

Labour Day - A time to remember

As we enter the month of September the realization that summer is ending is marked each year by the Labour Day long weekend. For most of us this is simply just that, the end of summer and the return to school for our children. Many people fail to remember the source of this significant holiday, particularly those who are union members and have a significant tie to this day.

Labour Day is an annual holiday celebrated all over the world that resulted from the labour union movement, to celebrate the economic and social achievements of workers. The majority of countries celebrate Labour Day on May 1, and it is popularly known as May Day and International Workers' Day, while North Americans celebrate on the first Monday of September. The celebration of Labour Day has its origins in the Eight-hour day movement, which advocated eight hours for work, eight hours for recreation, and eight hours for rest. If only it really worked out like that.

Labour Day has been celebrated on the first Monday in September in Canada since the 1880s. The origins of Labour Day in Canada can be traced back to April 14, 1872 when a parade was staged in support of the Toronto Typographical Union's strike for a 58-hour work-week. The Toronto Trades Assembly (TTA) called its 27 unions to demonstrate in support of the Typographical Union who had been on strike since March 25. George Brown, Canadian politician and editor of the Toronto Globe hit back at his striking employees, pressing police to charge the Typographical Union with "conspiracy." Although the laws criminalizing union activity were outdated and had already been abolished in Great Britain, they were still on books in Canada and police arrested 24 leaders of the Typographical Union. Labour leaders decided to call another similar demonstration on September 3 to protest the arrests. Seven unions marched in Ottawa, prompting a promise by Canadian Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald to repeal the "barbarous" anti-union laws.^[2] Parliament passed the Trade Union Act on June 14 the following year, and soon all unions were demanding a 54-hour work-week.

The Toronto Trades and Labour Council (successor to the TTA) held similar celebrations every spring. American Peter J. McGuire, co-founder of the American Federation of Labor, was asked to speak at a labour festival in Toronto, Canada on July 22, 1882. Returning to the United States, McGuire and the Knights of Labor organized a similar parade based on the Canadian event on September 5, 1882 in New York City, USA. On July 23, 1894, Canadian Prime Minister John Thompson and his government made Labour Day, to be held in September, an official holiday. In the United States, the New York parade became an annual event that year, and in 1894 was adopted by American president Grover Cleveland to compete with International Workers' Day (May Day).

This Monday I'd ask each and every one of you to take a moment and remember why we call our September holiday "Labour Day" and what it means to us as union members. If you have a chance please join the PWU at the Toronto Labour Day Parade as a participant or an observer. For those of you wishing to travel a little further and check out

Ontario's next largest Labour Day Parade in Port Elgin. (details – please see the attachments).

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