

Labor Day

A Reading A-Z Level V Leveled Book

Word Count: 1,281

LEVELED BOOK • V

LABOR DAY

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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Written by Kira Freed

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**Multi
level
P.S.V**

Glossary

economic (<i>adj.</i>)	related to buying and selling of goods and services (p. 4)
federal (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to a central government that shares power with separate states (p. 4)
guaranteed (<i>v.</i>)	promised or ensured (p. 9)
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)
minimum wage (<i>n.</i>)	the lowest hourly pay rate allowed by law (p. 10)
negotiate (<i>v.</i>)	to try to reach a formal agreement through discussion (p. 8)
private sector (<i>n.</i>)	the part of the economy that is not directly run by the government (p. 9)
regulations (<i>n.</i>)	official rules that govern how something should be done or made (p. 11)
rights (<i>n.</i>)	freedom or powers that people can justly claim (p. 8)
strikes (<i>n.</i>)	protests in which workers stop working to show dissatisfaction with their working conditions or to force employers to meet their demands (p. 8)
wages (<i>n.</i>)	regular payments earned by a worker that are based on the amount of time worked (p. 6)

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Focus Question

Why is Labor Day important?

Words to Know

economic	negotiate
federal	private sector
guaranteed	regulations
Industrial Revolution	rights
labor	strikes
minimum wage	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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Correlation

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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 sustain their country.

So enjoy a day off on Labor Day and be sure to have some fun. Just remember to take a moment to honor the workers who labored to build a better future for themselves, their families, and every American citizen.

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. The inspiration for International Workers’ Day was the May 4, 1886, Haymarket Affair in Chicago.

Important people, including the president, give speeches on Labor Day, and parades have been common since the holiday began. Many communities also have festivals featuring music, crafts, boating, fall foods, classic cars, or other themes.



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

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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. Communities often hold parades and picnics. People may take advantage of the long weekend to throw a party or go to the beach. Many 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, however. It's also a day that the U.S. government set aside to recognize the contributions and achievements of American workers, past and present.

In order to understand what Labor Day honors, it's important

to learn about the labor movement. This term refers to an organized effort by workers to improve their **economic** and social conditions by joining together.



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

Honoring Workers

Labor Day was first celebrated in New York City in 1882. The celebration was held by the Central Labor Union of New York to give all working citizens a day off.

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 an official nationwide holiday in 1894.

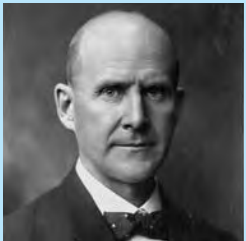
Key People in the Labor Movement



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.



Horses provided much of the energy used in farming before machines became available.

Machines and Workers

During the **Industrial Revolution** (late 1700s to early 1800s), new technology allowed many jobs once done by hand to be done faster and more easily by machines. Many farmers began using machines instead of workers to plant and harvest crops. Using machines often increased profits, but doing so also put many small family farmers out of business. The new machines also allowed factories to produce cloth and other items at a much lower cost than small home businesses. Because of these changes, many people living in rural areas and small towns moved to cities and went to work in factories.



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

Tough Jobs

Many employers wanted to keep expenses low so the businesses could earn higher profits. Though some employers treated their workers well, many did not. Workers needed jobs and were often powerless in the face of poor treatment. In 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.

Many workers in the 1800s didn't receive much time off. At that time, the United States had no limits on the number of hours workers put in at their jobs each day or week. The average manufacturing employee worked one hundred hours a week! (That's more than fourteen hours per day, every day.)



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

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 at one-and-a-half times the normal rate?

Answers: \$600; \$825

The act also said that workers had to be paid extra when they work longer hours than usual, or overtime. With overtime, each hour over forty worked in a single workweek is paid at a rate of one-and-a-half times a worker's usual hourly rate. The idea behind overtime pay was to discourage employers from overworking employees and encourage employers to hire more workers (to avoid having to pay overtime).

The act also established safety **regulations** in the workplace and banned most kinds of child labor. It set the minimum age at sixteen during school hours, fourteen for certain after-school jobs, and eighteen for dangerous jobs.



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

Slowly, things began to change. In 1906, facing the threat of a nationwide strike by union members, two large printing companies switched to an eight-hour workday. In 1914, Henry Ford increased automobile workers' wages to \$5.00 a day—more than twice the average of other automakers. Ford said that well-paid workers had a better attitude, produced higher-quality work, and were less likely to quit. In 1926, the Ford Motor Company switched to a five-day, forty-hour workweek.

The year 1938 was a turning point in labor reform. Largely through the efforts of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). Its purpose was to protect workers from being taken advantage of by employers and being forced to work in poor 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.

Minimum Wage

When the Fair Labor Standards Act passed in 1938, the minimum wage was \$0.25 per hour. (Adjusted for 2016 buying power, that figure would be \$4.11.) As of early 2016, the federal minimum wage was \$7.25 per hour. Individual states are free to set it higher, and many have.



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, much of the machinery could be run by children. It was less expensive for employers to hire children than adults, and they were easier to control. Also, their small size allowed them to move in tight spaces around machines.

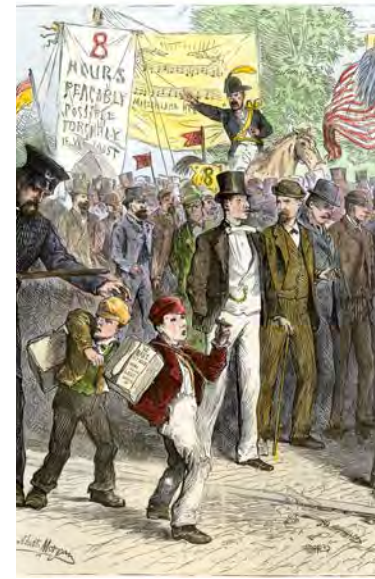
By the early 1800s, roughly two million school-aged children were working in mills or factories in the United States. Many were from families too poor to support them. Children often held jobs before the age of seven and worked six days a week for up to eighteen hours each day. They had little time for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

Workers Join Together

Over time, workers started to join together to improve conditions at their jobs. They formed labor unions—organized worker associations set up to protect and expand workers’ **rights** in the workplace.

The first labor unions, founded in the late 1800s, were for all workers, but later they split into separate ones for different jobs or trades. The goal of any union is to bargain with employers on behalf of its members. Unions **negotiate** for such things as better hours, wages, working conditions, and benefits. They sometimes call for **strikes** to protest unfair situations or to give workers a stronger hand in negotiations with their employers.

In 1866, an organization called the National Labor Union (NLU) urged Congress to pass a law making the eight-hour workday standard for all workers. Despite its name, the NLU was more of a political organization than a labor union. It laid some of the groundwork for the labor unions that would come later, however. Although the NLU did not succeed in getting the law passed, it did bring attention to the issue of the eight-hour workday.



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

In 1869, President Ulysses S. Grant announced that government employees would be **guaranteed** an eight-hour workday and a stable wage. He also encouraged workers in the **private sector** to seek out the same legal guarantee.

The new eight-hour workday was not popular with many employers.

Large numbers of them

refused to cooperate after Illinois signed the eight-hour workday into law for all workers except those working on farms. On May 4, 1886, eighty thousand strikers and supporters gathered at Chicago’s Haymarket Square to protest employers’ lack of cooperation with the law, and police officers used heavy force to stop the rally. That event became known as the Haymarket Affair.

Labor Unions Today

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