

A Brief History Of Labor Day

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esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations."

The parade should be followed by "a picnic or festival in some grove," the proceeds of which should be divided on a semi-co-operative basis, each local union keeping the money for the tickets it sold and contributing to the expenses in proportion to its membership.

The New York Herald wrote of that first parade that it was colorful and "the most orderly parade ever seen." Of the picnic, it said that "Americans and English, Irish and Germans, they all hobnobbed and seemed on a friendly footing, as though the common cause had established a sense of closer brotherhood."

The Tribune editorially commented "the gathering had none of the aspects of a bread riot, but every semblance of a picnic or a political barbecue."

The next year, 1883, the city Central Labor Union again sponsored a Labor Day parade, and the Tribune saw fit to report it much more fully. This time the trades unions began to assemble at 8:30 in the morning at historic Cooper Union, symbol of liberty and reminiscent of one of Lincoln's greatest speeches on freedom. At 10, when the procession got under way, there were 10,000 workers in line, and they marched past a reviewing stand in Union Square on which were Louis P. Post, Justus Schwab, Robert Blissett, P. J. McGuire, and other well-known labor leaders.

After the parade the celebration moved to Wendell's Elm Park, where fully 20,000 persons listened to speeches and watched athletic games.

In 1884 there were 20,000 men in the parade and "ten times that number lined the streets and cheered."

Unions vied with each other in developing original and colorful floats and other stunts. The printers had a truck bearing one of Benjamin Franklin's printing-presses. The oldest bricklayer in New York rode on another truck, surrounded by little girls. The cigar-makers had a truck bearing their members at work, and the cigars they made were distributed among the crowd. Twelve hundred members of the Eastern Butchers' Union, "all stalwart men," marched in uniform garb of check jumpers, black caps, and dark trousers, walking down the avenue 12 abreast.

The second division of the parade was headed by 150 members of the Wendell Phillips Labor club, an organization of Negro workers.

James Wood and Washington Park were hired for the "picnic and summer night's festival," and there were 40,000 present to listen to the band concerts and watch the athletics. Platforms were set up for dancing at night. The Tribune noted that "it was proposed to have speaking in the evening, but that part of the programme was abandoned. It was found next to impossible to get the people to forsake the varied amusements."

In Chicago a month later, on October 9, 1884, the fourth annual convention of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada, which became the American Federation of Labor, adopted a resolution proposed by A. C. Cameron, a Chicago delegate, which read:

"Resolved, that the first Monday in September of each year be set apart as a laborers' national holiday, and that we recommend its observance by all wage workers, irrespective of sex, calling of nationality."

ganized labor movement (there were 26 delegates, and the organization's report showed total expenditures of \$543.20 for the year) started something which was soon followed by an endorsement from the federation's rival, the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor.

Labor men universally adopted the idea as part of their basic programs, and began to seek legalization of Labor Day as a holiday.

The first Labor Day bill was introduced in the New York legislature in 1887, but Oregon passed the first Labor Day law, on February 27, 1887. Colorado, Massachusetts, New Jersey and New York followed suit the same year, and other states followed rapidly. In 1894 President Grover Cleveland signed an act making Labor Day a holiday for all federal employees, for the District of Columbia, and for the territories.

Labor Day is now a legal holiday in all states and territories, either by legislative enactment, or, as in Wisconsin and Wyoming, through proclamation by the governor.

It was in New York City in 1887 that Labor Day began to be a holiday for all, not merely a union celebration. "Flags were displayed from the public buildings, hotels and many stores and buildings," said the Tribune, which put Labor Day on page one for the first time.

"The courts and municipal offices were closed, and even at the Customs House the day was observed as a holiday, though no national law requires it."

The Tribune listed interesting details of the parade, in which 20,000 participated. "The employees of Higgins' carpet factory made a fine show, and the women workers in carriages caused considerable cheering." Henry George, the famed single-taxer and liberal, stood in the reviewing stand, and by his side was Frank Farrell, Negro vice-chairman of the county committee of the United Labor party.

Observance of the holiday began quickly in other cities all over the country during these years, and in 1894 the event was first celebrated in Washington as a national holiday.

