

A Brief Timeline History of Labor Day

Early 1880's: Labor movement leaders promote the idea of a Labor Day celebration when most workers work twelve hour days, seven days a week and child labor laws are poorly enforced. The celebration will honor worker contributions to American prosperity, their difficult working conditions and their growing organizational power.

September 5 , 1882: The Central Labor Union holds the first recorded Labor Day Celebration in New York City. 10,000 workers take an unpaid day from work and parade from Union Square to City Hall. A combination festival and act of defiance, the inaugural event intended by its organizers to demonstrate "the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations" establishes a model for others.

1885: Many other industrial communities adopt the practice of celebrating "a working man's holiday" with encouragement from New York.

February 21, 1887: The Oregon State Legislature passes a law to create an official Labor Day. Colorado, Massachusetts, New Jersey and New York do the same by the end of the year.

By 1894: Connecticut, Nebraska and Pennsylvania and twenty-three additional states add the holiday to their official calendar to honor workers.

May 11, 1894: Pullman workers stage a strike to protest wage cuts and the firing of their union representatives.

June 26, 1894: The American Railway Union, led by Eugene Debs, calls for a boycott of all Pullman Railway cars. 50,000 workers participate and railway traffic from Chicago stops entirely.

June 28, 1894: As the strike brings workers' concerns fully to public attention, President Grover Cleveland signs into law the Congressional bill that makes the 1st Monday of September an annual national Labor Day holiday.

July 4, 1894: President Cleveland claims that the strike is interfering with mail delivery, "If it takes the entire army and navy of the United States to deliver a postcard in Chicago, that card will be delivered." He sends troops to Chicago to break the strike and seven men die in the ensuing riots. The boycott is broken, union leaders are jailed, but the national holiday prevails.

1909: The American Federation of Labor Convention resolves that the Sunday preceding Labor Day will be "Labor Sunday" reflecting the spiritual and educational concerns of the Labor movement.

The first few decades of the 20th century: Labor Day is marked with large worker parades, political speeches of prominent politicians and the intention to honor the American worker's contribution to American life by creating a national workingman's holiday.

Mid-to late twentieth century: As urban areas expanded, suburbanization took hold and parades became less popular, Labor Day's meaning gradually changed. It became the official last "free" summer week-end for everyone—children and adults. It was the reminder that now we all returned to our labors: children to their learning, adults to their work, as summer ended and fall began.