

A black and white photograph of a large crowd of men marching in a parade. They are wearing matching checkered suits and white hats. Some are waving. The background shows trees and a fence.

LEVELED BOOK • P

LABOR DAY

**Multi
level
P.S.V**

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Focus Question

Why is Labor Day important?

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

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 holiday means the end of summer. It's a time to have fun before the school year starts. Government offices and many businesses close. Many towns and cities hold parades and picnics.

Labor Day isn't just a day to take it easy, though. It's also a day to honor American workers, past and present.

To understand what Labor Day honors, it's important to learn about the history of workers in the United States.



Horses did much of the work in the time before machines.

Machines and Workers

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, many new kinds of machines were

invented. People who had money to buy the machines started to make more money. However, machines now did jobs that poorer people used to do. Many of those people moved to cities and went to work in **factories**. They no longer had any other way to make money.

Many factory owners wanted to pay workers as little as possible. Workers were afraid they would lose their jobs if they asked for more money. In the 1800s, low pay, long working hours, and unsafe workplaces were common.



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. Many factory workers worked one hundred hours a week! (That's about fourteen hours every day.) They 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 crowded spaces 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 as cutters in a fish cannery in Eastport, Maine.

Child Labor

Many children were also forced to work. By the early 1800s, about two million children were working in mills or factories. 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. Many children became sick from the long hours at work.

Workers Join Together

Over time, workers wanted more of a say in how they were treated. Groups of workers came together to form **labor unions** to protect their **rights** in the workplace. Labor unions try to get companies to agree to better hours, pay, and safer workplaces. Unions sometimes call for workers to stop working, or **strike**, to get a better deal at their jobs.

In 1869, President Ulysses S. Grant made a new rule that government workers only had to work eight hours each day.



Soon after, people started working to get a law passed that would do the same for all workers.

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 company owners didn't like the idea of an eight-hour workday. But over time, things started to change. In 1906, two large companies switched to an eight-hour workday. Twenty years later, the Ford Motor

Company began a five-day, forty-hour workweek.

The company believed that well-rested workers did their jobs better.

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.



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

Help from Congress

In 1938, Congress passed an important group of laws to help workers.

The laws said a workweek could not be more than forty-four hours. (It was changed to forty hours two years later.) The laws also set the lowest

pay allowed. The laws helped make sure workers earned at least enough money to meet their basic needs.

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.

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 laws also said hourly workers had to be paid extra when they worked more than forty hours each week. Workers earn one-and-a-half times their usual hourly **rate** for each extra hour they work. This law was meant to keep companies from forcing people to work too many hours.

The laws also made safety rules and said that young children could not work at many types of jobs. Children now had to be sixteen years old to work during school hours. They could be fourteen for some after-school jobs.



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

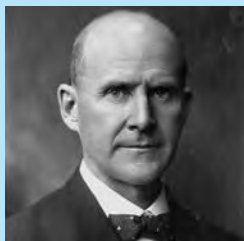
Key People in the Labor Movement



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 business owners 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 a holiday. Thirty more states did the same before the U.S. government made Labor Day a holiday for the whole nation in 1894.

Canada also celebrates Labor Day on the first Monday in September. More than sixty other countries instead celebrate a holiday to honor workers on May 1. The president and other people give speeches on Labor Day. Many towns and cities hold parades and other celebrations. This holiday also marks the beginning of the fall sports season.



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

Workers standing together changed the way they were treated and paid. They set limits for working hours and made workplaces safer. They ended child labor and made the lives of workers better. Labor Day honors all these things. It also honors the efforts of American workers to build their country.

So enjoy a day off on Labor Day and have some fun. Also take a moment to remember the people who worked to make the lives of every American worker better.

Glossary

factories (<i>n.</i>)	a building where machines and people make goods (p. 5)
labor (<i>n.</i>)	hard physical work or the workers who do the work (p. 4)
labor unions (<i>n.</i>)	groups of workers who act together to have more rights in the workplace (p. 8)
rate (<i>n.</i>)	an amount measured by comparing it to a unit of something else, such as miles per hour (p. 11)
rights (<i>n.</i>)	freedom or powers that people can justly claim (p. 8)
strike (<i>v.</i>)	to stop working as a way to protest working conditions or force an employer to make changes (p. 8)

Words to Know

factories

labor

labor unions

rate

rights

strike

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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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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