

*The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended, and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. Pope Pius X., Leo XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and*

# Annals from the Archives

## Labor Unrest in Massachusetts



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Massachusetts Militia attempting to keep order in Scollay Square during 1919 Boston Police Strike  
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—The 1920s are remembered as times of great prosperity. That was true for some but not for all. During World War I, the U.S. government enacted legislation to ration food and fuel. In January 1918, this forced some schools, such as St. Mary's in Cambridge, to remain closed "on account of coal conservation law." Not until the 16th of January could they re-open. These laws ended with the war and caused prices to skyrocket. During 1919, consumer costs were 78% higher than they had been in 1914.

In Cambridge, where approximately 35 sisters lived, prices for meat rose 23% between 1916 and 1920; milk went from \$67 in 1914 to \$114 in 1920, an increase of 58%. Those expenses affected more than food. The Sisters reported from the West Broadway convent in South Boston that for Christmas of 1918 the "chapel not so floral as other years giving to the exorbitant prices of flowers; decorated [the chapel] with asparagus. . ."

In addition, ordinary workers either lost their jobs, struggled to make ends meet with the salaries they received, or saw their wages cut in response to the higher cost of manufacturing. Four million workers across the country went on strike in 1919, including the majority of the Boston Police Department. They walked in protest when the city cut their wages from 25 cents to 21 cents an hour and increased their work week from 83 to 98 hours. Despite their many grievances, mostly that their wages could not keep up with the cost of living, the government refused to meet any of their demands. Adding fuel to the fire, this strike occurred during the "Red Scare" when fears of Bolshevism were running high. Finally, the governor of Massachusetts, Calvin Coolidge, ordered a new police force to be hired. In the end, these new recruits received many of the compensations that the strikers had wanted.

Labor unrest continued across the country. The Annals kept by the Sisters of Notre Dame on E Street in South Boston begin 1921 by stating, "The year opened under most unfavorable conditions for the working classes. Many strikes had brought unemployment; stores and other places of business had to dismiss help, and the high prices commenced in the war time brought additional suffering." The *Boston Globe* reported on many of the strikes spreading across the state and country. In Lawrence, Massachusetts workers protested the textile mills cutting their wages. On January 5, 1921, the *Globe* wrote that "thousands of mill hands [were] out of work . . . [and] there is not justification of a wage cut in the textile industry and that there had been a large percentage of the mill workers who, even in the days of highest prices, have never received wages such as the Federal Government declared necessary to maintain an American family."

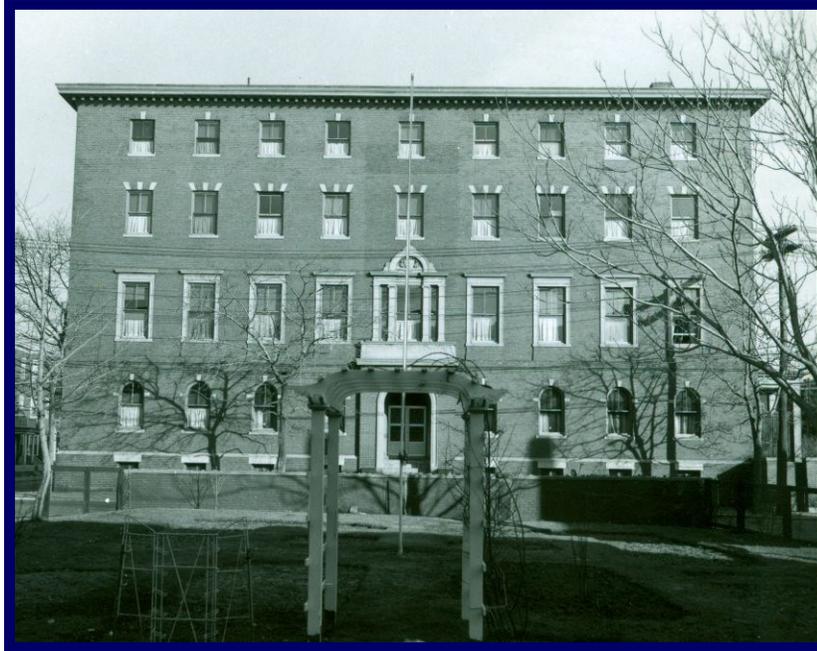
Wage reduction affected almost all workers, including those in printing, restaurants and construction. When carpenters, painters, plumbers and others involved in the construction industry were offered 90 cents an hour—a cut of 10%—and no

guaranteed overtime, 30,000 Boston workers, representing 50 separate unions, walked out on January 19, 1921. Two days later, shoe workers went on strike. In February, grocery workers and teamsters in Salem, Massachusetts joined the strikers.

Meeting after meeting were held between the mayor of Boston and the labor leaders. The dispute dragged on until March 23rd, when an uneasy settlement was finally made. Though most workers returned to their various jobs, unrest continued across the country. By September, almost 20,000 businesses had failed, leading to more than 2.5 million people losing their jobs.

President Harding was forced to organize an Unemployment Conference which attempted to address the crisis. While it was too little, too late, the economy did begin a slow rebound in 1922, leading to the popular view of the "Roaring Twenties" as a time of great prosperity. Despite that, labor problems continued into 1922. Coal miners went out on strike for nearly six months to protest wage cuts and railroad workers also walked when the Railroad Labor Board cut their pay by 13%.

As for the Sisters of Notre Dame in Cambridge and elsewhere in Massachusetts, prices slowly dropped for a few years. In 1920, they had spent about 27 cents a pound for meat. That went down to 15 cents a pound two years later, but by the beginning of the Depression in 1930 had risen to more than 30 cents a pound.



St. Mary's Convent in Cambridge, MA

#### Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Cambridge, MA Convent Annals, 1903-1919; 1920-1936.
- ◆ Cambridge, MA Convent House Accounts, 1896-1919; 1920-1936.
- ◆ E Street, South Boston Convent Annals, 1903-1927.
- ◆ Boston Globe Archives, 1872-1979.
- ◆ Boston Public Library, Flickr Images.
- ◆ [The People's Chronology](#) by James Trager. 1992.