policemen’s Union gathered to vote whether to strike. That morning at roll call, Curtis read the guilty verdict to the men, informing the nineteen men of their suspensions. That night, at 10 PM, the patrolmen's union met to discuss whether they would strike in support of their suspended fellows. Though the polls remained open until 8 AM on September 9, before midnight, approximately 1,000 men voted in favor of striking. By the next day, the vote was 1,134 votes in favor of the strike with only two dissenting votes, overwhelmingly in favor of striking. On September 9, 1919, at 5:45 PM, 1,117 of 1,544 police officers walked off their jobs.73

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Epilogue

Late in the night on September 9, riots erupted in Boston. Reporters filled papers with accounts of murder, gambling, rape, mass destruction, and looting.

One typical account states that after the police walked out,

At once Boston was plunged into anarchy. Large groups of hoodlums, who had been waiting for this opportunity, surged through the city streets, looting shops and making life unsafe for orderly citizens. With the rowdies was a sprinkling of professional crooks who organized "crap" games and won large sums from the rowdies whose wealth exceeded their discretion. "Crap" shooting is usually a game of small stakes, but in Boston stakes ran high... The forces of disorder which had captured the city did not give up without a struggle, and for more than twenty-four hours Boston was the scene of deeds common enough in the cities of Russia, but perhaps never before paralleled in the sober Massachusetts capital. Gangs of rowdies pursued women, destroyed property, and fought pitched battles with the State Guardsmen.

The riots, which lasted until September 11, and the newspapers, which summarily lined up behind Commissioner Curtis, changed public sentiment in Boston. Instead of cautiously supporting a moderate solution to police unionization, the public in Boston, as well as around the country, began to call the police criminals and traitors and called for their dismissal.74

On September 12, AFL President, Samuel Gompers, sent a telegram to Frank McCarthy, urging the striking police to go back to work. Gompers seemed to recognize the complete failure of the strike due to the outcry against the police and the lack of support within organized labor. Moreover, the looting and rioting which occurred after the police went on strike highly embarrassed the AFL, as popular opinion stated that the lack of a police presence was responsible for the unrest. In a speech on September 13, 1919, Mathew Woll, Vice President of the AFL, stated that “The Federation…gave charters to unions of policemen and firemen with the understanding that they would not resort to strikes.” Instead, the AFL expected them to use “‘a method of redress open to them which can be executed collectively and which would obviate the necessity for a strike.’” The patrolmen accepted Gompers’ advice and voted to return to work pending an October 6 meeting called by President Woodrow Wilson. Curtis responded by issuing an order to all Division Captains “That none of the patrolmen who failed to report for duty on September 9, 1919, or since that time may return to duty under any circumstances; nor are they to be allowed to remain or loiter on the premises of the different station houses.” This refusal to allow the police to return to work angered the citizens of Boston, who wanted a return to normalcy and feared a general strike which seemed to loom on the horizon. Once again, rather than agreeing to solutions which could then be negotiated, Curtis took a hardline stance, which only prolonged the situation and worsened the problem.75

The reason Curtis refused to take back the police was due to his meeting with the State Attorney General, who ruled that the police had vacated their positions when they walked off the job. This ruling allowed Curtis to rebuild the police force with men to whom he had demonstrated his power. If he had taken the striking patrolmen back, it would have looked to have been a less decisive victory for the Commissioner. An all new police force would be less likely to attempt to defy his orders, cementing his control over the Boston Police Department.  

In the wake of the public backlash against the police, the Boston Central Labor Union also abandoned the Boston Policemen’s Union. On September 12, the CLU urged any unions which had not taken a strike vote to do so as soon as possible. By September 22, the hope of a general strike which would force the city to recognize the police union had failed. At the September 21 meeting of the Central Labor Union, President Michael J. O’Donnell stated that “The time is not now opportune for the ordering of a general strike.” Realistically, the failure of the Boston Central Labor Union to assist the police was the final nail in the coffin of the hopes of the patrolmen to form a union or to retain their former jobs. Though the former patrolmen remained on strike and newspapers carried the story of the strike through the end of the year, by the end of September, the hopes of the 

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*Globe, September 13, 1919, pg. 1; “Text of Police Union’s Request to the Governor,” Boston Daily Globe, September 13, 1919, pg. 8.*

*76 “Discharges Union’s Officers,” Boston Daily Globe, September 14, 1919, Pg. 1.*
patrolmen had been crushed. Of all the police officers who failed to report on September 9, few, if any, ever returned to police work in Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{77}

Conclusion

The difference in the Commissionerships of O'Meara and Curtis largely explain the Boston Police Strike of 1919. Stephen O'Meara, though strict and, at times, hard-handed, could empathize with the patrolmen. As an immigrant who worked his way up from reporter to prominent citizen, O'Meara approached his job with fairness in mind. Though the policemen still had grievances, the pay was never enough, the hours were long, and complaints got lost in the police bureaucracy, it seems he inspired confidence in his men. He not only allowed the formation of the Boston Social Club, but also met with the Club on a regular basis to hear what the men had to say. Though the city budget would not allow the $200 raise in 1918, O'Meara discussed the situation with the Social Club’s representatives. Moreover, he did his best to make police work a permanent occupation, immune from the whims of public politics.

