

AFD Ep 325 - Boston Police Strike & Police-Labor Relations [Bill/Rachel, Sept 20]

Intro/background: September 9, 1919 to December 21, 1919

- It was effectively over almost immediately, as Samuel Gompers of the AFL publicly urged the Boston Police strikers by September 12 to return to work, but instead on September 13 more than 1000 officers were permanently fired (these officers were never brought back, even in the late 1930s) and fresh recruitment started Sept 13. December 21 is when the new police force was fully staffed and the Massachusetts State Guard stood down. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston_Police_Strike
- We did not talk about it last year on the centennial due to being off the air for Bill's election campaign for three months, but this year seemed like a better time to talk about it anyway in terms of topicality

Current role of police unions in larger labor movement:

- <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/18/afl-cio-police-labor-union/>

On June 8, the Writers Guild of America East, a 6,000-member AFL-CIO affiliate that represents television writers and digital journalists (including at The Intercept), passed a resolution that urged its parent body to “disaffiliate” the International Union of Police Associations, the sole police-only union in the federation. “As long as police unions continue to wield their collective bargaining power as a cudgel, preventing reforms and accountability, no one is safe,” WGAE wrote in a statement.

Lost in the debate, however, is that the unions who were the immediate inspiration for the resolution would be untouched. Neither the Minneapolis, New York City, Louisville, or Buffalo unions are part of the IUPA or any other AFL-CIO union. Three are independent unions and one, in Louisville, belongs to the arch-reactionary Fraternal Order of Police. And, adding more complexity to advocates of disentangling police unions from the broader organized labor movement, the IUPA, with its 100,000 members, is far from the only union within the AFL-CIO that represents cops.

Police have a small but politically and ideologically influential presence in some of the country's largest and most progressive unions, like the United Food and Commercial Workers; the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees; the American Federation of Government Employees; and the Communications Workers of America. All are major members of the AFL-CIO union federation.

The Change to Win union federation, which broke away from the AFL-CIO in 2005, is home to the Service Employees International Union, which has thousands of law enforcement members in its International Brotherhood of Police Organizations/National Association of Government Employees chapter, as well as the Teamsters, which represents tens of thousands of police and corrections officers.

Bill Fletcher Jr., a former education director at both the AFL-CIO and AFGE, and a leading expert on race and labor, said that he has witnessed past efforts at major unions to address issues related to criminal justice reform or racism, and seen them collapse in the face of internal police opposition. “The leadership of the overall union will cower in the face of this” law enforcement opposition, he said, “in part because they are afraid that the law enforcement units will leave. That has happened in every union that I’ve worked with and every union that I have observed.” And unlike other groups of union members, police in particular will often vote with their feet to join other unions, a practice that is very uncommon in the rest of labor — giving them additional leverage over internal union deliberations.

Indeed, the AFL-CIO, which represents 12.5 million members in over 50 affiliated unions, swiftly rejected the WGAE’s resolution. “We believe the best way to use our influence on the issue of police brutality is to engage our police affiliates rather than isolate them. Many of our unions have adopted a code of excellence for their members and industries that could and should be applied to those who are sworn to protect and serve,” the

AFL-CIO's board wrote in a June 9 [statement](#). "We believe the labor movement must hold our own institutions accountable. A union must never be a shield from criminal conduct."

A vote by the AFL-CIO Executive Council to expel IUPA could be a boon to the FOP, if other police union members walked out the door with them. With union density lower than at any time in the last 80 years, unions often feel that they cannot afford to lose any more members.

"Rather than open the door to the de-unionization of public sector workers, a much better strategy is a social movement strategy," which would include the AFL-CIO saying it didn't want to be associated with cop unions, said Dubal. That strategy, Dubal argued, would recognize that "police aren't workers even in the same way that firemen are workers. Police defend property. They have historically defended white property. We're not in a place where that is going to change."

Union leadership is concerned that efforts to reform the police collective bargaining process could backfire and endanger public sector labor rights more broadly. AFSCME President Lee Saunders, who is African American, spoke to those concerns in an op-ed in USA Today, where he wrote, "Just as it was wrong when racists went out of their way to exclude black people from unions, it is wrong to deny this freedom to police officers today."

In major confrontations, police unions have already failed to show solidarity with other public sector unions. In Wisconsin, where the notorious Act 10 revoking collective bargaining rights for public employees provoked mass demonstrations in 2011, GOP Gov. Scott Walker carved cops out of his assault, depriving teachers and other public workers of the political protection that could come from a broader coalition. The police unions did not stand with the other workers.

