

Lessons From The Police Strikes

In a very interesting article on Police strikes the American City presents the question very clearly as it affects the community.

The strikes of policemen are not isolated outbreaks, but symptoms of long-standing grievances to which American cities must give heed.

The occasion of the Boston strike was the suspension by the Police Commissioner of nineteen policemen, all officers in, and organizers of, a police union formed in defiance of his express orders, which were supported by the Mayor and the Governor. Our readers are doubtless familiar with the story of violence, pillage, and loss of life that ensued when the protection of the police ceased and criminals flocked to the city to make the most of their opportunities. This was checked only by the determined action of Governor Coolidge by means of the state militia and the organization of a volunteer police force made up of courageous, public-spirited citizens.

Prior to the Boston affair, the Commissioners of the District of Columbia had refused to permit the organization of a union of police in Washington, a position in which they were subsequently upheld by President Wilson, in the following words:

"I am desirous as you are, of dealing with the police force in the most just and generous way, but I think that any association of the police force of the Capital City, or of any great city, whose object is to bring pressure upon the public of the community such as will endanger the public peace or embarrass the maintenance of order should in no case be countenanced or permitted."

At the President's suggestion, action on the grievances of the Washington police was deferred pending his return to Washington and the Industrial Conference of October 6.

About the same time the police and firemen of Macon, Ga., refused to yield to the demands of the local Civil Service Commission to disband their unions. The police, according to press reports, hooted the order, and the members of the firemen's union announced that they would "only be put out with guns." Two chiefs of police have failed to compel obedience and have resigned. The case is still unsettled.

Before passing judgment, let us pause to examine the grievances of the men and the issues raised by their conduct.

There is no doubt that conditions in both the police and fire services have been far from ideal, and that the expense of buying uniforms at present prices, the restriction upon places of residence, and, in many cities, the deductions from scanty pay for pension fund dues, are particularly hard in view of the high cost of living. Moreover, it is a notorious fact that the salaries paid to policemen and firemen in many cities, as well as to teachers and other public servants are a disgraceful commentary upon our complacent indifference to the faithful service customarily rendered by such employees.

But granting the justice of many of these claims, are the methods by which the police and firemen have sought to remedy these conditions justifiable?

Three issues are raised: the right of police and firemen to organize; their right to affiliate with a nationally organized labor body; and, most vital of all, their right to strike.

1.—The right to organize.—The constitutional guarantee of the right "peacefully to assemble and petition the Government for a redress of grievances" would seem to indicate very clearly the fundamental right of police and firemen, as well as other citizens, to organize for the improvement of the conditions under which they perform their duties. This is recognized by the Commissioners of the District of Columbia in their deliberately worded statement:

"They approve heartily of the principle of collective bargaining, and they welcome the organization of members of the police force for purposes of collective representation mutual support and organized effort to increase their salaries or improve their working conditions."

2.—The right to affiliate with a nationally organized labor body.—On this point the Commissioners of the District of Columbia are equally definite:

"They must withhold their consent from any project to connect such an organization of members of the Police Department with any other labor organization,

"The fact that the policemen's union (in Washington) is bound by a 'no-strike' provision is an earnest of the intention of its members not to resort to a strike as a weapon of compelling its demands, but if it be affiliated with with other organizations which do contemplate the use of a strike in an emergency, every member of the police force who is a member of the union would be liable to the charge, however falsely made, of favoritism in the performance of duty in the event of industrial trouble involving the organization with which it is affiliated."

A policeman is morally obligated by his oath of office to assist in the preservation of law and order. As such, it is inconceivable that he could serve two masters, one of which, by its very nature, must ever represent, not all the people, but a class. A police department cannot fulfill its duty to the public if its members are subject, even to the slightest degree, to the direction of an organization outside the department not responsible to the public. The absolute subordination of armed force to civil authority as representative of all the people has been a fundamental belief of the American people since the adoption of the Constitution. It cannot be compromised, for it is the very essence of security to persons and property, and any change by which a separate and inevitable conflicting allegiance, would be introduced to lessen the direct responsibility of the police to the people would be intolerable.

3.—The right of the police to strike.—President Wilson, in his speech at Helena, Mont., on September 11, set forth the only possible answer to this question when he said:

"I want to say this—that a strike of the policemen of a great city, leaving that city at the mercy of an army of thugs, is a crime against civilization.

"In my judgment the obligation of a policeman is as sacred and direct as the obligation of a soldier. He is a public servant, not a private employee, and the whole honor of the community is in his hands. He has no right to prefer any private advantage to the public safety.

"I hope that that lesson will be burned in so that it will never again be forgotten, because the pride of America is that it can exercise self-control."

That his position is heartily concurred in by thoughtful city employes is evident from the following resolution adopted by 643 officers of the New York City Fire Department on September 15:

"The members of the uniformed force of the Fire Department being public officials serving as a force of public safety, we believe that any attempt of an organized effort on the part of such force to engage in a strike under any circumstances would be akin to mutiny and desertion of posts in time of danger, which would not only result in an undue menace to the lives and property of the citizens of the city, but would also be an unlawful proceeding and a crime against civilization and government."

The Honor Legion (1,100 strong) of the New York Police Department on October 1 adopted a similar resolution.

What Ought To Be Done?

Obviously it should be made very evident to municipal employes that the regularly constituted authorities in American cities are prepared to remove just grievances, but are also fully prepared to remove, in another sense, every man who, in disregard of his sworn duty, undertakes to take the law into his own hands.

It is equally obvious that the morale of the police and firemen will suffer if they do not get a "square deal." It is not so easy to recruit for either service as it was. Without first-class police and fire services, every city would soon be in difficulties, and in the end at the mercy of the lawless element. The case as presented for increases of pay is so sound, so convincing, that city councils generally should act promptly. Many cities have already done so, and Boston, for example, is recruiting its new police force on a higher pay basis.

But while justice should be done without delay, it should be made unmistakably plain that no American city will tolerate divided allegiance or confess itself helpless against a violent minority. If the riots in Boston and the defiance of the police and firemen in Macon drive this lesson home, these disturbances, regrettable as they are, may yet prove to be of real value as an object lesson to the nation,