

A History Of Labor Day

The Industrial Revolution modernized the United States and Canada during the 19th century. As people enjoyed steady employment, they compromised their rights in the workplace. Longer work hours and pay cuts were imposed. US labor groups began protecting themselves by unionizing.

In Canada unions were illegal until 1872 when thousands of Ottawa laborers marched to Prime Minister John MacDonal'd's home. That year Canada wiped the anti-union law from its books and the march became an annual Canadian tradition.

In 1882, Toronto labor officials invited an American Union leader, Peter J. McGuire to Toronto's labor celebrations. McGuire was so impressed that he suggested a workers parade to New York City's Central labor union. He chose September 5th as the date because it filled the long void between July 4th and Thanksgiving. Coincidentally that same year, a machinist from Paterson New Jersey, Matthew Maguire, also proposed the laborers celebration.

On Tuesday September 5th, 1882 thousands of New York City laborers marched from City Hall to Union Square. They gathered in Reservoir Park for an afternoon of picnics, concerts and speeches, rallying for an eight-hour work day.

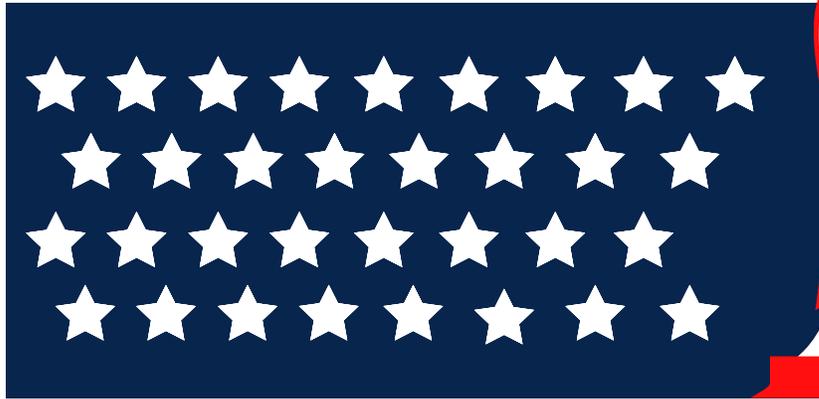
Two years later the Central Labor Union moved the parade to the first Monday in September. They also encouraged all US cities to follow New York's lead and march for the working man's holiday. For many the choice was to either spend the day at work or march without pay. That began to change when Oregon became the first state to legalize the Labor Day holiday in 1887. Other states including New York soon followed.

It took a political disaster to put Labor Day on the national calendar. In 1894, railway workers in Pullman, Illinois went on strike to protest wage cuts. President Grover Cleveland faced pressure to end the demonstrations and sent 12,000 federal troops to break the strike. Violence erupted. Two strikers were killed and Cleveland's harsh methods made headlines. In an attempt to appease the nation's workers he signed a bill to make Labor Day a federal holiday. Cleveland still lost that year's election.

America's workers continued to gain power through the 1950s when over a third of all labor forces were unionized. Labor Day had become a time to rally workers for safer conditions, fair pay and benefits. But in the second half of the 20th century the US labor force diminished. Many factories closed. Jobs were outsourced to other countries.

Today workers still parade through blue-collar neighborhoods on Labor Day and speeches unite the ever dwindling labor force but the day's true call has quieted. For now, most Americans leisurely enjoy the holiday as summer's last vow.

SEPT 5TH



LABOR DAY

Celebrated on the first Monday in September to honor and recognize the American labor movement and the works and contributions of laborers to the development and achievements of the United States.

