



Labor Day

Type of Holiday: National

Date of Observation: First Monday in September

Where Celebrated: United States and Canada

Symbols and Customs: Last Weekend in Summer, Parades and Rallies, Picnics, Political Speeches

ORIGINS

Labor Day is the only American holiday honoring the efforts of working people in building this country. It also commemorates the accomplishments of the labor movement in gaining decent wages and legal protections for workers. Both Americans and Canadians celebrate Labor Day on the first Monday in September.

Labor Day is a national holiday in the United States. National holidays can be defined as those commemorations that a nation's government has deemed important enough to warrant inclusion in the list of official public holidays. They tend to honor a person or event that has been critical in the development of the nation and its identity. Such people and events usually reflect values and traditions shared by a large portion of the citizenry.

The American Labor movement can be traced back to the founding of this country. The movement didn't become strong until the late nineteenth century, however, because until that time the U.S. was primarily an agricultural country. From 1860 to 1900, a remarkable change took place. The growth of American industry transformed this country from one where most people worked in agriculture to one where most people worked in mines and factories. As more people became factory

workers, the possibility of a strong, U.S. labor movement grew. Nevertheless, organizing proved difficult because workers had no protection from angry employers and desperately needed their meager wages. In those days, most factory employees worked ten to fourteen hours a day, six days a week. Wages were so low that not only did both parents work, but many families also had to send their children to work as well. There was no minimum wage, no laws against child labor, no sick leave, no vacations, no pension, no social security, and no protection against being fired without reason.

In the 1880s, an economic boom provided favorable conditions for labor leaders to demand shorter hours and higher wages. In 1882, leaders of New York's Central Labor Union decided to hold a parade and picnic on September 5. Some say the man who first proposed the idea was Peter J. McGuire, secretary of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners. More recent research suggests that it was Matthew McGuire, a machinist who served as secretary of the Central Labor Union in 1882. In any case, the event was a great success, even though the working people who participated lost a day's wages in order to attend the event. About 10,000 to 20,000 people marched in the parade, carrying the tools of their trade with them as symbols of their profession. The parade demonstrated to the public that workers could wield considerable power when they united to defend their interests. The picnic offered laborers an opportunity to relax, to form friendships with one another, and to listen to speeches by labor leaders. Musical entertainments and fireworks were also provided.

The parade and picnic in New York City served as a blueprint for similar events all over the country. Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Newark, and St. Paul all hosted Labor Day events in the 1880s. These events demonstrated the power of organized labor to both politicians and factory owners. They also publicized the plight of workers and inspired public sympathy for their cause. On February 21, 1887, Oregon became the first state to declare Labor Day a legal holiday. Colorado, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York followed suit later in that same year.

In some cities organizers scheduled Labor Day celebrations for May 1, in order to coincide with the **MAY DAY** rallies held by European labor leaders. Others stuck to the September date. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, American labor leaders had by and large decided to steer clear of any association with European communist, socialist, and anarchist labor leaders. May Day labor rallies disappeared and the September celebration established itself as Labor Day in the United States.

By 1894, twenty-three states had already made Labor Day into a legal holiday. In that same year, Congress declared Labor Day, the first Monday in September, to be a national holiday.

SYMBOLS AND CUSTOMS

Last Weekend in Summer

Although Labor Day has its roots in the labor movement, it has become a leisure-oriented holiday. For many Americans, Labor Day weekend symbolizes the last weekend in summer. Technically this isn't true, since fall begins on the **AUTUMN EQUINOX**. Nevertheless, in many parts of the U.S. the weather starts to cool down in early September, the days grow noticeably shorter, and children return to school after the summer break. For these reasons, many people treat Labor Day as the last weekend of summer and accordingly plan to picnic outside, go to the beach, or take a final summer vacation. Many stores hold Labor Day Weekend sales featuring discounted summer merchandise. Schools and colleges often wait until after Labor Day to begin their fall term. Some segments of the population suggest that Labor Day is the last day of the year on which fashion-conscious people wear white shoes and clothing (the first days being **MEMORIAL DAY** weekend). White shoes and clothing are associated with the heat of summer.

Parades and Rallies

In the early decades of the holiday's history, parades and rallies organized by labor unions often served as the main feature of civic Labor Day observances. In large cities tens of thousands of workers marched in these parades. They helped reinforce the values and aims of the union and kept members feeling united with one another. Indeed, in the first half of the twentieth century a strong American labor movement influenced politicians to pass laws that established a minimum wage, created a social security program to benefit people too old to work, eliminated child labor, and much more. By the 1960s organized labor had created working conditions that Americans living in the 1880s, when Labor Day first got its start, could scarcely dream of.

In the second half of the twentieth century, even as the labor movement achieved its goals, it began to lose strength and membership. Labor Day parades and rallies began to occur more sporadically and eventually died out in some places. Though parades are becoming rarer, some labor organizations still host picnics that include pro-labor speeches.

Picnics

Many Americans enjoy hosting or attending picnics with family and friends on Labor Day. Barbecued meats are often served, especially such typically American fare as hot dogs and hamburgers. The fruits and vegetables of summer, such as watermelon, tomatoes, green beans, summer squash, and corn, often play a

starring role in the meal as well. Cold drinks and cold desserts, such as ice cream, usually round out the celebration.

Many political groups and labor organizations combine fun and politics by hosting large picnics at which speeches will be made. This tradition dates back to the founding of the holiday.

Political Speeches

Political candidates sometimes wait until Labor Day to make the first big speech of their campaign. Thus the day often serves as the start of the campaign trail, with two months of intense political activity ahead until the November elections. Some politicians try to make their speeches at large Labor Day picnics, where many of their supporters are likely to be gathered.

WEBSITES

History Now, American History Online
www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/populism-and-agrarian-discontentgovernment-and-civics/essays/labor-day-from-protest-p

Library of Congress Local Legacies
lcweb2.loc.gov/cocoon/legacies/MN/200003181.html

U.S. Department of Labor
www.dol.gov/laborday/history.htm

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