

Labor Day: How it came about; what it means

“Labor Day differs in every essential way from the other holidays of the year in any country,” said Samuel Gompers, founder and longtime president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). “All other holidays are in a more or less degree connected with conflicts and battles of man’s prowess over man, of strife and discord for greed and power, of glories achieved by one nation over another. Labor Day ... is devoted to no man, living or dead, to no sect, race, or nation.”

Labor Day, the first Monday in September, is a creation of the American labor movement and is dedicated to the social and economic achievements of workers. It constitutes a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country.

FOUNDER OF LABOR DAY

More than 100 years after the first Labor Day observance, there is still some doubt as to who first proposed the holiday for workers.

Some records show that Peter J. McGuire, general secretary of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and a co-founder of the AFL, was first in suggesting a day to honor those “who from rude nature have delved and carved all the grandeur we behold.”

But Peter McGuire’s place in Labor Day history has not gone unchallenged. Many believe that Matthew Maguire, a machinist, not Peter McGuire, founded the holiday. Research seems to support the contention that Matthew Maguire, later the secretary of Local 344 of the

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International Association of Machinists in Paterson, N.J., proposed the holiday in 1882 while serving as secretary of the Central Labor Union in New York. What is clear is that the Central Labor Union adopted a Labor Day proposal and appointed a committee to plan a demonstration and picnic.

THE FIRST LABOR DAY

The first Labor Day holiday was celebrated on Tuesday, Sept. 5, 1882, in New York City, in accordance with the plans of the Central Labor Union. The Central Labor Union held its second Labor Day holiday just a year later, on Sept. 5, 1883.

In 1884, the first Monday in September was selected as the holiday, as originally proposed, and the Central Labor Union urged similar organizations

in other cities to follow the example of New York and celebrate a “workingmen’s holiday” on that date. The idea spread with the growth of labor organizations, and in 1885 Labor Day was celebrated in many industrial centers of the country.

LABOR DAY LEGISLATION

Through the years the nation gave increasing emphasis to Labor Day. The first governmental recognition came through municipal ordinances passed during 1885 and 1886. From them developed the movement to secure state legislation. The first state bill was introduced into the New York Legislature, but the first to become law was passed by Oregon on Feb. 21, 1887. During the year four more states — Colorado, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York — created the Labor Day holiday by legislative enactment. By the end of the decade, Connecticut, Nebraska, and Pennsylvania had followed suit. By 1894, 23 other states had adopted the holiday in honor of workers, and on June 28 of that year, Congress passed an act making the first Monday in September of each year a legal holiday in the District of Columbia and the territories.

A NATIONWIDE HOLIDAY

The form that the observance and celebration of Labor Day should take were outlined in the first proposal of the holiday — a street parade to exhibit to the public “the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations” of the community, followed by a

festival for the recreation and amusement of the workers and their families. This became the pattern for the celebrations of Labor Day. Speeches by prominent men and women were introduced later, as more emphasis was placed upon the economic and civic significance of the holiday.

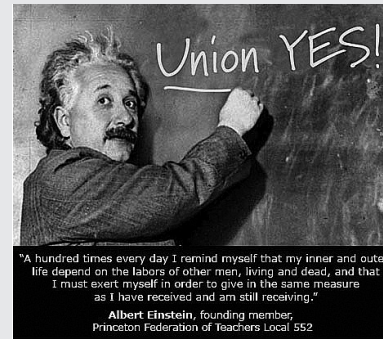
Still later, by a resolution of the AFL convention of 1909, the Sunday preceding Labor Day was adopted as Labor Sunday and dedicated to the spiritual and educational aspects of the labor movement.

The character of the Labor Day celebration has undergone a change over the years, especially in large industrial centers where mass displays and huge parades have proved a problem. This change, however, is more a shift in emphasis and medium of expression. La-

bor Day addresses by leading union officials, industrialists, educators, clerics and government officials are given wide coverage in newspapers, radio, and television.

The vital force of labor added materially to the highest standard of living and the greatest production the world has ever known and has brought us closer to the realization of our traditional ideals of economic and political democracy. It is appropriate, therefore, that the nation pay tribute on Labor Day to the creator of so much of the nation’s strength, freedom, and leadership — the American worker.

(Editor’s Note: This article is from the Northwest Labor Press archives. It is a history of the Labor Day researched by the U.S. Department of Labor.)



**UNION
MEMBER
of the
CENTURY!**

Albert Einstein, Time magazine’s “Person of the 20th Century” was a visionary scientist, philosopher, teacher — and a union member. In fact, he was a founding member of the Princeton Federation of Teachers Local 552, signing its charter in 1938. Look ... he was a pretty smart guy, right? Well? What are you waiting for!

(From the Washington State Labor Council)



The strength and well-being of the nation depends on America’s working men and women.

Happy Labor Day and Thank You!

**Peter DeFazio, Democrat
United States Congress
Oregon, District 4**

Paid for and authorized by DeFazio for Congress

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