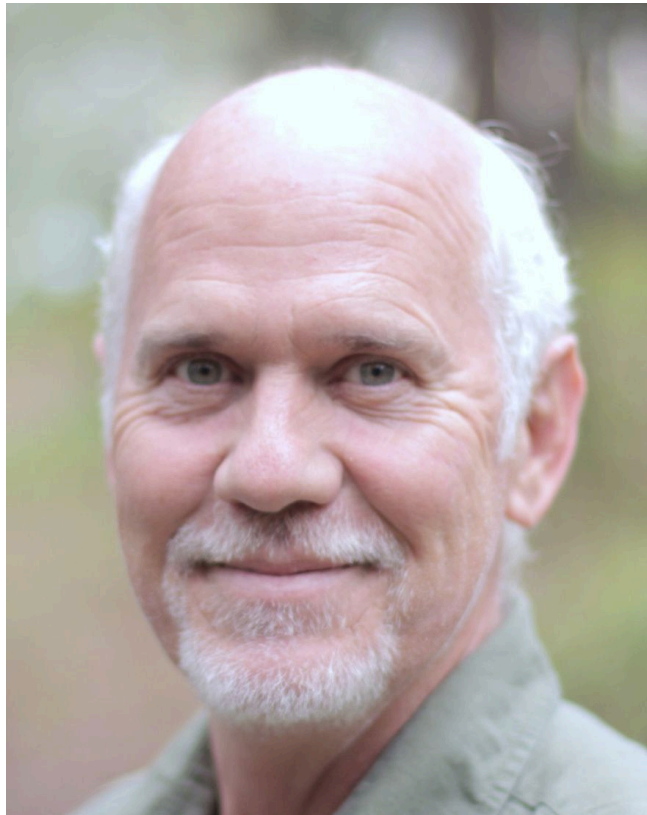

In My View: Why We Celebrate Labor Day

September 2, 2023



Most people think of Labor Day as the last day of summer. It is a day for beach parties and picnics in the park.

For businesses it is a time to hold clearance sales to move out the summer inventory. In fashion circles Labor Day is the date after which one should not wear white. It is always the first Monday in September.

None of these reflect the reason why we celebrate Labor Day. I admit that I was not familiar with the specific details of how Labor Day began and evolved over the years. I did some research on the origins and history of Labor Day which I will share with you today.

First Labor Day

The US Department of Labor website says, “Labor Day is an annual celebration of the social and economic achievements of American workers. The holiday is rooted in the late nineteenth century, when labor activists pushed for a federal holiday to recognize the many contributions workers have made to America’s strength, prosperity, and well-being.

The first Labor Day holiday was celebrated on Tuesday, September 5, 1882, in New York City. On February 21, 1887, Oregon was the first to pass a law recognizing Labor Day. June 28, 1894, Congress passed an act making the first Monday in September of each year a legal federal holiday.

Many Americans celebrate Labor Day with parades, picnics, and parties – festivities very similar to those outlined by the first proposal for a holiday, which suggested a street parade 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.”

American Labor

“American labor has raised the nation’s standard of living and contributed to the greatest production the world has ever known and the labor movement has brought us closer to the realization of our traditional ideals of economic and political democracy.

It is appropriate, therefore, that the nation pays tribute on Labor Day to the creator of so much of the nation’s strength, freedom, and leadership – the American worker.”

First Labor Unions

Another website called Study.com has a concise summary of the history of labor unions. “Labor unions in the USA have their roots in the 18th-century Industrial Revolution in Europe and the colonial period in America. The first recorded strike in the USA was by New York journeymen tailors in 1768 over a wage reduction.

The first sustained trade union organization was the Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers in Philadelphia in 1794. Labor unions grew in response to the social and economic impact of industrialization and mechanization in the 19th century.

The most famous labor union in the USA was the American Federation of Labor (AFL), founded in 1886 by Samuel Gompers.”

Workers Rights

A story in Stacker Media (8/17/23) provides a good overview of the accomplishments of unions. “Today, American workers have a host of rights and recourses should their workplace be hostile or harmful.

While the modern labor movement works to continue to improve the working conditions for all, with big efforts around a fair minimum wage and end of employer wage theft, the movement has a history rich with fights and wins. It put an end to child labor, 10-to-16 hour workdays, and unsafe working conditions.

Today, every wage-earning American owes a debt of gratitude to organized labor for the 40-hour workweek, minimum wage, anti-discrimination laws, and other basic protections.”

Union Victories

“The gratitude is owed mostly to the unions those nameless and disposable workers organized, which they did under the threat of being fired, harassed, evicted from company homes, beaten, jailed, and, in many cases, killed.

In 1886, for example, over 200,000 railroad workers went on strike to protest an unjust firing. In 1894, over 250,000 workers walked out of the Pullman Palace Car Company factories to protest 12-hour workdays and wage cuts.

Overall union membership in the U.S. in 2020 was at 10.8%, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. While that’s a historical low rate, some industries—like digital media, museums, and non-profits—are making inroads with new unions.

Over the decades, there have been far more losses than victories, but the victories the labor movement did achieve made earning a living in the United States a much more equitable, fair, safe, and profitable proposition. These wins show what is possible for the modern labor movement.”

Labor Day BBQ

In the true spirit of Labor Day, the Del Norte County Democratic Party is hosting a Labor Day BBQ “Honoring Labor and Working Families” on Saturday, September 2, from 12 to 2 PM at Beachfront near the Gazebo.

This free event is being sponsored by the Building and Construction Trades Council of Humboldt and Del Norte Counties, Operating Engineers Local #3, Assemblymember Jim Wood, Congressman Jared Huffman and Senator Mike McGuire.

Please join us to celebrate and recognize the contributions of labor unions and the workers who built our country and continue to toil every day to keep America working.

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