

This Week in History

Labor Day always falls on the first Monday in September.

On the first Monday in September, people in the United States observe the holiday known as Labor Day. Many people take advantage of the three-day weekend to get out of town, have a family gathering, or binge-watch their favorite shows. But amid all the fun, it is important to remember that Labor Day honors working people, and the labor unions that represent them.

What is a labor union, and what does it do? *(It is an organization of workers in a certain profession that advocates for better wages and safer working conditions.)*

Do you know anyone who has ever belonged to a union?

For many years, U.S. employers had all the power over their workers. They could hire or fire anyone for any reason, or no reason at all. Many employers expected staff to work six days a week, at least ten hours per day, in often-unsafe conditions. There were no laws preventing companies from hiring children for certain jobs. And wages, of course, were completely up to each individual business owner. If a worker didn't like their work situation, they had two choices: quit and look for something else, or keep their jobs by keeping their mouths shut. **Should workers have a say in their own work conditions? Why or why not?**

In 1768, some tailors in New York became frustrated at having their wages cut. They got together and decided to stop working until the problem was fixed. **What is this kind of action called?** *(A strike.)* This was the first strike in the Americas. It prompted skilled workers in some other industries to organize themselves into unions. But union membership really started to grow with the rise of factories after the Civil War. **When did the Civil War take place?** *(1861 to 1865.)* Some business owners, threatened by the growing power of workers, fired any worker who tried to organize a union. Rich businesspeople talked politicians into passing laws against strikes and other activities. These owners could then call the police — and their own private security forces — on their own workers. Some of these situations

led to violent clashes, with deaths and injuries on both sides.

How would you feel about this if you were a worker? How do you think owners felt about this?

As union membership grew, smaller unions started to join together to form larger organizations. The man shown here, P.J. McGuire, was a vice president of the biggest unions, the American Federation of Labor. In 1882, McGuire came up with the idea of a day to honor all workers, as well as the unions that represented them. He chose the first Monday of September because it was halfway between two other important holidays. **What do you think these holidays are?** *(The Fourth of July and Thanksgiving.)* This idea soon spread to states across the country before Congress made Labor Day an official federal holiday in 1894.

In the 1930s, labor unions were able to win workplace improvements that we now take for granted. Some of these improvements are listed here. **Who wants to read the list?** These fights helped workers to enjoy better and safer work conditions, better wages, and better lives. Unions also battled for years to pass laws regulating child labor. **What would it be like to work in dangerous conditions as a child, like the mine workers shown here?** After several tries, Congress finally passed the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938. This law restricted the kind of jobs that could be done by people under the age of 16, as well as the number of hours they could work. **How do you feel about this law?** Despite these gains, however, the number of Americans who belong to unions has declined from more than 30 percent in 1955 to about ten percent today. **Why do you think fewer people belong to unions now? Will this number rise again later, or do you think labor unions are done as a political force?**
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