

LEVELED BOOKS

LABOR DAY

MULTI
LEVEL
P.S.V

Written by Kira Freed

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LABOR DAY



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Focus Question

Why is Labor Day important?

Words to Know

federal

Industrial Revolution

labor

labor movement

minimum wage

regulations

rights

strike

wages

Cover: Meatcutters march as a group during a Labor Day parade in the early 1900s in Chicago, Illinois.

Title page: A boy serves as junior fire chief by throwing candy from the roof of a car during a Labor Day parade in Catlettsburg, Kentucky.

Page 3: A girl tends the spinning machines at a cotton mill in North Carolina in the early 1900s.

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Back to School

Many students in the United States go back to school right after **Labor Day**, the first Monday in September. For those students, this **federal** holiday marks the end of summer. It's a time to enjoy one last blast of fun before the school year starts. Many businesses and all government offices close, and communities often hold parades and picnics. People may go to the beach or just enjoy the extra day off at home.



Cheer squad members march during a Labor Day parade in Newtown, Connecticut.

Labor Day isn't just a day to take it easy, though. It's also a day the U.S. government set aside to honor the achievements of American workers, past and present.

To understand what Labor Day honors, it's important to learn about the **labor movement**. This movement involves workers joining together to improve the way they work and live.

Machines and Workers

During the **Industrial Revolution** (late 1700s to early 1800s), many new kinds of technology were invented. The inventions allowed many jobs once done by hand to be done much faster and more easily by machines. Farmers began using machines to plant and harvest crops. Many small farmers who could not afford to buy the machines lost their jobs. Also, factories could produce items at a much lower cost than small home businesses. Because of these changes, many people in farming communities moved to cities and went to work in factories.

Many employers wanted to pay workers as little as possible so the businesses could keep more money. Though some employers treated their workers well, many did not. During the 1800s, low **wages**, long workdays, and terrible working conditions were common in the United States. The labor movement began as a result of workers wanting more of a voice in how they were treated.



A farmer uses a tractor to plow a field in 1925.

Tough Jobs

Many workers in the 1800s didn't get much time off. At that time, the United States had no rules about how many hours people worked each day or week. The average factory worker worked one hundred hours a week! (That's about fourteen hours each day, every day.) People worked as much as they were told to because they didn't want to lose their jobs.



Women work in a factory in 1870. Long hours and overcrowding were common in factories at that time.



At the end of the 1800s, only twenty-eight states had laws against child labor. Here, three boys aged ten to twelve work in a fish cannery in Eastport, Maine.

Child Labor

The Industrial Revolution also led to an increase in child labor. In many factories, the machines could be run by children. Children were also cheaper to hire and easier to control than adults.

By the early 1800s, about two million school-aged children were working in mills or factories in the United States. Many were from families too poor to support them. Children often held jobs before the age of seven. Many worked six days a week for up to eighteen hours each day. They had little time for rest and no time for school or play. They often faced dangerous working conditions. Many became ill from the long hours at work.

