

This Day in History... September 5, 1882

First U.S. Labor Day Parade

On September 5, 1882, the first Labor Day parade in the United States was held in New York City.

The first Monday in September marks the unofficial end of summer, but the Labor Day holiday was created to mean much more. Its roots can be traced to the Industrial Revolution, when Americans worked long hours for low wages. Labor unions grew at the end of the 19th century, as workers organized to improve working conditions. It was these unions that began a yearly tribute to the immense contributions of US employees.

Two men are often credited as having the idea for the first Labor Day celebration. One was Paterson, New Jersey, machinist Matthew Maguire. As secretary of the local branch of the Machinists and Blacksmiths Union, he helped organize the Central Labor Union of New York. He became that organization's secretary as well. In this capacity, he sent out invitations to other local unions to join in a parade scheduled for Tuesday September 5, 1882. Other accounts credit Peter J. McGuire, of the American Federation of Labor for submitting the first proposal in May 1882 after attending the annual labour festival in Toronto, Canada.



Stamp pictures part of a 17 by 51 foot mural.



This stamp was issued to honor the American labor movement.

When the day arrived, about 10,000 people participated in the parade, many of whom gave up a day's wages to be there. Workers marched from City Hall to Union Square, and then enjoyed picnics, a concert and speeches in Reservoir Park. According to the organizers, the parade showed the public "the strength and *esprit de corps* of the trade and labor organizations" in the area. The celebrations continued with recreational activities for the workers and their families.

In the following years, many states passed legislation making Labor Day an official holiday. In 1887, New Jersey became one of the first five states to pass such a law. Following the deaths of striking employees of the Pullman Palace Car Company at the hands of federal government troops, the US Congress rushed through legislation making Labor Day a national holiday. In the hopes of repairing relations between American workers and the government, President Grover Cleveland signed the bill into law on June 28, 1894, designating the first Monday in September as a federal holiday called Labor Day.

Though the focus of the holiday may have changed over the last century, Labor Day still offers American workers a chance to relax and reminds US citizens of the contributions made to this country by tradesmen and laborers.

The Labor Day Stamp and the AFL-CIO

The 1956 Labor Day stamp features a design from the mosaic mural at the AFL-CIO headquarters in Washington. Artist Lumen Winter designed the mural, called "Labor is Life." The First Day of Issue ceremony was, for the first time, preceded by a dedication ceremony – both of which took place in the White House Rose Garden.

Today, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) is the largest related group of labor unions in the United States. Samuel Gompers was integral in the founding of the American Federation of Labor. Gompers joined the Cigar Makers' Union when he was 14 years old and eventually became the local president. In this position, he began programs to pay benefits for out-of-work or sick members. He promoted unionization of cigar makers, stating, "One of the main objects of the organization is the elevation of the lowest paid worker to the standard of the highest..."

In 1886, delegates representing a number of crafts met in Columbus, Ohio, and founded the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Gompers was elected president and was reelected at each annual convention, except one, until his death. The group's main goals were increasing workers' wages, shortening the workday, and improving working conditions. In the 1930s, several member unions broke away and formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) due to disputes between craft unions, which controlled the AFL, and industry unions. The two groups competed for members in what was sometimes a bitter rivalry, until they again merged in 1955.



Stamp issued for Samuel Gompers' 100th birthday in 1950.

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