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A City in Terror. By Francis Russell. New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1975. Pp. 256.
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Abstract

In the past decade, the greatest phenomena in the field of labor relations in the United States has been the rapid growth of the organization of public employees into structures for collective bargaining. Today's public employees have obviously concluded that enhancement of terms and conditions of employment can only be achieved through the negotiating process. The posture of public employees was in 1919 (the time period dealt with by Russell) an unthinkable concept insofar as it impinged upon the sovereignty of government. Moreover, it was deemed at that time that public employees were public servants who had no right to withdraw their services. In this atmosphere, this book review considers the subject of the book- the Boston police strike in 1919.

KEYWORDS: labor relations, public employees, collective bargaining, Boston police strike of 1919

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In the past decade, the greatest phenomena in the field of labor relations in the United States has been the rapid growth of the organization of public employees into structures for collective bargaining. The growth of this organization has established a pace that has no parallel in the private sector. For example, in the State of New York there are approximately one million public employees.¹ Of this number, approximately 60 percent are members of employee organizations. This is a rate of organization that more than doubles the extent of organization in the private sector. The *raison d'être* for this disparity is significant, but it is not within the scope of this reviewer's franchise. For the purpose of this review it is sufficient to say that today's public employees have obviously concluded that enhancement of terms and conditions of employment can only be achieved through the negotiating process.

The posture of public employees, though seemingly accepted today by the body politic, was in 1919 (the time period dealt with in *A City in Terror*) an unthinkable concept insofar as it impinged upon the sovereignty of government. Moreover, it was deemed at that time, that public employees were public servants who had no right to withdraw their services. Therefore, many persons maintained that any attempt to persuade public employees to the contrary was the result of the importation of foreign ideologies operating to the detriment of American democracy. In this atmosphere, I shall consider the subject of the book—the Boston police strike in 1919.

The author, prior to considering the events leading up to the strike, attempts to portray the national scene. He recounts the efforts of soviet *qua* socialists to export the Russian Revolution to America and the involvement of such activists in the police strike in Seattle, Washington and in the textile mill strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He also notes the involvement of known socialists or radicals—Ben Gitlow, Carlo Tresca, and James Larkin. The thrust of national observation was that such strikes were not only an economic or industrial dispute; but also were part of an effort to establish soviet governments in the United States. This review will

1. These include employees of the state and political subdivisions thereof.

not dispute the contention that there were efforts by some, although an insignificant number, in 1919 to sovietize American institutions, but it does not appear that this was a significant factor in the events that gave rise to the Boston police strike.

The strike can be best understood in the light of the circumstances surrounding the administration of the Boston Police Department. Such understanding does not mandate the input of extraneous philosophies or movements.

In 1885 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts assumed control over the Boston Police Department. This move, in the opinion of the author, was to ensure "Yankee control" over the department and to put the department beyond the control of the "Celtic intruders."² However, the Massachusetts governor selected a Celt, Stephen O'Meara, as the first police commissioner. O'Meara was an enlightened administrator. As a disciplinarian, he was strict but understanding. He encouraged the police to organize into a club through which they could air their grievances. Under O'Meara, the Boston police were described as "physically finer than West Point Cadets"³ and as "the most law abiding and law conscious in the country."⁴

O'Meara died in December, 1918; the author observes that if O'Meara had lived, a police strike would never have occurred and that under O'Meara's replacement a strike was inevitable. This observation is well taken. But it is essential to consider the economic condition of the Boston policeman at the end of 1918 in order to isolate the true cause of this strike.

A recruit's annual wage was \$730 (or \$2.00 per day). The wages would increase to \$1,400 after six years, but the policemen were responsible for securing their uniforms at a cost of \$200. These figures become significant in comparison to other employees. Due to the war time inflation, the wage rate of a policeman was only one-half that of a carpenter, two-thirds that of a city laborer, and less than that of a street car conductor.

When this disparity was brought to the attention of the new police commissioner, his response was in essence that anyone who was dissatisfied with the pay rate could resign. The veracity of such a

2. The author attributes this action to the fact that a person of Irish descent had been elected Mayor of Boston.

3. F. RUSSELL, *A CITY IN TERROR* 40 (1975).

4. *Id.* at 41.

statement is clear but its efficacy is doubtful.