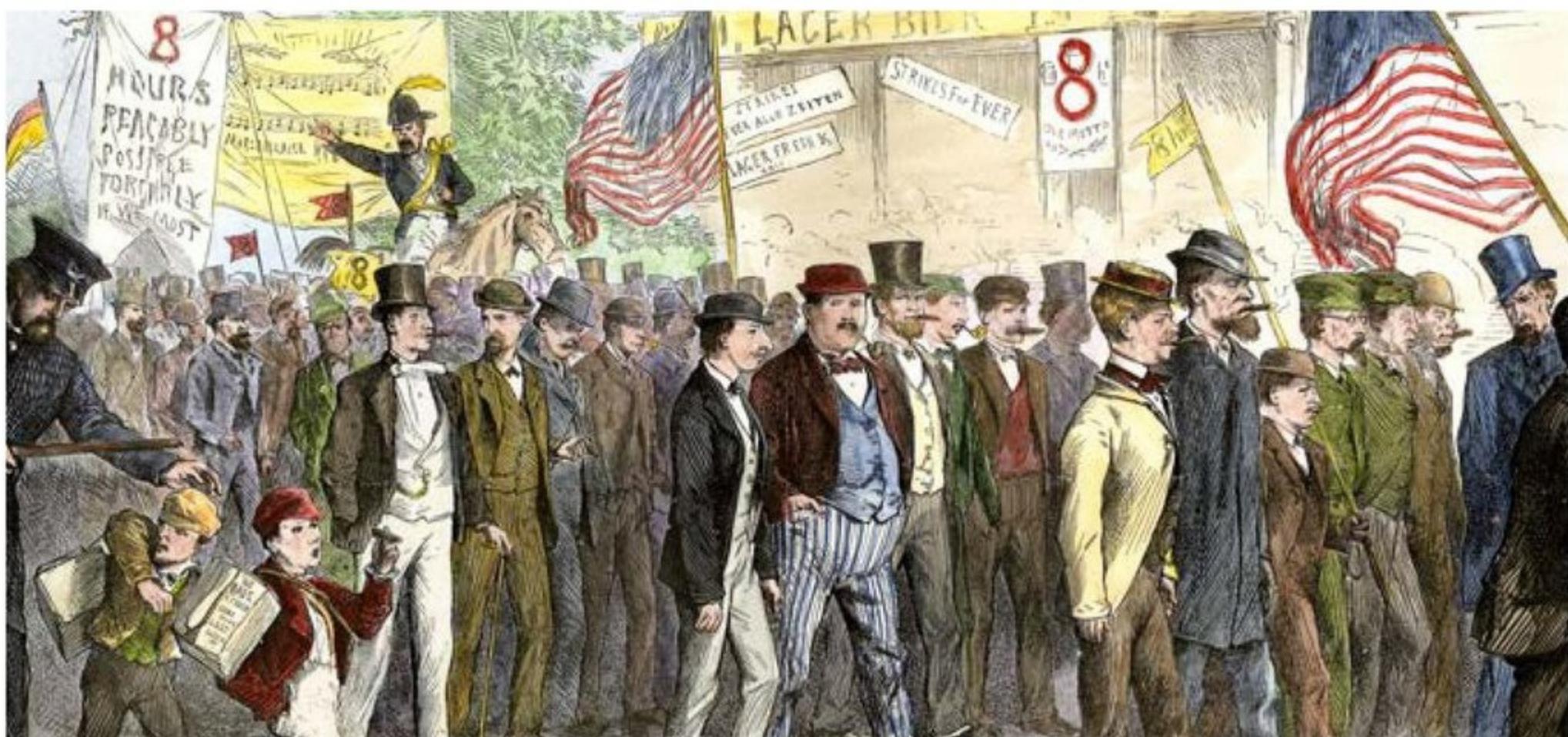
Workers Join Together

Over time, workers began to join together to change things. They formed labor unions—groups set up to protect workers' **rights**. Labor unions bargain with employers for better hours, wages, working conditions, and benefits. Unions can call a **strike** to gain a stronger hand in talks with employers. During a strike, workers refuse to do any more work until changes are made.

In 1869, President Ulysses S. Grant announced that government workers only had to work eight hours each day. Soon after, an effort began to get a similar law passed for people working for private organizations.



Many unions have their own seal that they put on things they work on or make. Union seals are a mark of pride and also let shoppers know what goods were made by union workers.



Workers march while on strike for an eight-hour workday in New York City in 1872.

Many employers didn't want to switch to the eight-hour workday, but over time that began to change. In 1906, two large printing companies switched to an eight-hour workday. In 1926, the Ford Motor Company began a five-day, forty-hour workweek. The company stated that well-rested workers did their jobs better. Even before then, Henry Ford had more than doubled autoworkers' wages. He said that well-paid workers had a better attitude, did better work, and were less likely to quit.

Labor Unions Today

Union membership in many businesses has dropped since the 1970s. However, unions for government workers are growing. Teachers, postal workers, firefighters, and police officers all have powerful unions. Today, more than fourteen million people in the United States are union members.

Help from Congress

The year 1938 was a turning point in the labor movement. At the urging of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). Its purpose was to protect workers from poor working conditions.

The act limited the workweek to forty-four hours (changed to forty hours in 1940). It also set the **minimum wage**—the lowest wage employers were allowed to pay their workers.



President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act in 1935. The Act was one of several measures taken to help American workers have better lives.

Minimum Wage

When the Fair Labor Standards Act passed in 1938, the minimum wage was \$0.25 per hour. (That would be \$4.11 in 2016.) In 2016, the U.S. minimum wage was \$7.25 per hour. States are free to set it higher, and many have.

$$15 = 3 + 5 + 2 = 10 - 4 + 10 \div 2 = 14 \times 2 - 3 = 25 - 5 - 5 + 2 = 17 + 3 \times 2$$

Math Minute

A worker's rate of pay is \$15.00 per hour. How much does that worker earn in a forty-hour workweek? How much does he or she earn in a week with ten hours of overtime?

Answers: \$600; \$825

The act also said that workers had to be paid extra when they work longer hours than usual, or overtime. Workers earn one-and-a-half times their usual hourly rate for each hour of overtime they work. (Overtime is each hour over forty worked in a workweek.) Overtime pay was meant to keep employers from forcing people to work too many hours. It was also meant to encourage employers to hire more workers.



During the 1894 Pullman Strike, railroad workers struck for over two months because of wage cuts that hurt their families.

The act also set safety rules in the workplace and banned many kinds of child labor. It set the minimum age for workers at sixteen during school hours. Fourteen-year-olds could work at certain after-school jobs, but workers had to be eighteen for dangerous jobs.

