

CITY LORE

Brother, Can You Spare a Day?

Labor Day Started in New York, but the Only Thing That Sizzled Was Management

By EDWARD T. O'DONNELL

ONE hundred-twenty-one years ago Labor Day meant something more than a three-day weekend and the unofficial end of summer. On Sept. 5, 1882, thousands of workers in New York risked being fired for taking an unauthorized day off to participate in festivities honoring honest toil and the rights of labor. This first commemoration of Labor Day testified to labor's rising power and unity in the Gilded Age and its sense that both were necessary to withstand the growing power of capital.

The Labor Day holiday originated with the Central Labor Union, a local labor federation formed the previous January to promote the interests of workers in the New York area. The organization immediately became a formidable force, staging protest rallies, lobbying state legislators and organizing strikes and boycotts. By August membership boomed to 56 unions representing 80,000 workers.

But the organization's activists wanted to do more than just increase membership and win strikes. They wanted to build worker solidarity in the face of jarring changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution.

Gilded Age workers were alarmed by the growing power of employers over their employees. Bosses were free to increase hours, slash wages and fire workers at will. Equally disconcerting was the growing gap between rich and poor, a disparity made shockingly clear in the Gilded Age by the growing army of poorly paid workers and the emergence of millionaire industrialists and financiers with names like Morgan, Rockefeller and Carnegie.

Nowhere were those changes more apparent than in New York, the capital of capitalism, a city populated with abundant laborers, ambitious entrepreneurs willing to exploit them in their relentless pursuit of profit, and

political leaders unwilling to exercise restraint. These developments, labor leaders noted, called into question the future of the American Republic.

The organization's activists believed that the establishment of a day celebrating the honest worker would open their eyes and compel them to reclaim their dwindling rights. Doing so in New York, the city where the excesses of industrial capitalism were most evident and media exposure was greatest, would send a message to workers nationwide.

The precise identity of the Central Labor Union leader who in May 1882 first proposed the idea of establishing Labor Day remains a mystery. Some accounts say it was P. J. McGuire, general secretary of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and the future co-founder of the A.F.L., who proposed the idea. Others argue that it was another man with a similar last name, machinist Matthew Maguire. Whatever the answer, both men played crucial roles in promoting and organizing the original holiday.

After months of preparation, the chosen day — Sept. 5, a Tuesday — finally arrived. Optimism among the organizers ran high, but no one knew how many workers would turn out. Few could expect their employers to grant them a day off and many feared getting fired for union activity. When William G. McCabe, the parade's first grand marshal and a popular member of Local No. 6 of the International Typographers Union, arrived an hour before the parade's start, only a few dozen workers stood milling about City Hall Park.

To the relief of Mr. McCabe and other organizers, some 400 men and a brass band assembled by the time the parade stepped off at 10 a.m. Initially, the small group of marchers faced ridicule from bystanders and interruptions in the line of march because policemen refused to stop traffic at intersections. As the parade continued north up Broadway, however, it swelled in size as union after union fell into line from side streets. Jeers turned into cheers as the spectacle of labor solidarity grew more impressive.

Marchers held aloft signs that spoke to their pride as workers and to the fear that they were losing political power and economic standing: "To the Workers Should Belong All Wealth," "Strike With the Ballot," "Don't Smoke Cigars Without the Union Label" and "Eight Hours for a Legal Day's Work."

Many wore their traditional work uniforms and aprons and walked behind wagons displaying their handwork. Others dressed in their holiday best.

After moving up Fifth Avenue, past the mansions of tycoons like Vanderbilt and Morgan, the grand procession of 5,000 or more terminated at 42nd Street and Sixth Avenue. There participants boarded elevated trains that took them to Wendel's Elm Park at West 92nd Street for a huge picnic. By late afternoon upward of 25,000 people jammed the park to participate in the festivities and consume copious amounts of food and beer. Members of craft unions gathered under banners put up throughout the park. Several bands played while speaker after speaker held forth from stages and soapboxes.

Thrilled with the success of their first effort, Central Labor Union leaders staged a second Labor Day the following year and drew even more participants. In 1884 the organization officially designated the first Monday in September as the annual Labor Day, calling upon workers to "Leave your benches, leave your shops, join in the parade and attend the picnic." Upwards of 20,000 marched that year, including a contingent of African-American workers. The first women marched in 1885.

WITH such an impressive start, the tradition of an annual Labor Day holiday quickly gained popularity across the country. By 1886 Labor Day had become a national event. Some 20,000 workers marched in Manhattan, and 10,000 more in Brooklyn, while 25,000 turned out in Chicago and 15,000 in Boston. Politicians took notice, and in 1887 five states, including New York, passed laws making Labor Day a state holiday. Seven years later, President Grover Cleveland signed into law a measure establishing a Labor Day holiday for federal workers.

Labor Day caught on quickly among Gilded Age workers because, unlike the traditional forms of labor activism — like striking and picketing, or civic holidays commemorating victories in war — it drew together workers for the purposes of celebration. As P. J. McGuire later wrote of the parade: "No festival of martial glory of warrior's renown is this; no pageant pomp of warlike conquest. . . . It is a demonstration of fraternity and the harbinger of a better age, a more chivalrous time, when labor shall be best honored and well rewarded."

In the 20th century, Labor Day parades grew into spectacles of pride and power. The high point came in 1961 when 200,000 workers marched up Fifth Avenue behind the grand marshal, Mayor Robert Wagner, passing reviewing stand dignitaries that included Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, Senator Jacob K. Javits and Harry S. Truman. But the strength of organized labor demonstrated by that parade was already being eroded by the emergence of the service economy, globalization and a political climate often hostile to unions.

By the late 1990's fewer than 15 percent of American workers belonged to unions, down from a peak of 39 percent, and Labor Day parades disappeared in many cities. Many that survived, like New York City's, were moved to the weekend after Labor Day so people could enjoy a final three-day summer weekend of recreation.

Still, many concerns that inspired the first Labor Day persist. Public distrust of corporations has spiked in recent years as a result of scandals in accounting and campaign finance and huge payouts to departing executives. Polls indicate that more and more Americans are worried about job security, health care costs and pension funding. Whether it all ultimately leads Americans to "Strike With the Ballot" remains to be seen. In the meantime Labor Day will presumably endure, an annual reminder of battles won and battles yet to be joined.

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