

## **Machinist Created the First Labor Day**

Labor Day is a creation of the labor movement and is dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers. It has become an annual tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity and well being of our country. There are several theories about the origins of Labor Day, but research is showing that it most likely was the idea of a Mathew Maguire, a machinist who would later become the secretary for IAM local lodge 344 in Paterson, N.J. Records indicate that he proposed the holiday in 1882 while serving as secretary of the Central Labor Union in New York. What is clear is that the New York Central Labor Union adopted a Labor Day proposal and appointed a committee to plan a demonstration and picnic, which was the first event of its kind.

The movement for a national Labor Day had been growing for some time. The NY-CLU "workingmen's holiday" was held on Tuesday, September 5, 1882; and it was more of a protest rally for the adoption of the 8-hour day, rather than the tame civic events that we see today. Participants had to give up a day's pay in order to march. The NY-CLU even levied a fine on non-participants, but their affiliation with labor was masked for the reporters who covered the parade.

In 1882, the New York City CLU was a lodge of the still-secret Knights of Labor with Mathew Maguire as its secretary. The parade Call and all invitations were sent out over the signature of Maguire. During the post-parade festivities, P.J. McGuire of the Carpenters was one of many speakers. Some historians attribute the creation of Labor Day to McGuire, but he did not participate in any planning for the parade.

Protests against President Cleveland's harsh methods, used during the Pullman strike, made the appeasement of the nation's workers a top political priority. Six days after his troops crushed the strike, legislation was rushed unanimously through both houses of Congress, and the bill arrived on President Cleveland's desk. 1894 was an election year. President Cleveland seized the chance at conciliation, and Labor Day was born.

The struggles of workers from generations ago are not over. On an average day, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 17 Americans die from on-the-job injuries. Meanwhile, the daily rate of occupational injuries and illnesses in U.S. private industry is upwards of 18,350 people.

Labor Day may be a fitting tribute to America's workers, but what about the other 364 days of the year? Despite all the important contributions of working people, they get little power or glory in the everyday world of news media. What if the situation were reversed? Wouldn't it be nice if once a year, big investors and corporate owners could be honored on Business Day? During the rest of the year, journalists would focus on the real lives of the nation's workforce. Instead of making heroes out of billionaire investors, the news media would provide extensive coverage of the workplace.

The vital force of labor added materially to the highest standard of living and the greatest production the world has ever known and has brought us closer to the realization of our traditional ideals of economic and political democracy. It is appropriate, therefore, that the nation pay tribute on Labor Day to the creator of so much of the nation's strength, freedom, and leadership -- the American worker.

### **Research was obtained through the following sources:**

**First Labor Day Parade**, by Ted Watts; for further information, contact The Illinois Labor History Society, 28 E. Jackson, Chicago, IL 60604 Phone: (312) 663-4107, or mail to [ilhsmcs.com](mailto:ilhsmcs.com)

*What If We Didn't Need Labor Day? By Norman Solomon*

*The Origins of Labor Day – September 2, 1996; The Online Newshour*