- <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/11/police-unions-american-labor-movement-protest>

Last week, the King county Labor Coalition told the Seattle police to confront its [racism problem](#) or be kicked out of the coalition. The Association of Flight Attendants-CWA also issued a [resolution](#) arguing police unions should be "removed from the Labor movement" if they cannot address racism within their ranks.

The head of the Minneapolis police union, Bob Kroll, has effectively blocked potential reforms [for years](#), even by a former police chief's standards. He has also led the federation while proudly broadcasting his politics, calling Donald Trump "wonderful" after meeting with him in 2019.

Kroll is also frequently hostile to black people; he has referred to Black Lives Matter as a "terrorist organization" and once allegedly referred to Keith Ellison as a "terrorist". Last week, he classified George Floyd as "violent criminal" based on the fact he had served prison time, in an openly racist attempt to defend Derek Chauvin, the officer who killed Floyd.

- <https://www.motherjones.com/crime-justice/2020/08/police-unions-minneapolis/>

A forthcoming research paper from the University of Victoria in Canada [found](#) that after police officers formed unions—generally between the 1950s and the 1980s—there was a "substantial" increase in police killings of Black and Brown people in the United States. Within a decade of gaining collective bargaining rights, officers killed an additional 60 to 70 civilians of all races per year collectively, compared with previous years, an increase

that researchers say may be linked to officers' belief that their unions would protect them from prosecution. A working paper from the University of Chicago [found](#) that complaints of violent misconduct by Florida sheriffs' offices jumped 40 percent after deputies there won collective bargaining rights in 2003.

Police unions, like all unions, were designed to protect their own. But unlike other labor unions, they represent workers with the state-sanctioned power to use deadly force. And they have successfully bargained for more job security than what's afforded to most workers, security they can often rely on even after committing acts of violence that would likely get anyone else fired or locked up.

- <https://newrepublic.com/article/157918/no-cop-unions>

There is already precedent for such a move. The AFL-CIO has disaffiliated from other unions in the recent past, most [notably](#) the Teamsters, the Service Employees International Union, and most recently, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, whose leaders [criticized](#) the federation for failing to throw its considerable weight behind progressive health care and immigration policy. Given the ongoing epidemic of racist police violence against the Black community and other communities of color in the U.S., there is no better reason—and no better time—to take a stand. It's already been a long time coming.

Unfortunately, union protection plays no small role in keeping cops like Chauvin and Thao out on the streets. Collective bargaining agreements for police generally include normal language around wages and benefits but can also act as an unbreachable [firewall](#) between the cops and those they have injured. Typically, such contracts are chock full of special protections that are negotiated behind closed doors. Employment contract provisions also [insulate](#) police from any meaningful accountability for their actions and rig any processes hearings in their favor; fired cops are able to appeal and win their jobs back, even after the most egregious offenses. When Daniel Pantaleo, an NYPD officer who was involved in the 2014 murder of Eric Garner, was finally fired, the police union immediately [appealed](#) for his reinstatement and [threatened](#) a work slowdown. Now the Sergeants Benevolent Association's official Twitter account spends most of its time [needling](#) New York City Mayor De Blasio and spouting [profanity](#) and [pro-Trump](#) propaganda.

Ultimately, police unions protect their own, and the contracts they bargain keep [killers](#), [domestic abusers](#), and [white supremacists](#) in positions of deadly power—or provide them with generous pensions should they leave. The only solidarity they show is for their fellow police officers; other workers are mere targets. Their interests, as well as those of [other right-wing oppressors' unions like those that represent ICE, border patrol, and prison guards](#), are diametrically opposed to those of the workers whom the labor movement was launched to protect. As retired NYPD commander Corey Pegues [wrote](#) in his memoir, *Once a Cop*, police unions are “a blanket system of covering up police officers.”

Despite their union membership, police have also been no friend to workers, especially during strikes or protests. Their [purpose](#) is to protect property, not people, and labor history is littered with accounts of police moonlighting as strikebreakers or charging in to harass or injure striking workers. The first [recorded](#) strike fatalities in U.S. history came at the hands of police, who shot two New York tailors dead as they tried to disperse. During the [Battle of Blair Mountain](#), the police fought striking coal miners on the bosses' behalf. In 1937, during the Little Steel Strike, Chicago police gunned down 10 striking steelworkers in what became known as the [Memorial Day Massacre](#). In 1968, days after

Dr. Martin Luther King addressed a group of sanitation workers, Memphis cops [maced](#) and assaulted the striking workers and their supporters, killing a 16-year-old boy.

