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July 4, 1776

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Labor Day

Labor Day History

As the Industrial Revolution took hold of the nation, the average American in the late 1800s worked 12-hour days, seven days a week in order to make a basic living. Children were also working, as they provided cheap labor to employers and laws against child labor were not strongly enforced.

With the long hours and terrible working conditions, American unions became more prominent and voiced their demands for a better way of life. On Tuesday September 5, 1882, 10,000 workers marched from city hall to Union Square in New York City, holding the first-ever Labor Day parade. Participants took an unpaid day-off to honor the workers of America, as well as vocalize issues they had with employers. As years passed, more states began to hold these parades, but Congress would not legalize the holiday until 12 years later.

Pullman Car Company. On May 11, 1894, workers of the Pullman Palace Car Company in Chicago struck to protest wage cuts and the firing of union representatives. They sought support from their union led by Eugene V. Debs and on June 26 the American Railroad Union called a boycott of all Pullman railway cars. Within days, 50,000 rail workers complied and railroad traffic out of Chicago came to a halt. On July 4, President Grover Cleveland dispatched troops to Chicago. Much rioting and

bloodshed ensued, but the government's actions broke the strike and the boycott soon collapsed. Debs and three other union officials were jailed for disobeying the injunction. The strike brought worker's rights to the public eye and Congress declared, in 1894, that the first Monday in September would be the holiday for workers, known as Labor Day.

The founder of Labor Day remains unclear, but some credit either Peter McGuire, co-founder of the American Federation of Labor, or Matthew Maguire, a secretary of the Central Labor Union, for proposing the holiday.

Although Labor Day is meant as a celebration of the labor movement and its achievements, it has come to be celebrated as the last, long summer weekend before Autumn.

The Labor Union

In the United States unionism in some form is almost as old as the nation itself. Crafts that formed local unions in the late 18th and early 19th century included printers, carpenters, tailors, and weavers. Their chief purpose was to keep up craft standards and to prevent employers from hiring untrained workers and importing foreign labor. From 1806 there were numerous prosecutions by employers of unions as combinations in restraint of trade. The early 1830s, a period of industrial prosperity and inflation, was a time of union development; however, the financial Panic of 1837 halted this growth. After the Civil War, in 1866, the National Labor Union was formed; it had such objectives as the abolition of convict labor, the establishment of the eight-hour workday, and the restriction of immigration, but it collapsed with its entry into politics in 1872.

During the depression of the 1930s, unions experienced a rapid growth in membership. At this time the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was formed; it

was made up at first of dissident unions of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and was led by John L. Lewis. During the administration of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, steps were taken to restore seriously deteriorated standards of employment and to facilitate the development of trade-union organization. The accomplishment of those goals were sought through the passage of such acts as the National Labor Relations (Wagner) Act of 1935, an enactment that enlarged the rights of unions and created the National Labor Relations Board, and by protective labor legislation such as the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938) and the Social Security Act (1935). There were often severe conflicts between the AFL and the CIO during the 1930s and 40s. It was therefore considered a momentous step when in 1955 the two labor groups merged to form the AFL-CIO. The AFL, the larger of the two organizations, was given a proportionate share of the offices of the new federation, and its president, George Meany, was unanimously elected president of the combined body. Industrial unions of the CIO were given a department of their own within the merged organization.

The Late 1950s to the Present

The AFL-CIO issued a series of ethical-practice codes to govern the behavior of union officers and expelled the Teamsters for corruption in 1957. Nevertheless the entire labor movement found itself on the defensive in the late 1950s, following the disclosures made by the Senate Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor or Management Field (popularly known as the McClellan Committee); the committee exposed such abuses as collusion between dishonest employers and union officials, extortions and the use of violence by certain segments of labor leadership, and the misuse of funds by high-ranking union officials. As a result of the findings of the

McClellan Committee, the Landrum-Griffin Act of 1959 was enacted to correct abuses in labor-management relations.

Since World War II, U.S. unions have undergone a period of decline. In 1960 one third of all American workers belonged to a union, but by 1997 the proportion had dropped to 14%. Faced with foreign competition and financial troubles in its traditional power base-manufacturing and mining-organized labor was hurt in the 1980s by layoffs and was, in many cases, forced to accept reduced wages and benefits. In response, many unions adopted a more conciliatory attitude, reducing the number of strikes to record lows in the 1980s and early 90s, and attempting to negotiate contracts providing job security for members. Unions have also placed greater emphasis on organizing drives for new members. Although unions have been very successful in organizing government employees, they have been less successful with recruiting office workers in the rapidly expanding services sector. Another problem is demographic: The fastest growing parts of the labor force (women, service industries, and college-educated employees) have traditionally been the most reluctant to organize. Unlike European Union movements, American organized labor has avoided the formation of a political party and has remained within the framework of the two-party system. By 1996 the number of strikes in the United States had reached its lowest level in 50 years; at the end of the decade, however, a tighter labor market and more aggressive union leadership led to a resurgence of strikes against such major companies as Northwest Airlines, General Motors, and United Parcel Service.

The Eight-Hour Work Day

Demands for an eight-hour working day became increasingly widespread among American laborers in the 1880s. In 1866, the National Labor Union failed to convince Congress to legalize the eight-hour working day. In 1869, the Knights of Labor were created and rallied for the eight-hour work day, abolition of child and convict labor, equal pay for equal work, and elimination of private banks. Although at its height membership reached 702,000 members, support for the Knights eventually diminished and the eight-hour work day was never institutionalized.

On May 4, 1886, an outbreak of violence occurred in Chicago. A demonstration, largely staged by a small group of anarchists, caused a crowd of some 1,500 people to gather at Haymarket Square. When policemen attempted to disperse the meeting, a bomb exploded and rioting ensued. Seven policemen and four other persons were killed, and more than 100 persons were wounded at what came to be known as the Haymarket Square Riot. Public indignation rose rapidly, and punishment was demanded. Eight anarchist leaders were tried, but no evidence was produced that they had made or thrown the bomb. They were, however, convicted of inciting violence. Four were hanged, one committed suicide, and the remaining three-after having served in prison for seven years-were pardoned (1893) by John P. Altgeld, governor of Illinois, on the ground that the trial had been unjust.

Fair Labor Act. It wasn't until 1938 when Congress proposed the Fair Labor Standards Act, establishing a minimum wage, initially \$0.25 an hour, along with a maximum workweek of 44 hours; these were to become \$0.40 an hour and 40 hours after seven years.

The Fair Labor Standards Act has been amended repeatedly in subsequent decades, with changes expanding the classes of workers covered; raising the minimum wage; redefining regular-time work and raising overtime payments so as to encourage the hiring of new workers, as opposed to the loading of extra work on the lowest-paid; and equalizing pay scales for men and women.

The Work Hours Act of 1962 provided time-and-a-half pay for work over an 8-hour day or a 40-hour week.

“History of Labor Day.” July 4, 1776. <http://www.history.com>.