

Epilogue: Labor Day in America

Labor Day, a legal holiday honoring workers (which was only made a federal holiday in 1894), is mandated to be celebrated on the first Monday in September. In 1887 Oregon became the first state to make Labor Day a legal holiday and other states soon followed. Early Labor Day parades were demonstrations in support of an eight-hour workday. Today all U.S. states, the District of Columbia, and the US territories have made it a statutory holiday. The September date was originally chosen by the The Central Labor Union (CLU) of New York and observed by many of the nation's trade unions. The observance included parades and speeches reviewing labor's contributions to society. The form for the celebration of Labor Day was outlined in the first proposal of the holiday: A street parade to exhibit to the public "the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations," followed by a festival for the workers and their families. This became the pattern for Labor Day celebrations. Speeches by prominent men and women were introduced later, as more emphasis was placed upon the economic and civil significance of the holiday. For some time Labor Day remained

a day not only to commemorate labor's contributions but also to draw public attention to the plight of workers and the struggle of labor unions to improve working conditions. Parades in which workers march with their local union and at which labor leaders give speeches are still a major feature of Labor Day in many U.S. towns and cities. One of the largest Labor Day parades in the United States takes place in New York City. However, today the federal holiday is often regarded as nothing more than a day of rest and parties. It seems that for a majority of American families Labor Day's significance is to mark end of the summer, so the national holiday is regarded as a day of rest and parties, parades and athletic events. However, what began in the late 19th century as a holiday instituted and organized by radical labor leaders (mainly anarchists and socialists)—the holiday of May Day in 1886—, became watered down due to the capitalist fears of the American ruling class, which finally managed to get president Cleveland to distance and dissociate the popular Labor Day celebrations from their radical roots (in May Day) by moving the holiday to September.

Therefore, on this Labor Day the GS is suggesting that his

fellow Americans take at least some time out from their backyard barbecues, their parties, their sports events, and in a time of what some have recently identified as an all-out class-warfare on the working poor and middle class—take time out on this Labor Day to remember that people were shot down in the streets so we could have the 8-hour day; that homes with families in them were burned to the ground so we could have Saturday as part of the weekend; that 8-year old victims of industrial accidents marched in our streets protesting working conditions and child labor only to be beat down by the police and company thugs. When we take account of the sacrifices of so many people as we should on Labor Day, we should not forget (we should not be victims of what political writer and activist, John Ross, calls “American amnesia”) that our current working conditions cannot be taken for granted—that people fought for the rights and dignities American workers enjoy today.