And on this day, Albert Porto, from the office of the Architect of the Capitol, climbed the great caisson dome of the Capitol and perched atop the statue of Freedom to encircle Freedom's brow with a gigantic wreath of "palm leaves, asparagus, roses and carnation."

Still on his precarious perch, Porto read an invocation of freedom which the packed crowds on the plaza, 287 feet below, could not hear. But they understood what he was doing, and cheered him.

Labor Day in Europe stemmed directly from an effort, instituted by Samuel Gompers, father and long-time president of the American Federation of Labor, to demonstrate in sympathy with United States labor's efforts to attain an almost unthinkable reform—the eight-hour day.

The A. F. of L. in 1889 decided upon this crusade, and the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners were selected as the spearhead, to make an initial demonstration on May 1, 1890. Gompers wrote to the International Labor Congress, which was meeting in Paris, and asked for support and demonstrations in all other countries.

European governments, used to workers' revolutions and unused to American labor's united demonstrations, viewed the prospect with alarm. Germany prohibited all government employees from striking that day, on pain of dismissal, and most private employers did likewise. Italy forbade all public assemblies on May 1, and called soldiers into the cities. France took elaborate measures to prevent disorders, and only England and Switzerland let the workers take

their course.

The 1890 demonstrations were small and not very successful, and the Nation, in an article from Milan, Italy, commented that the selection of the eight-hour day as a battle-cry was "most unfortunate." The writer cited as "astounding" one labor pamphlet which made the suggestion that "the greedy capitalist" who really had to have 16 hours of work in a day should hire two workers instead of one, paying each the full day's pay.

From this, however, came observance of May 1 as Labor Day in Europe. Governmental fears subsided, and the day was made a legal holiday in many countries, and the nations of a Latin America followed the European precedent.

Canada followed the United States with its holiday on the first Monday in September, and Newfoundland established September 2 as its Labor Day. Western Australia and Queensland observe the first Monday in May, Victoria in Australia observes April 21 as its Eight-Hours Day, and New South Wales and South Australia have their similar days in October.

The significance of Labor Day has been voiced in glowing words by many national leaders. Back in 1895 a grand old man of labor, Eugene V. Debs, said the day's supreme significance was that apart for discussion "of questions vital with interest to all workers, involving not only labor, but legislation, law and liberty."

"It would add infinitely to the significance and glory of Labor Day if it should be, as it was designed to be, a day upon which all lines dividing labor, real or ideal, should be obscured, and the supreme law of brotherhood have full sway."

In 1902, Frank P. Sargent, U. S. Commissioner of Immigration, put a thought nobly and succinctly:

"There is no national holiday when the people should take deeper interest in its proper observance than on Labor Day. While Independence Day, the glorious Fourth of July, commemorates the birth of liberty, Labor day proclaims the struggle constantly maintained by the countless toilers of the land to perpetuate those principles announced in 1776: Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness."

And Samuel Gompers said in 1921, a few short years before his death:

"Labor Day stands for Labor's faith. Faith in America. Faith in her institutions. Faith in her democracy. Faith in her representative government. And above all, Labor Day stands for faith in the workers. Faith in their ability and determination to show the world that within the field of democracy Labor can forge its way straight ahead and strike from its path the barriers of reaction, greed, oppression and tyranny wherever found and by whomever planted. . . ."

"And Labor Day stands for freedom. For freedom attained and freedom demanded."

A National Theme For Labor Day 1942

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not only gives evidence that the production necessary to win this war as speedily as possible will be turned out, but with goods at hand, in the air and on the battlefield, American Labor challenges the deluded axis idea that Slave Labor can out-produce Free Labor. With a resounding promise that Free Labor will win, American Labor holds out the hand of hope to the enslaved nations of the world.

No wonder that Labor Day this year will be the greatest in the history of America! And no wonder that it will be not just an American Labor Day but a confident, inspiring in-

ternational Labor Day.

Consequently, a theme has been selected for Labor Day that embraces these two promises—the promise of victory and the promise of freedom to the world—

FREE LABOR WILL WIN!

