

Tomorrow is Labor Day, the culmination of the 3 day holiday weekend that has come to mark the end of summer here in the United States.

There are those who think that Labor Day was created as a government sponsored alternative to the socialist International Workers Day, aka May Day, which is observed world-wide on May 1st. But it turns out that both holidays originated right here in the good old USA.

Both Labor Day and May Day grew out of American labor struggles in the 1880s and, surprisingly, the same man, Peter McGuire, who founded the International Brotherhood of Carpenters, is claimed as the “father” of both Labor Day and May Day.

At the time, different labor factions favored one holiday rather than the other. But as Yale historian David Montgomery writes, “Little is gained by calling one holiday real and the other phony.”

The roots of Labor Day go way back. During the French Revolution a special day in September was set aside as a labor holiday. In nineteenth-century North America, celebrations, picnics, parades, benefits, and demonstrations of various kinds were held to support the eight hour work day, to help strikers, and for other labor causes. There are reports of early Labor Day celebrations in Toronto, Canada, in 1872 and in Boston in 1878. The first Labor Day in Australia was celebrated in 1856. According to labor movement historians, the American Labor Day

holiday grew out of the parade and picnic of the Central Labor Union of New York City on September 5, 1882.

On that day, some ten thousand workers took an unpaid day off and marched around Union Square in support of the holiday and celebrating labor's international cause. It became an annual event that spread to other cities and states as the movement for a national Labor Day grew.

In 1884, at McGuire's urging, the national conference of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, the organizational forerunner of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), passed a resolution establishing May 1, 1886, as the day on which the workers themselves would institute the eight-hour day. May Day was already a day with deep historical roots and rituals such as the May Pole dating back centuries, and this holy day would be the day when workers would demand their rights.

That first May Day was a huge success. Hundreds of thousands of workers took to the streets in a general strike throughout the country to force employers to recognize the eight-hour working day. Two days later, on May 3rd, the Chicago police opened fire on the unarmed striking workers at the McCormick Reaper Works, killing six workers and wounding untold more. The next day, at a rally in Haymarket Square, the police again demanded the workers disperse. A

bomb was thrown, and seven policemen died. The police retaliated by firing into the crowd, killing four and wounding hundreds. The bomb thrower was never discovered.

In a controversial trial, eight prominent labor radicals were charged with conspiracy. Despite a lack of evidence linking them directly to the bombing, seven of the eight were convicted of murder and sentenced to death, and the eighth was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. It was a dark time for American labor, and it nearly destroyed the movement, as public opinion was manipulated against them. But labor rallied, and kept the struggle alive.

Four years later, on May 1st, 1890, massive strikes were held throughout Europe and America, and in Peru, Chile, and Cuba to demand the international adoption of the 8 hour work day. Since then, workers throughout the world observe the first of May as a day of international worker solidarity.

But the struggle to set aside the September Labor Day as a legal holiday never stopped, and by the early 1890s, thirty states and many cities recognized Labor Day as a legal holiday for workers.

On May 11, 1894, employees of the Pullman Palace Car Company in Chicago went on strike to protest wage cuts and the firing of union representatives. On June 26, the American Railroad Union, led by Eugene V. Debs, called for a boycott of all Pullman railway cars, crippling railroad

traffic nationwide. To break the strike, the federal government dispatched troops to Chicago who violently suppressed the strike, killing thirty workers in the process.

In the wake of the ensuing massive unrest, Congress finally passed an act making Labor Day a legal holiday. Like the weekend, Labor Day was brought to America by the organized action of the labor movement.

These people struggled and fought and died so we could have an eight hour work day and a five day work week, among other things. We should never forget that. But what's so important about an eight hour work day that people would die for it?

Imagine that all you had time for was work and sleep and eating. Imagine that you had to work ten to 16 hours a day, six or seven days a week. Imagine that if you refused, or got sick, you would lose your job. What life you had was not yours.

The workers demand was this: Eight hours for work. Eight hours for rest. Eight hours for ourselves. Not sixteen hours working for the boss and eight hours for rest. Eight hours to recreate. To dance around the Maypole if we like. Eight hours to educate ourselves and our children. To read. To write. Eight hours to be with family and friends. Eight hours to think and organize. Eight precious hours to dedicate to a better present and a better future.

Both May Day and Labor Day are days of celebration for working people. Both grew out of the struggles of workers for the eight-hour day and better working conditions, and many of the same people and organizations were involved in the origin of both holidays. Unfortunately, conflicts between different tendencies within the labor movement have affected how we view these two labor holidays.

From the very beginning, the U.S. press has described the May Day demonstrators as “wild-eyed agitators” of the “European type,” “radicals, mostly socialists and anarchists,” with “accents and foreign mannerisms predominating.” The Labor Day parade, by contrast, is seen as “a demonstration of the honest American workingman,” “sober, clean quiet,” and “well-clothed and well-appearing men.”

So these two workers’ holidays are indeed different. On Labor Day, workers can take a well-deserved legal holiday and enjoy their achievements without having to fight the bosses and cops to do so. On May Day, workers themselves assert their power, without legal sanction, in defiance of the bosses, the state, and even union leaders if necessary.