[Bill on the Boston Police Strike]

- The events of September 1919 in Boston took place in the context of the end of World War I in November 1918 and the Treaty of Versailles signing in June 1919, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917 with fears of a similar uprising in the United States and particularly Massachusetts after the success of the IWW in the 1912 Lawrence textile mills wildcat strike, the 65,000-strong Seattle General Strike of February 1919, the [Cleveland May Day Riots of 1919](#), and the [spring 1919 anarchist bombings](#). Many of these we discussed in depth in previous episodes. It is broadly part of the First Red Scare. The Massachusetts Volunteer Militia formed in 1908 had been reorganized as a Massachusetts State Guard in 1917 for the purpose of repelling a German invasion if one came while the Army and National Guard were deployed in Europe, and this was still around when the strike occurred. They had however also been involved in humanitarian efforts such as flu pandemic response.
- Both strikebreakers of the Massachusetts State Guard and permanent replacements for Boston police were drawn heavily from veteran troops of the U.S. military in World War I, which the British were about to do in Ireland at the start of 1920. Other strikebreakers or militia forces included Harvard students, as had also happened in the 1912 strike in Lawrence. However, many of the fired striking police officers were also recent veterans of World War I, while some older members were Spanish-American War veterans.
- After a long breakdown in relations between police officers and the Boston Police Commissioner (who was under the authority of the Massachusetts Governor, not the City of Boston, at that time) over fairly grim working conditions, very low pay compared to other Boston workers, lack of supplies being provided by the department, and rapid postwar inflation cutting into real compensation, as well as the August 1919 decision to affiliate a formal union to the American Federation of Labor (like peers in 37 other US cities were doing that summer) instead of sticking to the permitted internal department social clubs or professional associations, more than 1000 officers did not show up for their evening shift on September 9, 1919 after a strike vote where only 2 officers voted no, following the conviction of the union leadership on charges of unlawful unionization. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston_Police_Strike
 - *In 1918, the salary for patrolmen was set at \$1,400 a year (\$23,800 in 2020). Police officers had to buy their own uniforms and equipment which cost over \$200. New recruits received \$730 during their first year, which increased annually to \$821.25 and \$1000, and to \$1,400 after six years.[3] In the years following World War I, inflation dramatically eroded the value of a police officer's salary. From 1913 to May 1919, the cost of living rose by 76%, while police wages rose just 18%.[2] Discontent and restiveness among the Boston police force grew as they compared their wages and found they were earning less than an unskilled steelworker, half as much as a carpenter or mechanic and 50 cents a day less than a streetcar conductor. Boston city laborers were earning a third more on an hourly basis.[3]*
 - *Police officers had an extensive list of grievances. They worked ten-hour shifts and typically recorded weekly totals between 75 and 90 hours.[a] They were not paid for time spent on court appearances.[2] They also objected to being required to perform such tasks as "delivering unpaid tax bills, surveying rooming houses, taking the census, or watching the polls at election" and checking the backgrounds of prospective jurors as well as serving as "errand boys" for their officers.[5] They complained about having to share beds and the lack of*

sanitation, baths, and toilets[2] at many of the 19 station houses where they were required to live, most of which dated to before the Civil War. The Court Street station had four toilets for 135 men, and one bathtub.[5]

