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Book Review

Book Review – *Boston Police Strike of 1919*

Brendan D. Dooley*

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The infamous Boston police strike is now over a century in our past, and our recollection of its specifics is fading, as history often does. Most of us have an undergraduate, introductory course's worth of understanding on the matter. The abbreviated account is that the police abandoned their posts *en masse*, mayhem erupted, and now there is a universal prohibition on law enforcement doing so ever again. *The Boston Police Strike* is the latest title from one of the country's foremost police historians that enhances our recollection of this watershed event, the contents of which thankfully bear but a whisper of an editorial voice.

The undergraduate experience is dedicated to laying down the basics, and this is clearly evident in the first half dozen chapters. The approach therefore concedes a truism of historical research: we cannot apprehend the totality of the present in the absence of background knowledge. In short, the scene must be set. There are essentially three major players on the stage. First, there are the institutions. The incipient labor movement is in play, with the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Opposing their will are the political powers on the municipal, state, and federal levels. Second, are the headline actors on the playbill: Samuel Gompers representing organized labor and Calvin Coolidge the governor. Even bigger figures like former New York City police commissioner Teddy Roosevelt and then President Woodrow Wilson make cameos as well. Third, there is the roster of those whom history would forget, but for a careful rendering like Oliver's, the suffering citizens of Boston. There are many who are named and introduced.

Amidst all the specifics, the author also explains the multiple circumstances bearing on the strike. Given the rampant corruption, the state of Massachusetts was responsible for administering the police. While the Republicans hold the office of police commissioner (Edwin Curtis) and governor (Coolidge), a Democrat serves as Boston's mayor (Andrew Peters). Robert O'Meara was brought in as Chief and served as a universally respected reformer until his death in December of 1918. The "Patriotic Riot" of 1917 was fresh in the memory of Bostonians as America erupted in racial violence throughout the summer of 1919. A recent but vivid impression was made with the Haymarket Riot in Chicago that fed anxieties over creeping communism (i.e. Red Scare), of which organized labor was seen to be an integral part. Amid this tension were also fears of immigration, amplified by the experience of the recent cessation of hostilities with The Great War. Creeping behind that bloodletting on the battlefield was the Spanish flu pandemic, taking lives with abandon. Into this depressing milieu we add rising inflation, leaving the professionalizing police force behind their industrializing peers.

With the background set and the characters introduced, we now arrive at chapter seven's unveiling of the climactic event. Subduing their ambivalence on the question of whether government workers ought to be unionized, the AFL extends the franchise to the Boston Police Department. The subsequent chapter details the union establishing the leadership within the ranks and the initial attempt of management to dismiss the offending officers. That aroused the ire of the rank-and-file who were already agitated by the lack of agreement over the proposed pay raise. Following the lead of the Ithaca, New York and Cincinnati departments, by a vote of 1,134 to 2 the Boston Policeman's Union opted to strike on September 9th (chapter 9).

While a remnant of about 400 officers remained, Commissioner Curtis' lack of preparedness showed almost immediately. Crowds began to form around Scollay Square. The accumulating tension was sundered with the breaking of a plate glass window on Court Street late that night, thus inaugurating four days of chaos that left nine dead, not to mention the immense economic destruction. Citing incompetence, Mayor Peters wrested

police authority from Curtis. That arrangement lasted until Coolidge discovered a statute that delegated ultimate police authority to the governor. Eventually, order was restored when he dispatched the Massachusetts State Guard. Through those intervening days there were harried efforts by citizens to ensure their own defense, slapdash efforts to deputize a volunteer corps, and position politically to deflect blame for the disaster. Meanwhile, an anxious nation watched attentively to see how the emergency would play out. One of the resounding virtues of the book is that it studiously avoids the graduate seminar theatrics of imposing an ideological cant of one kind or another on to the events. Chapter fourteen grants a brief and (mercifully) muted analysis of events. The author kindly leaves the reader alone with the facts to draw their own lessons from the recitation of history. This is not to say that it lacks any top-line, take-away messages. Perhaps the largest lesson that echoes through history is that, because the catastrophic consequences were largely assigned to the AFL it served as an object lesson to the profession. All 37 charters that were then held by police organizations were quickly nullified, none of the striking officers was hired back, and with the exception of Youngstown, Ohio in 1967, no police organization has successfully organized a strike since; there are widespread restrictions on the practice.

The silence provided by the author's exercise of narrative discretion invites us to ponder what accounts for Coolidge's resolution effectively setting the status quo. There are two that leap to mind, which may be of service to future readers; an observation, and a lingering question. The observation is that there is value in refraining from action. "Silent Cal" was legendarily taciturn. Rather than comment or reflexively intervene, he relied on the natural maturation of events to determine, famously, which one of the ten problems on the horizon would not be the one that "rolled into the ditch." The restraint he demonstrated—albeit with the costs it imposed—offers an alternative to the crisis mongering and instinctive twitch to command ever shrinking media cycles in the contemporary political era. Over those fateful days, the problem that many jurisdictions were confronting on the question of organized labor crystalized. Once he had a sober view of the problem he acted swiftly and decisively.

As the strike unfolded a consensus was forming, with even the avatar of modern progressivism, Woodrow Wilson, voicing approval for Coolidge's handling of the matter. Many identify Coolidge's adroit maneuvering on the matter and the plaudits it earned as his first step toward the presidency. Wilson's commentary on the governor's behalf (p. 226) captured the dilemma that Gompers faced, which leaves us with a question. Does public sector union membership represent a conflict of interest, via "dual loyalty?" At least one leading scholar of good governance maintains that the practice is unconstitutional because it hamstring political discretion.ⁱ Then again, how can law enforcement bring government employers to the bargaining table otherwise? We are therefore left with a reminder that "The more things change, the more they stay the same." History indeed illustrates lessons to be learned but divining value from facts is complicated work. Silence often helps us concentrate long enough to discern the message though.

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Author

Brendan D. Dooley

Associate Professor of Criminal Justice, Mount St. Mary's University Emmitsburg,
MD

b.d.dooley@msmary.edu

[Brendan Dooley, Ph.D. | Mount St. Mary's University](#)

Endnotes

ⁱ Philip K. Howard, *Not Accountable: Rethinking the Constitutionality of Public Employee Unions* (Garden City: Rodin Books, 2023).