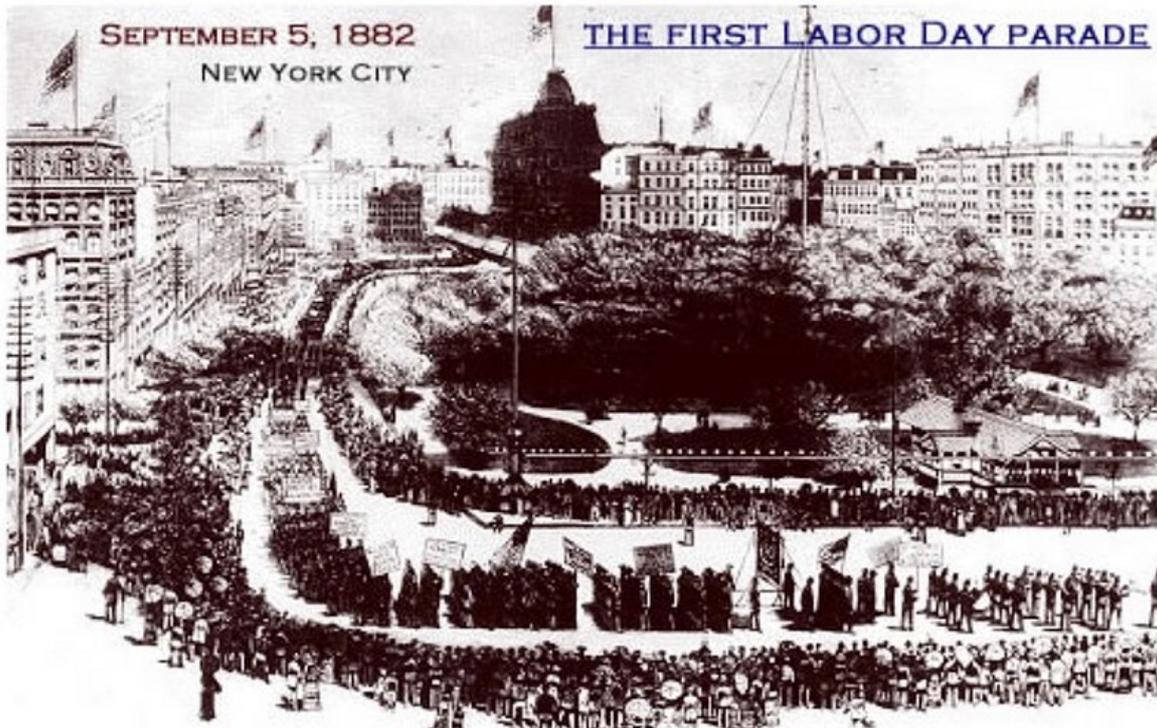


# The History of Labor Day

By Jay L. Zagorsky, The Conversation, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.01.17

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The first Labor Day was hardly a national holiday. Workers had to strike to celebrate it. This illustration ran in Frank Leslie's Weekly Illustrated Newspaper on September 16, 1882. Photo from Public Domain. Photo from Public Domain.

Labor Day is a U.S. national holiday. It is always held on the first Monday of September. Unlike many other U.S. holidays, it is a celebration without customs or traditions, except for maybe shopping and barbecuing.

For most people, Labor Day just marks the last weekend of summer and the start of a new school year. Yet, the holiday's founders in the late 1800s envisioned something very different. They wanted to have a day that would bring workers together while giving them time off work.

## History of Labor Day

The first Labor Day holiday was in 1882 in New York City and was led by the city's Central Labor Union. A union is an organized group of workers who have come together to protect their rights.



The organizers of the first Labor Day wanted an event to bring different types of workers together. However, employers did not recognize Labor Day as a day off work. This was solved temporarily with a one-day strike in the city. Workers left their jobs for the day to march in a parade and then attend a giant picnic.

A newspaper article about the day said the event was like one long political barbecue with “rather dull speeches.”

### **Why was Labor Day invented?**

Labor Day came about because workers felt they were spending too much time on the job.

In the 1830s, manufacturing workers were putting in 70-hour weeks on average. This is almost double what is considered full-time work today, which is 40 hours a week. Many union organizers focused on securing an eight-hour workday. Unions also wanted workers to have six working days a week instead of seven.