This theme will run through the many activities in which Labor invites the nation to share on this day.

Development of the Theme.

Behind these four words, FREE LABOR WILL WIN, are the thoughts and purposes which this brief theme sums up. Naturally it is intended that these should be developed fully in the various activities and materials which will be a part of Labor Day 1942.

The first and most obvious thought is the outcome of the clash between free men and men who are slaves of ruthless and power-hungry masters, a war in which the productive capacity of free labor is opposed to that of slave labor. Hitler has said, "Since the Civil War the Americans have been in a condition of political and popular decay." In other words, America has gone soft. He has mistaken the desire for peace in which to enjoy freedom for a lack of willingness and ability to defend and fight for freedom. He believes that his regimented, forbidden-to-think, brutalized countrymen, and the beaten millions from over-run countries, whose bodies he commands, can produce more and better sinews of war than clear-eyed, thinking men and women working voluntarily to the utmost because they can decide their fate and choose to remain free!

By now, by Labor Day, 1942, a suspicion of the final result of such a contest must be seeping into the most self-deluded Nazi brain: FREE LABOR WILL WIN!

The Labor Day theme also embraces all who are doing a full day's work to aid America and its allies to win. In this work every patriot has an equal share—the unskilled laborer, the skilled craftsman, the foreman, the clerk and stenographer, the superintendent, the company president, the farmer, the miner, the crew of the smallest cargo vessel—all who work as free men to preserve that freedom.

Labor Day and its theme also bring inspiration and pride of achievement to men and women not immediately engaged in producing tanks and guns and planes and other implements of war—who may indeed be doing the same work as in peace time. It will help them realize that the ultimate purpose of all work has now become to help America win, and that many usual and uninspiring tasks are now as truly "war work" as the more dramatic occupations. This same thought applies to the parts worker who is making something so small or so obscure that its final war purpose is remote or even unknown to the worker.

Thus, on this particular Labor Day, Labor becomes the host to many who previously had not participated in this day, except as a general holiday. Labor is also the host to management, celebrating an achievement which is a joint accomplishment of labor and management.

Even further, this theme focuses attention on the fact that this day finds the free men of all the United Nations working together. American tanks and planes and guns fight in Russia, Egypt, Australia. Ships of the United Nations carry and guard the products of American factories and fields. The working men of Britain, Russia, China, and other lands, as well as their fighting men, hold the line on far fronts to gain time urgently needed by the United Nations. Labor Day says "FREE LABOR WILL WIN"—meaning not only the Free Labor of America but of all lands in which the light of freedom has not been extinguished. For Labor in the United Nations has,

in common, to enjoy and preserve the right to speak, to act, and to organize. Free labor everywhere shares in America's Labor Day in 1942.

It should be noted that the Labor Day theme is "Free Labor Will Win," not "Free Labor HAS Won." This is both a promise and a caution. For it would be worse than foolish to adopt a complacent attitude because a good beginning has been made. There is a long road of blood and sweat and tears ahead. American labor looks at its job squarely and realistically, clearly seeing the sacrifices and toll and weariness that must be borne with grim resolution. And it proclaims its willingness to undergo this ordeal for the sake of the prize for which Americans have fought since Washington's time—Freedom.

In Summary.

Labor Day this year has a broader meaning and a wider purpose than ever before. Labor pauses to salute the stupendous job already done and to dedicate its untiring effort to the still greater task ahead. With its theme of "FREE LABOR WILL WIN" Labor Day 1942 will—

- (1) Halt the proof that Free Labor is outproducing Nazi Slave Labor and will continue to do so.
- (2) Proclaim the willingness of American Labor and the American People to make the sacrifices necessary to victory.
- (3) Hearten and inspire all who work for America, no matter what their occupations.
- (4) Clasp the hand of free men in other nations who are working as well as fighting to preserve the freedom of nations and the right of labor.
- (5) Brighten the hope of freedom in the hearts of axis-enslaved people everywhere.
- (6) Throw a ringing challenge in the teeth of the axis . . . that freedom of the individual to think and speak and worship and work shall not perish.

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