The police sought an increase of \$200 per year but it was not granted. In an effort to obtain bargaining leverage, the police voted in August, 1919 to affiliate with the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Boston's police commissioner while acknowledging the right of the Boston police to organize issued an order prohibiting affiliations with outside organizations. This action was most assuredly directed against the proposed affiliation with the AFL. The Commissioner's sole objection was not the validity of the grievances of the police but the proposed affiliation with a labor organization. Most importantly, the Governor of Massachusetts, Calvin Coolidge, intervened at this time by endorsing the commissioner's position.

The specific issue which gave rise to the subsequent strike was the threatened discipline of eight policemen for affiliating with an outside union.

A citizens committee intervened and recommended that (a) policemen should not affiliate with an outside union; (b) that those who participated in such affiliation would not be disciplined; and (c) that wages of police would be reviewed. These recommendations provided a basis for the resolution of the dispute.⁵ However, they were unacceptable to the police commissioner. Throughout this crisis, Governor Coolidge kept a very low profile and indicated that he should not be "annoyed" even though the police commissioner was a gubernatorial appointee. The Governor maintained this blaise attitude throughout the dispute. The eight officers were subsequently suspended and the strike began.

A strike by policemen is a most traumatic experience whether it takes place in 1919, or 1969, or 1975. It is worthy of note that the experience of the 1919 strike in Boston was comparable to the experience of Montreal in 1969, since both experiences resulted in the complete breakdown of "law and order." Looting and personal assaults were commonplace; personal rights were also violated. In brief, the veneer of civilization was proven to be extraordinarily thin. There is nothing to indicate that an experience in 1975 would be any different.

Therefore, the Boston experience warrants a conclusion that a strike by policemen cannot be tolerated. But this conclusion also

5. The frustration of Boston's Mayor in response to this attitude was such that he reportedly struck the Governor.

warrants a concomitant resolution that government must provide a means of resolving inequities involving public safety employees so as to avoid the need for detrimental self-help activities by such employees. Simply stated, a viable alternative carrying the same bargaining leverage of a strike must be devised.

The summary of the events in this book indicates that Governor Coolidge avoided his responsibility in this most crucial dispute. Yet, his inaction was such as to impel him into the presidency of the United States. Coolidge's conduct, interpreted by most Americans at the time, was that of a man who would not tolerate anarchy.

One cannot read this book without realizing that the Boston Policemen had grievances—grievances of a nature that required a response. Such a response did not have to admit the merits of the grievance; it simply had to indicate that such grievances would receive consideration.

It is the opinion of this reviewer that the Boston police strike of 1919 could have been averted. Further, in retrospect, it seems that the mantle of a hero should not have been conferred upon Mr. Coolidge. Rather it should be noted that if Mr. Coolidge had not engaged in the "ostrich syndrome" (ignoring the grievances of the Boston police) the strike might have been avoided. Mr. Coolidge might not have been President, but he would have posthumously achieved recognition as a man who would deal with inequities and demand their resolution.

It has been long recognized that the basic reason that employees have organized into an organization to deal with their employer is the need to be recognized as human beings. Human dignity is a most important factor in labor relations. This is a factor that Mr. Coolidge did not recognize, and the horrendous results of the 1919 strike should be recorded as a failure of Mr. Coolidge to the same degree that blame has been assessed upon the strikers. A person can not be driven into the ground by reason of unfair and inequitable conduct of an employer, and thereafter permit an employer, because of the essential characteristic of the employee services, to decry the lack of concern for public safety in the event of a strike. Rather, public employees should take appropriate measures to provide for the resolution of grievances in order to avoid the basis for the type of self-help activities engaged in by the Boston policemen of 1919.

In summary, this historical review of the police strike of 1919

should be read not only in recognition of the fact that a police strike cannot be tolerated, but also as an example that essential employees must be accorded a procedure (outside of the strike) which permits their grievances to be heard and resolved.

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