

## “The Forgotten Radical History Of Labor Day”

It's become commonplace to complain about how the true meanings of our American holidays have been forgotten in favor of weekend sales, cookouts and family gatherings. But the problem is particularly clear when it comes to Labor Day. While holidays like Memorial Day or the Fourth of July still feature prominent collective and media reminders of their historical and cultural significance alongside the barbeques and beach trips, *Labor Day has become almost entirely divorced from its origins* and associated instead with one last burst of summer fun before the fall and new school year commence in earnest. . . . [My emphasis]

The question of who is responsible for the creation of a holiday devoted to labor remains in some dispute. For many years it was attributed to Peter McGuire, a carpenter who became a national labor leader in the 1880s; recently historians have argued instead for Matthew Maguire, a machinist and leader of the New York Central Labor Union (CLU).

We do know that the holiday originated in the early 1880s, and the first parade was organized in New York by the CLU and the national union the Knights of Labor on September 5, 1882. In their inclusion of every type of worker, including unskilled and immigrant workers (the latter a particularly radical position in the era of the Chinese Exclusion Act and significant anti-immigrant trends in the labor movement), the Knights embodied one element of late 19th century labor radicalism, and their parades reflected this identity.

Yet in the years before it became a formalized or federal holiday, Labor Day was celebrated at different times and in diverse ways by distinct unions and organizations, *and there were those who argued for a much more overtly radical element to the holiday: celebrating it on or around May 1, to link it overtly to the burgeoning international association between May Day and communist activism.* Whether Peter McGuire first conceived of the holiday or not, both he and the newly formed American Federation of Labor (of which he became a national leader after its 1886 founding) were among those arguing in this decade for a more clearly international celebration, inspired in

part by Toronto's Labour Festival which McGuire had attended in 1882. *Whenever the holiday was celebrated, it had the clear potential in these early years to reflect the labor movement's more radical and activist sides.* [My emphasis]

*Both the formalizing and federalizing of the holiday happened in direct response to such radical elements.* The May 1886 Haymarket riots and bombing, and the fears of international radicalism that followed, led to President Grover Cleveland's 1887 recognition of a September Labor Day celebration, the first such formal national acknowledgment of the holiday.

(Ironically, it was to commemorate the Haymarket affair that the 1889 Paris Second International officially designated May 1 as International Workers' Day, a holiday still celebrated around the world.) *And the 1894 Pullman Strike, one of the broadest and most prominent national strikes of the period, led Congress and Cleveland (serving in his second, non-consecutive term as president) to go one step further—just six days after the strike ended, Cleveland signed the hastily drafted and passed legislation that made Labor Day a federal holiday, to be celebrated on the first Monday of September.* [My emphasis]

Like the American labor movement itself, these histories are messy, conflicted, include both triumphs and tragedies, aren't easily boiled down into a straightforward narrative. But one clear takeaway is this: As with every victory achieved by the labor movement (including eight-hour workdays, the weekend, health protections, child labor laws, and numerous other successes), *Labor Day would not exist without the movement's more radical and activist elements and efforts*. Remembering the holiday's origins can thus help us not only celebrate all that the labor movement has achieved, but also recognize the continued need for radical activism. [My emphasis]

~ Ben Railton, Associate Professor of English and American Studies at Fitchburg State University and a member of the Scholars Strategy Network.