Unfortunately, for most Americans, Labor Day has become just another day off, rather than a day to commemorate the struggles of working people, struggles that brought us things like the weekend, the 8 hour working day, the right to organize and bargain collectively, and the right to safe working conditions.

These are things that those of us who are white and better off have come to take for granted, things that we assume are just part of our social fabric. But they weren't always there, and they still aren't for many of those who are poor or people of color or undocumented, and these rights are constantly under attack.

The struggle for worker justice has never ended, and it goes on every day. Here in New Mexico, wage theft is rampant. Low wage workers at hotels, motels, and restaurants have been told to clock out before they finish their work. Overtime isn't paid. Those who speak up are fired. Most low wage workers don't get paid sick days, and must choose between working or taking care of themselves and their families.

It's even worse for agricultural workers. Almost 90 percent of farm and dairy workers are subject to wage theft, poor working conditions, and are forced to work overtime without pay. Immigrants overwhelmingly make up the nation's agricultural workforce. More than fifty percent of the nation's farmworkers are undocumented, so employers threaten them with deportation if they report abuse or try to organize.

The list goes on and on. Worker exploitation is widespread, and many large companies, such as Wal-Mart and McDonalds have institutionalized poor working conditions, low pay and have suppressed collective bargaining rights.

And women of all colors and classes still face wage discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace.

So what can we do to help? I'd like to share some suggestions from the Rev. Aaron McEmrys, who is currently serving the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, Virginia as its Senior Minister.

The first thing we need to be clear on here is our role. What role is most appropriate? Where do we fit in? Although every congregation will answer these questions somewhat differently, our primary role will, in most cases, be that of Ally, not Organizer. Workers who want our support will generally already have their own leaders and basic strategy, and often the support of trained organizers from labor unions or other kinds of organizations.

What religious communities can offer that many groups of workers may lack are: our moral authority, our financial and institutional resources, our community leadership and connections – and, most of all, the willing hands and hearts of many of our congregants. Our primary task, then, is to be the best ally we can be, always remembering that this is their struggle, not ours; and that we are here to offer support, not leadership or direction.

The place we need to start from on a congregational level is at the most basic level: we want to support the democratic process, we want to support the fundamental rights of workers to

speaking and organizing freely, and we categorically oppose all attempts to limit free speech and democracy through coercion or intimidation.

Different congregations will feel differently about worker's rights issues, as will all the individuals in all of those congregations. Once you have a group of people who want to support worker justice, you have to put yourselves on the map. Worker struggles are shrouded in secrecy most of the time, as workers are afraid of management retribution if they are found out. Because of this, it is hard for any congregation, even with the best of intentions, to know who might welcome their support! A good place to start here in Taos is with Holly Beaumont at Interfaith Worker Justice in Santa Fe, who knows who needs you on their side here in northern New Mexico.

So what do you do on that fateful day when your phone rings and there is a group needing your support on the other end? First and foremost – listen! Don't assume that you know how to help or what is needed. Don't assume that you know how they feel, what they are experiencing or what they hope for. Just listen. Let them tell you what they need. Just listening deeply, intently and responsively accomplishes a lot all by itself – listening is one of the best ways in the world to show someone how much you respect them.

Support tends to be needed in 3 main areas: The practical, such as providing meeting places for workers, providing access to office equipment such as copiers and computers, and supporting striking workers with food, water, and moral support.

The second area of support is political. Contact your local politicians and let them know you support workers rights to organize. Push for – and support – worker rights legislation and living wage ordinances. Santa Fe has one of the highest minimum wages in the country. Could Taos join them?

The third is pastoral care and support. Although this might sound fancy or like something a Minister should do – we must remember that we are all ministers, and we are all called to support those who suffer. Most of this simply boils down to listening and empathizing. Just letting workers know you support them (like when you bring food to a picket line) can be a great healing gift. Honk your horn when you pass a picket line, flash workers a thumbs-up. Just let them know you support them. Your congregation can send a letter or card of support to the union, can bring food or even do a hymn-sing if you feel so moved. Just be there.

But above all – if you want to support workers and their feelings, never EVER under any circumstances – cross a picket line. This is the single most hurtful thing you can do to workers in their struggle. The feelings of pain and betrayal workers experience when people cross their

Every Day is Labor Day

Rev. Munro Sickafoose

UCOT, Taos, NM
September 4, 2016

lines is very real. It might be inconvenient, but every prospective customer who refuses to cross a picket line is a victory, a gift of hope for those workers.

These are just a few of the ways to support justice for workers. There are many more. The UUA website has in-depth resources, as does the Interfaith Worker Justice website. I invite you to explore them, and above all, take action.

Every day is Labor Day. Every day, someone is being exploited in your neighborhood, your town, your state, your country. The struggle is not over. The revolution of the heart begins with each of us, every day, and consists of paying attention to what is going on around us, and giving our support in whatever way we can to those who are denied justice. We are truly stronger together.

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Source material for this sermon comes from:

[There is Power in Union: A UU Guide to Worker Justice \(PDF, 18 pages\)](#)

<https://www.popularresistance.org/the-true-story-of-labor-day-debunking-the-myth/>

Action resources:

<http://www.uua.org/economic>

<http://www.iwj.org/locations/new-mexico>

<http://www.lutheranadvocacynm.org/>