Curtis, on the other hand, was totally unable to sympathize with the policemen’s plight. Having come from a well to do family, Curtis approached the position as a plutocrat who believed in his right to rule. From his first day in office, Curtis alienated many of the policemen under his command by issuing orders and proclamations about police behavior without any observation period. Furthermore, his insistence on a grievance committee, rather than the Boston Social Club, sent waves throughout the department, especially after he failed to live up to his promise of regular monthly meetings.
To the patrolmen, Curtis cut off every avenue of redress available to them. No longer could they rely on an internal union, the grievance committee was an abject failure, as well. Inflation due to the First World War had driven the patrolmen’s real wages down, placing them among the lowest paid workers in Boston, despite having one of the most dangerous and arduous jobs in the city. On top of the hours and pay, patrolmen had to remain in vermin infested stationhouses. Facing poverty, unsanitary conditions, long and dangerous work, not to mention favoritism, all while being ignored by the only person in the city who could ameliorate their problems, the patrolmen looked outside the department for redress.

Thus, when the American Federation of Labor decided to allow police unions in June of 1919, the patrolmen jumped at their chance to affiliate. The AFL could have provided the policemen with a number of things. First, a collective bargaining agreement and subsequent contract would have forced the city to raise the patrolmen’s pay. Secondly, it would give the men a path which to address complaints and grievances through shop stewards. Under union auspices, complaints would have been less likely to get ignored or lost. Most importantly, if after recognition of their union, the Commissioner failed to live up to the collective bargaining agreement, the policemen would have had the weight of organized labor behind it. Sympathy strikes by other trades would have leveraged pressure against the city government, giving greater strength to the cause of the workers.
One can only wonder what the patrolmen would have done if Curtis had shown the least amount of flexibility. For instance, would the patrolmen have been so intransigent about forming their union if Curtis had made an overture, such as creating plans to clean the station houses? While these questions may be impossible to answer, what is clear is that at numerous times, Curtis had the ability to forestall the strike. Instead, Curtis went through great efforts to play a game of brinksmanship with the police union. First by reiterating O’Meara’s orders and then, after the union had been voted in, changing the department rules to forbid outside organizations. Then, in another move to publically pressure the patrolmen to abandon the AFL, he rushed the printing and delivery of 2,000 dismissal forms in a public display of power. Rather than weakening the men’s resolves, such antics raised their hackles and caused them to fight even harder.

Furthermore, had Curtis heeded the recommendation of the Citizens Committee and set up an internal union with a three person grievance committee, which would have no oversight of his duties, and dismissing the cases against the nineteen police officers, it seems likely that the patrolmen would not have abandoned their jobs. Instead, Curtis decided to prove a point by ignoring the Committee’s report entirely and suspending all nineteen of the patrolmen, knowing full well that doing so would incite the walkout. The riot which followed the walkout played in Curtis’ favor, though, and turned public sentiment against the police. Though many citizens believed that Curtis should have accepted the Citizens Committee’s compromise, they ultimately blamed the riots
on the policemen who they felt abandoned the city in its hour of need. Thus, when over 1,000 men lost their jobs in a single day, the city praised the Commissioner, the Mayor, and the Governor for a job well done.

While responsibility for the strike itself falls at the feet of Edwin U. Curtis, the failure of the strike rests, at least in part, with Boston’s organized labor. In the weeks before the strike, the Central Labor Union promised to support the police via a general strike if need be. However, it seems that the animosity that many laborers felt towards the police won out. Thus, when the police walked off the job, most unions did not follow them. Instead, the CLU released an announcement stating that they would not strike after the police had already walked off. Making matters worse was the “no strike for public employee unions” proclamation made by the AFL less than a week after the police went out. Though the blamed the strike on the city officials, the rhetoric also placed blame on the police.

In the end, the groundwork for such a showoff between labor and management began with the centralization efforts in the late 19th century. Though the aim of the aldermen was to create an efficient system of policing, they failed to create enough balance between the Commissioner and other city officials. All it took was one man who refused to compromise with or listen to the men whom he commanded to set in motion a series of events which changed not only the way the public perceived the police, but the way the police perceived themselves for nearly half a century. In a very real way, the Boston Police Strike proved the efficacy and power of bureaucracy if one man could push 1,117 public servants to walk off the job with almost no backlash against him.