Recognizing Labor Day

By

Toby A. Echelberry

What is Labor Day and why do we celebrate it? For many of our generation it was the traditional marker of the end of summer where we got that one last vacation, usually camping, before we knew we had to start the next school year. Labor Day weekend was also the weekend where we turned to the local PBS channels watching the Jerry Lewis telethon with all the variety stars who showed up over the 3-day event and Ed McMahon calling for the drum roll to watch the tote board numbers climb toward the annual goal of raising money for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. However, how many really know what Labor Day is and why we had this last three-day weekend at the end of each summer?

At the height of the Industrial Revolution which took place in the late 1800s, the United States was known to have had a vast expansion of industrialization where many factories were built with machines replacing highly skilled craftspeople to generate mass quantities of merchandise to reduce the cost to produce such items. The goal was to create an abundance of goods at lower prices. The mechanization tended to have a less desirable outcome, however. Where producing something such as a knife, a dress, or a barrel used to have a skilled craftsman building from scratch to a desired outcome making each production piece unique and providing a sense of pride in not only the consumer but the craftsman as well. Mechanization broke down the production process into organized steps, and each process was then defined by machining specs and labor steps. Now instead of requiring a craftsman to build the item, any unskilled laborer in a factory could follow the steps for production with minimal training and instead of one pair of shoes being custom made, you could make hundreds, all identical in nature. Jobs were plentiful, and many of these positions were filled with the immigrants escaping Europe of following the American dream of a better future.

The typical American working class worked 12-to-16-hour days and worked six or seven days a week to strive for a basic living wage. Households had children as young as five and six working in factories or mines instead of obtaining free public education just to support the family. Working conditions were just as poor, working in crowded and dangerous environments, many of which were hot and poorly ventilated. Several families had left the rural lives of farming to go to the big cities with vivid dreams of making it rich or prosper more as well have opportunities for families to attend better schools, be closer to hospitals and younger generations to get more involved with the social scene of the big bright cities. Not only was the pay outrageous low, but there were no workers' rights; if you disagreed or chose to argue over conditions, you were easily replaced. Tensions were high, health was as poor as the few cents people had in their pockets. As a result, a change needed to occur and instead of fear from the repercussions of being singled out and replaced by the big business owners, laborers started to collaborate with each other in mass where power in numbers forced some of these business owners to start improving pay and working conditions.

Unions had been around prior to the Civil War but were few in numbers. Now with the Industrial Revolution, there was a higher necessity for more unions to be built and organized to protect the laborers. Strikes were a common tool used by the union, where if the labor forced walked off the job, there would be no production, thence no profits for the business owners. During the strike business owners would weigh the cost of loss of production against cost of improved conditions. Business owners would work with union leaders to find the balance of the two with hopes quickly get laborers back into the plants. If the demands were too high, the owners would try to hold out the laborers as they earned nothing while striking and eventually, they hoped many would return to work or accept a small compromise.

Early strikes by unions sent clear messages to laborers stating that businesses would oppose all attempts to strikes by first opposing the strike, try to fire all employees who did strike, blacklist leaders (a process where business owners shared lists of labor movement or union leaders with each other) and require employees to sign "yellow dog contracts" (a promise never to join a union). In early days of unions, the government would support business owners by sending in soldiers to stop strikes and to thwart riots. Courts at the time were ruling against workers and the unions. Workers who broke contracts would not get the back pay for work performed. If an employee was injured on the job, he was not allowed to collect any money from the company. Single shop unions, or a union which only resided in a single business, were easily defeated as power of numbers were not there. Many National Labor Unions were formed in the late 1860s where different unions could organize and cooperate to gain power. Many of these national unions were surrounded around companies of like products like steel or railroad. These unions gained power by placing pressure on the government to create laws to help workers while organizing national strikes to gain domination over employers. Some of more know national unions were American Federation of Labor (AFL), Knights of Labor and the National Labor Union (NLU).

Unfortunately, the bad size to the strikes were the many riots which took place over heavy emotions of selected individuals or as a wider campaign. Union violence typically occurred where strike forces were preventing replacement workers from taking their jobs versus against the managers or employers. Some of these more well known strikes or riots were the Thompkins Square Riot (1874), Molly Maguires (1875), Anthracite Coal Strike (1875), San Francisco Anti-Chinese Riot (1877), Great Railroad Strike (1877 and 1886), Battle of Viaduct (1877), Cloakmakers' General Strike (1885), McCormick Harvesting Machine Company Strike (1885), Southwest Railroad Strike (1885), Haymarket Riot (1886), Homestead Steel Strike (1892)and the Pullman Strike (1894) to name a few. 35,000 individuals were killed annually from 1880 to 1900 and another 536,000 were injured from riots. Many historians will go on to state that the United Stated had the bloodiest labor history of any industrial nation.

It is hard to believe for many, but there were very few labor laws prior to the Industrial Revolution as most of the labor force was in agriculture. Now with the rising growth of industrial jobs, laws are needed to protect the working class. Some of those early laws were focused on child labor, the length of a workday, regulation of employee's hours and the impact of labor law on strike behavior. Laws were also starting to define business conduct as well, such as the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 which prohibits trusts, monopolies and cartels as well promoting economic fairness and competitiveness by regulating interstate commerce. The twentieth century is spent

providing fair and economic conditions for the employer and employee, but it was the late nineteenth century where the birth of the bulk of change started.

During this time of massive unrest, several attempts to repair the ties of federal and state government, employers and workers were made. On September 5, 1882, as a sign of a peaceful protest, between 10,000 and 20,000 various workers from all different companies assembled at City Hall and then marched to Union Square, marched around it and then marched to Reservoir Park (today known as Bryant Park) where they met their families and they all picnicked while listening to speeches and music. The parade began with the Central Labor Union (CLU) organized together holding signs and banners such as "NO MONEY MONOPOLY" and "LABOR BUILT THIS REPUBLIC AND LABOR SHALL RULE IT." Together with the other five large unions (together known as "The Big Six") they marched peacefully in solidarity. Hundreds of workers, such as seamstresses leaned out of the windows of the skyscrapers cheering and waving handkerchiefs. To make sure the parade was kept peaceful, no alcohol was allowed. At the park, a reviewing stand filled with labor dignitaries waved to them and provided a variety of speeches. Afterwards the park filled with picnicking families ate and danced to jigs by Irish fiddlers and pipers. The newspapers across the nation wrote about this event, and soon many more cities across the nation started hosting their own peaceful labor celebrations.

By 1886 several cities established their own annual parade and state legislation was in the works to mark an official state holiday celebrating the working class. New York was the first state to introduce a bill to make the holiday official, but Oregon was the first to pass the law. In 1887. Later that year New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Colorado passed their own laws. Between 1887 and 1894, 23 states passed laws to recognize Labor Day. Not all states had the same day though, some had first Monday in September, first Saturday in September or even the first day of September. The significance of the day is that is the midpoint between Independence Day and Thanksgiving.

On June 28, 1894, President Grover Cleveland signed S. 730, a bill drafted ten months earlier by Senator James M. Kyle of South Dakota which marked Labor Day a legal holiday. The bill defined that the first Monday of September in each year, this day would be a public holiday as well joining other already established public holidays such as Christmas, the first day of January, the twenty-second day of February, the thirtieth day of May and the fourth day of July as defined by law.

So, this coming Labor Day weekend, take some time to stop and appreciate all those who sacrificed over the years working to contribute to this nation's strength, prosperity, and well-being. Every man, woman and child has helped shaped this great nation, and this day is your day to recognize all the social and economic achievements made by the American workforce past and present.