Many politicians and business owners were in favor of giving workers more time off. That’s because workers who had no free time were not able to spend their paychecks on traveling, entertainment or dining out.

The U.S. economy was growing in the late 1800s and early 1900s. It was important for businesses to sell more of their products and services. Shortening the workweek was one way for the working class to spend its money.

## **Common misconceptions**

The idea of a special holiday for workers was easy for politicians to support. It was easy because it cost lawmakers nothing and helped them seem likable to voters.



In 1887, Oregon, Colorado, Massachusetts, New York and New Jersey all declared a day to celebrate workers. Soon, half the states in the country recognized Labor Day as a holiday. By 1894, President Grover Cleveland made Labor Day a national holiday.

However, it is up to each state to declare its own holidays. An official national holiday does not require employers to give their workers the day off.

For example, many stores are open on Labor Day. The same goes for some government services, like police and transportation offices and national parks.

As president, Barack Obama encouraged Americans “to honor the contributions and resilience of working Americans.” This did not officially declare that anyone got time off, though.

### **Controversy: Militants and founders**

Today most people do not think of Labor Day as a controversial holiday. This was not the case 100 years ago.

Some union groups disagreed on how workers should act on a day designed to honor workers. Certain unions supported a day of protests.

Other union members wanted Labor Day to have parades and picnics. In the U.S., picnics, rather than street protests, won the day.

There is also a dispute over who suggested the idea of a Labor Day holiday. It will likely never be known who actually came up with it.

### **Have we lost the spirit of Labor Day?**

The original holiday addressed a problem of long working hours and no time off. This issue seems to be back for different types of workers, many of whom are constantly connected to work.

Perhaps stopping for one day could become a Labor Day tradition. Workers could shut off phones, computers and other electronic devices and celebrate having at least one day off from work during the year!

*Jay L. Zagorsky is an economist and research scientist at Ohio State University.*

## Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the article would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) The first Labor Day holiday was in 1882 in New York City and was led by the city's Central Labor Union.
  - (B) A newspaper article about the day said the event was like one long political barbecue with "rather dull speeches."
  - (C) This is almost double what is considered full-time work today, which is 40 hours a week.
  - (D) In 1887, Oregon, Colorado, Massachusetts, New York and New Jersey all declared a day to celebrate workers.

- 2 Which detail from the article BEST supports the article's CENTRAL idea?
- (A) It is always held on the first Monday of September. Unlike many other U.S. holidays, it is a celebration without customs or traditions, except for maybe shopping and barbecuing.
  - (B) The organizers of the first Labor Day wanted an event to bring different types of workers together. However, employers did not recognize Labor Day as a day off work. This was solved temporarily with a one-day strike in the city.
  - (C) Many politicians and business owners were in favor of giving workers more time off. That's because workers who had no free time were not able to spend their paychecks on traveling, entertainment or dining out.
  - (D) For example, many stores are open on Labor Day. The same goes for some government services, like police and transportation offices and national parks.

- 3 Read the paragraph from the section "Have we lost the spirit of Labor Day?"

*Perhaps stopping for one day could become a Labor Day tradition. Workers could shut off phones, computers and other electronic devices and celebrate having at least one day off from work during the year!*

HOW does this paragraph contribute to the article overall?

- (A) It shows how the spirit of Labor Day is alive today.
- (B) It describes a new argument for a Labor Day tradition that encourages workers to disconnect from work for a day.
- (C) It emphasizes the role technology has played in changing the modern workplace.
- (D) It explains why state laws have caused confusion about Labor Day.

- 4 HOW effective is the introduction [paragraphs 1-2] at presenting the origins of Labor Day introduced in the section "History of Labor Day"?
- (A) The introduction is not effective because it does not suggest that Labor Day today is different than it was initially intended to be.
  - (B) The introduction is not effective because it fails to mention the influence of labor unions.
  - (C) The introduction is effective because it directly connects to the importance of Grover Cleveland's efforts to establish a national Labor Day.
  - (D) The introduction is effective because it presents the idea that there is more to Labor Day than the traditions currently associated with it.