

# Labor Day: How it came about and 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 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

(Turn to Page 3)

# Uncle Sam wants you to buy American!

**Be an Economic Patriot**

**Your Government is Pledged To  
“Buy American”**

**You Can Do the Same!**

As unemployment remains stubbornly high, people continue to watch their spending. But don’t be penny-wise and pound foolish. If and when you buy anything, look for union-made in the USA.

It’s the patriotic thing to do.



**NORTHWEST OREGON LABOR COUNCIL, AFL-CIO  
Union Label & Service Trades Department**

9955 SE WASHINGTON STREET, SUITE 305 • PORTLAND, OREGON • 503-235-9444

# THANKS FOR ALL YOU DO!

Thank you Oregon workers! Working people are the lifeblood of our country. From good paying jobs to the right to organize, I stand with you in our fight to make America work for working Americans.

PAID FOR BY JEFF MERKLEY FOR OREGON

**Jeff Merkley**  
U.S. Senate