

Pastor's Column

Labor Day

This week we celebrate Labor Day, but how many of us have any idea where the holiday came from or what it celebrates?

The first Labor Day was celebrated on Tuesday, September 5, 1882, in New York City and was proposed by the Central Labor Union at a time when American workers were struggling for basic rights such as the eight-hour day.

The CLU moved the “workingman’s holiday” to the first Monday in September, 1883 and urged other unions to celebrate the date as well. The movement grew throughout the 1880’s with 23 states passing legislation recognizing Labor Day as a holiday. By 1894 Congress followed suit and Labor Day became a national holiday.

On that date, in 1894, most American workers still did not have an eight-hour day, the right to organize, social security, health care, or even a living wage. Child labor was common and there were no health and safety laws. Indeed, just being a unionist could get you fired or even killed in some quarters.

During the Progressive era, union activism began to bring some basic reforms, but it was not until the New Deal era in the 1930’s that most of the basic rights we take for granted were won. And even then, many workers in the agricultural and public sectors were left out. It was not until the 1960’s that public sector workers got the right to organize at the federal level. That only became true in California’s education sector in the 1970’s.

For much of the 20th century, Labor Day was a real celebration of American workers with parades, picnics, and speeches dedicated to the struggles and triumphs of American unions. The meaning of the holiday has been largely erased from the public memory. People enjoy the weekends by they have forgotten or never learned about the struggles of the American Labor Movement that made our weekends even possible. We lose this history at our peril.

In the midst of our current economic crisis and growing inequality we need to remember the voices that seek to raise everybody up and proclaim that, “An injury to one is an injury to all.”

All workers everywhere, union and non-union, deserve a decent job, basic rights, and the dignity that comes with work. We pray, God, that on this Labor Day we may celebrate the gains made to protect people in the workplace, and that those who are hurting during this time of turmoil may feel the presence and support of our Faith Family and Your nearness. We make this prayer through Christ, our Lord. Amen!

F. Mike