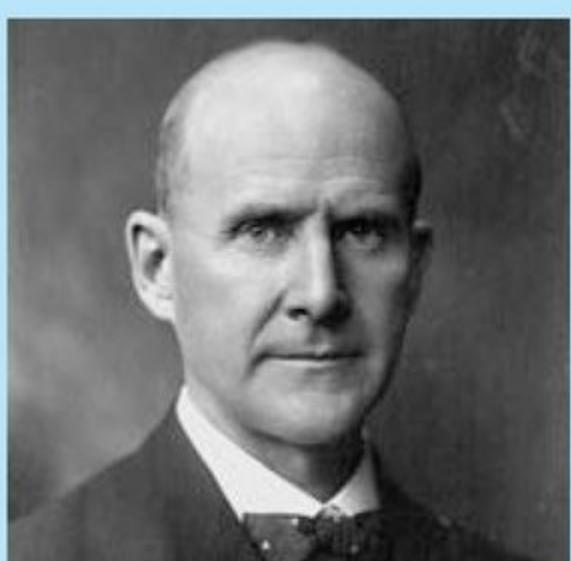
Key People in the Labor Movement



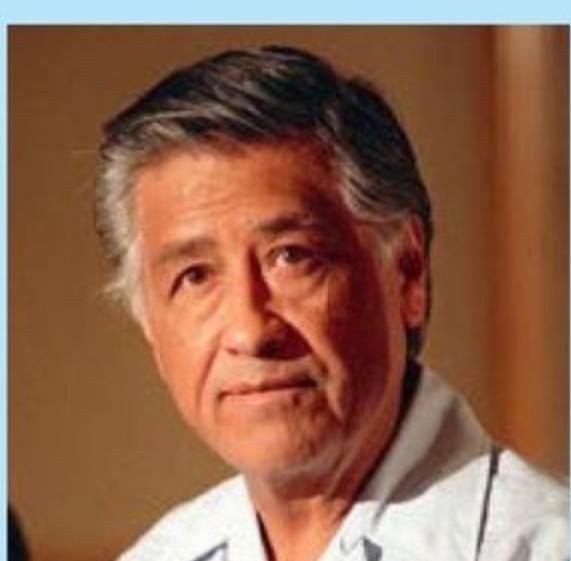
Mother Jones (Mary Harris Jones, 1837–1930) helped coal miners in the early 1900s. Union members called her “Mother” because of her hard work on behalf of the miners. She traveled across the United States to help striking miners and to end child labor.



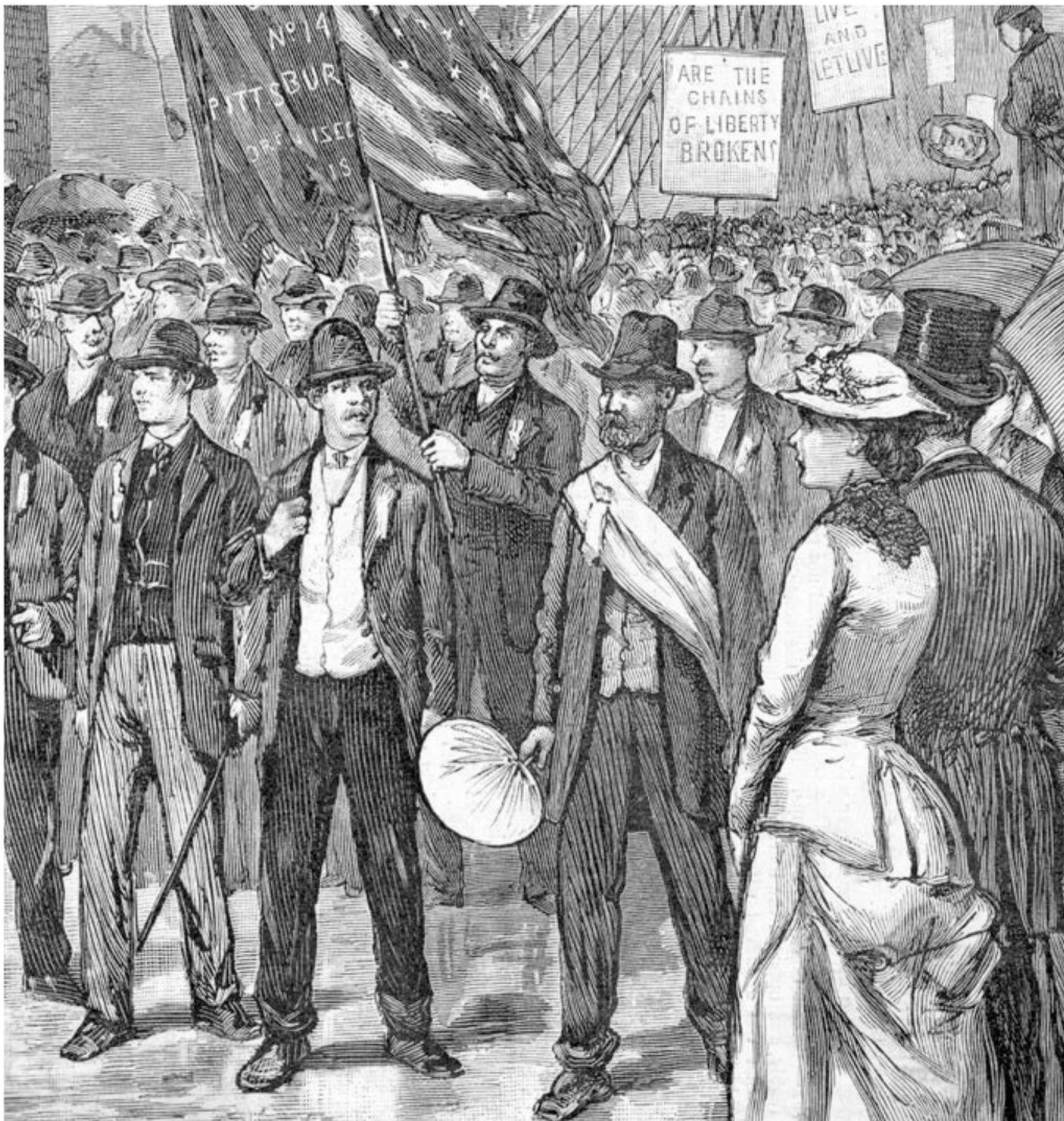
Samuel Gompers (1850–1924) was president of the American Federation of Labor for almost forty years. He believed in the power of *collective bargaining*—talks between union leaders and employers to reach agreements that helped both sides. Through his leadership, collective bargaining became the model for how most unions work today.



