



Labor Day: An Ode to the American Worker



A parade in Buffalo, New York, a century ago was a precursor to Labor Day celebrations still held each year in cities and towns across America. *Library of Congress*

Unlike other U.S. holidays, Labor Day does not pay tribute to a person or memorialize a historic event. It gives voice to the American worker.

The innovation surge that drove manufacturing during the 19th century had given rise to a “working class” of people employed by others — on others’ terms. By the late 1800s, poor working conditions were a source of social discord, especially in cities, where immigrants were arriving in large numbers.

The labor movement stirred mixed sentiment in America, but many workers believed it offered a unified voice that would hasten improvements. Organized labor played a role in America’s social and cultural development — and in establishing protections for workers and the first notable commemoration of Labor Day.

On September 5, 1882, New York’s unions hosted a “workingman’s holiday.” An estimated 10,000 workers took the day off without pay to march for reduction of the 12- to 16-hour

workday. A quarter million New Yorkers turned out to watch the parade, which concluded with a picnic for workers’ families.

The next day’s *New York Times* reported that “those who rode or marched in the procession were cheerful, and evidently highly gratified with the display. ... The great majority smoked cigars, and all seemed bent upon having a good time at the picnic grounds.” Banners called for “Eight Hours for a Legal Day’s Work” and “Less Hours and More Pay.”

A Poet of the Night Shift

Philip Levine, raised in Detroit, worked in factories while attending university there, including a night shift at an automotive gear and axle factory.

Levine has published numerous volumes of poetry. *The Simple Truth* (1994) won the Pulitzer Prize, and *What Work Is* (1991) won the National Book Award. Levine has said of his writing about workers, "I took this foolish vow that I would speak for them and that's what my life would be."

Here is an excerpt from "What Work Is":

...

now suddenly you can hardly stand
the love flooding you for your brother,
who's not beside you or behind or
ahead because he's home trying to
sleep off a miserable night shift
at Cadillac so he can get up
before noon to study his German.

Works eight hours a night so he can sing
Wagner ...

— From *What Work Is*, by Philip Levine
(Alfred A. Knopf, 1991)

Online readers may listen to Philip Levine read "[What Work Is](#)" at the Library of Congress.

Unions continued the annual celebration, and in 1894 Congress established the first Monday in September as the nation's official Labor Day. The eight-hour day eventually became the legal standard in 1940 through amendments to the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which also banned child labor and set certain wages.



Titled *Transcending* by its creators, David Barr and Sergio De Giusti, this monument to the legacy of the U.S. labor movement rises above Hart Plaza in Detroit. ©Pat (Clutch) Williams

Other Voices

Throughout the country's history, sculptors, composers, authors and painters etched their perceptions of workers' lives into the social consciousness.

"The truly great man is he who would master no one, and who would be mastered by none," Kahlil Gibran, Lebanese-American artist and philosopher, mused in *Sand and Foam*, his 1926 collection of spiritual reflections.

Gibran's quote is engraved beneath the arches of *Transcending*, a 19.2-meter steel-and-granite monument to the legacy of labor that rises above Hart Plaza in Detroit, the heart of the U.S. automobile industry and witness to labor's sterling successes and devastating defeats.

Raised in Detroit during turbulent times, Philip Levine would convey a poetic message about the working class. The 1930s brought notable work stoppages — "strikes." It

was a restless period that painted the boyhood backdrop for Levine, who arrived in 1928 as a newborn son of Russian Jewish immigrants.

Collective, but Individual

Harking back to the original New York holiday, local governments host picnics and sporting events on Labor Day. Schools and offices are closed.

Union leaders and government officials make speeches honoring the collective achievements of American workers.

Americans, however, have many definitions of work based on many different experiences, so a day set aside to honor their work reflects those differences. Marching in a parade or not, going swimming or not, visiting friends or not, Americans honor the essence of Labor Day simply, by taking the day off ... or not.