

The History of Labor Day

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

Word Count **444**

Level **580L**



The first Labor Day was not a holiday. Workers had to go on strike to celebrate it. This meant they skipped work, even if their boss did not want them to. This drawing shows the first Labor Day Parade. Photo from Public Domain. Photo from Public Domain.

The first Monday of September is an American holiday. It is called Labor Day.

On most holidays, people usually want to do something special. But Labor Day is not a holiday like Christmas or Hannukah. To most people, Labor Day just marks the end of summer.

This is not what people had in mind when they started the holiday. The idea of Labor Day was to bring workers together. It was also to give them time off work.

History of Labor Day

The first Labor Day holiday was more than 100 years ago, in New York City. It was led by one of the city's unions.



A union is an organized group of workers. By joining together, they can protect their rights. They can ask for higher pay, or for more time off.

No one knows who came up with the idea of Labor Day. But many employers did not like it. They did not want to give workers an extra holiday.

The workers decided to go on strike. This means they left their jobs for the day. The workers marched in a parade and then went to a giant picnic.

Why was Labor Day invented?

Workers had many reasons to complain. Back then, people worked almost twice as much as today.

Unions wanted workdays to be shorter. They also wanted fewer workdays every week.

Many lawmakers and business owners liked these ideas. They thought if workers had more time off, they would spend more money. This would help businesses grow.

Common misconceptions



By 1894, President Grover Cleveland made Labor Day a national holiday. But each state decides its own holidays. So, a national holiday does not mean all workers get the day off.

For example, many stores stay open on Labor Day. Some government jobs do not follow this holiday either. For example, police officers have to keep working.

Have we lost the spirit of Labor Day?

Labor Day began because people worked too much. This problem is coming back today.

Many different types of workers are working a lot. They work even when they are not at the office. Work takes over nights, weekends and vacations.

Taking a break from phones and computers could be good for people. It would be the best way to follow Labor Day. Then, workers would have at least one day off from work!

Jay L. Zagorsky is a professor at Ohio State University.