Eugene Debs (1855–1926) helped found major labor unions for railroad workers and industrial workers. He ran for president five times between 1900 and 1920. Debs traveled the country helping workers bargain with their employers.



César Chávez (1927–1993) was forced by hardship to become a migrant farm worker when he was eleven. In 1962, Chávez helped found what later became the United Farm Workers. This labor union works for the rights, safety, and fair treatment of migrant farm workers.



Workers march as part of a Labor Day celebration in 1882 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

A New Holiday

Labor Day was first celebrated in New York City in 1882. In 1887, Oregon became the first state to pass a law making Labor Day an official holiday. Thirty more states passed similar laws before the U.S. government made Labor Day a federal holiday in 1894.

Canada also celebrates Labor Day on the first Monday in September. More than sixty other countries around the world instead celebrate International Workers' Day on May 1.

Famous people, including the president, give speeches on Labor Day. Parades have been common since the holiday began. Many communities also have festivals featuring music, crafts, fall foods, or special events.



Canadian ironworkers march together during a Labor Day parade in Toronto, Ontario.



Workers wear safety gear while working in a modern bolt factory. Today's factories are much safer than many were in the past.

A Better Future

The labor movement improved the way workers are treated and paid. It set limits for workdays and workweeks, introduced safety regulations, brought an end to child labor, and more. Labor Day honors these accomplishments as well as the efforts of all American workers to build and help their country.

So enjoy a day off on Labor Day and be sure to have some fun. Just remember to also honor the people who labored to improve the lives of every American worker.

Glossary

federal <i>(adj.)</i>	of or relating to a central government that shares power with separate states or regions (p. 4)
Industrial Revolution <i>(n.)</i>	a shift in manufacturing and transportation from human and animal power to machine power that started in the late eighteenth century (p. 5)
labor <i>(n.)</i>	difficult physical work or the workers who do the work (p. 4)
labor movement <i>(n.)</i>	the organized efforts of workers to improve their working conditions through united action and bargaining (p. 4)
minimum wage <i>(n.)</i>	the lowest hourly pay rate allowed by law (p. 10)
regulations <i>(n.)</i>	official rules that govern how something should be done or made (p. 15)
rights <i>(n.)</i>	freedom or powers that people can justly claim (p. 8)
strike <i>(n.)</i>	a form of protest in which workers stop working to show dissatisfaction with their working conditions or to force employers to make changes (p. 8)
wages <i>(n.)</i>	regular payments earned by a worker that are based on the amount of time worked (p. 5)

Labor Day

A *Reading A-Z Level S Leveled Book*

Word Count: 1,008

Connections

Writing

How did the laws passed by Congress in 1938 change the lives of American workers? Write an article as a newspaper journalist from that time to inform readers about these laws.

Social Studies

Research a historical figure of the labor movement. Write a biography about that person, including the impact he or she had on the lives of American workers.

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