- The response of Police Commissioner Edwin U. Curtis to the AFL unionization: *"It is or should be apparent to any thinking person that the police department of this or any other city cannot fulfill its duty to the entire public if its members are subject to the direction of an organization existing outside the department.... 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 which 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."*
- Governor Coolidge and Commissioner Curtis had previously rejected a reformist compromise proposed by certain Boston officials and endorsed by most Boston newspapers that would have recognized the union and raised pay but prohibited the right to strike.
- Media coverage:
https://books.google.com/books/about/Red_Scare.html?id=7sgJeSyKZoYC
(p.129)
 - The local newspapers were all hostile to the decision to strike. One said *"behind Boston in this skirmish with Bolshevism stands Massachusetts, and behind Massachusetts stands America."* One paper called the strikers "agents of Lenin."
 - A newspaper in Philadelphia echoed this, saying *"Bolshevism in the United States is no longer a specter. Boston in chaos reveals its sinister substance."*
 - The Wall Street Journal said "Lenin and Trotsky are on their way"
 - The New York Times also called it Boston's attempt at Bolshevism, which is fairly bizarre given how little support even most other unions were willing to throw behind the police on strike during emergency membership votes on the matter.
 - The New York Times laid out a theoretical rationale against the unionization of police: *A policeman has no more right to belong to a union than a soldier or a sailor. He must be ready to obey orders, the orders of his superiors, not those of any outside body. One of his duties is the maintenance of order in the case of strike violence. In such a case, if he is faithful to his union, he may have to be unfaithful to the public, which pays him to protect it. The situation is false and impossible.... It is the privilege of Boston policemen to resign if they are not satisfied with the conditions of their employment.... but it is intolerable that a city ... should be deserted by men who misunderstand their position and function as policemen, and who take their orders from outside.... [I]t is an imported, revolutionary idea that may spread to various cities. There should be plain and stern law against it. It is practically an analogue of military desertion... [I]t ought to be punished suitably and repressed.*
 - A newspaper in Ohio argued that "When a policeman strikes, he should be debarred not only from resuming his office, but from citizenship as well. He has committed the unpardonable sin; he has forfeited all his rights."
 - Local and national newspapers emphasized the first and second night's purported looting and chaos, although this was pretty much restricted to

the most crime-ridden areas anyway, while everywhere else was basically uneventful. The second night's chaos was largely a response to the arrival of Massachusetts State Guard troops and their lack of knowledge or experience on either policing or crowd control which led to them fatally shooting some people and injuring others while trying to contain riots or stop criminal activity happening in plain view. A striking officer was also shot dead by a vigilante auto parts dealer after disarming two scabs. But despite all the hubbub about violent chaos, only 9 people died in total over the whole thing and property damage only amounted to \$35,000, which would be about \$526,000 today.

<https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/> I'm pretty sure most major storms to hit the coast of New England caused more property damage back then. Also compare that to the nearly \$500,000 in 1919 dollars (or \$7.5 million today) raised by private citizens in Boston to donate to the Guardsmen and the small number of police officers who had declined to join the strike.

- Newspaper consensus was that the Massachusetts State Guard murdering several people was an appropriate action that disciplined the city's criminal element and subdued them for the remainder of the several months of deployment. The national public's understanding was that Boston had instantaneously devolved into roving street gangs, women being assaulted openly, stores being pillaged, and the Guard machine-gunning the mob down mercilessly as "terror reigns." Even in 1930, one of the Boston newspapers was continuing to tout this narrative, despite how little of the city had been disturbed at all when the strike began.
- President Woodrow Wilson's public reaction, coming just a few weeks before his debilitating stroke, seemed based on the wildly exaggerated newspaper accounts. He labeled the strike "a crime against civilization" that left Boston "at the mercy of an army of thugs." In reality, even the Police Commissioner contended after the fact that he probably did not need to call out the State Guard in the first place because the first night's disorders were actually quite contained.
- Metropolitan Parks Police mostly refused to stand in for striking Boston Police and more than two dozen were suspended.
- Governor Calvin Coolidge made a national reputation that led him to the Vice Presidency in the 1920 election with the line "There is no right to strike against the public safety, anywhere, anytime." He coasted to a landslide re-election in November 1919.
 - Coolidge's other theme of the "sovereignty" of the state being under fire was also echoed in remarks by former US Secretary of State and former New York Senator Elihu Root, who objected to the minority of unionized Americans seizing for themselves the "power to enforce laws, the power to punish crime, the power to maintain order" by virtue of gaining control over the membership of municipal police who could strike at any time
 - Right-wing Massachusetts US Senator Henry Cabot Lodge told a newspaper in Washington DC "If the American Federation of Labor succeeds in getting hold of the police in Boston it will go all over the country, and we shall be in measurable distance of Soviet government by labor unions" – seemingly alluding to the Soldiers' Councils that had led to the Russian and German Revolutions of 1917 and 1918

- Montana Senator Henry L. Myers proclaimed “the nation will see a Soviet Government set up within two years,” which he didn’t mean as a positive outcome.
- NY Times report on the collapsing strike after several days:
<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1919/09/15/118159015.pdf>
- Police unionization effectively ended for over two decades and Boston’s police did not unionize until 1965 when state law finally allowed it