

The History Of Labor Day

[By Mark Lewis](#)

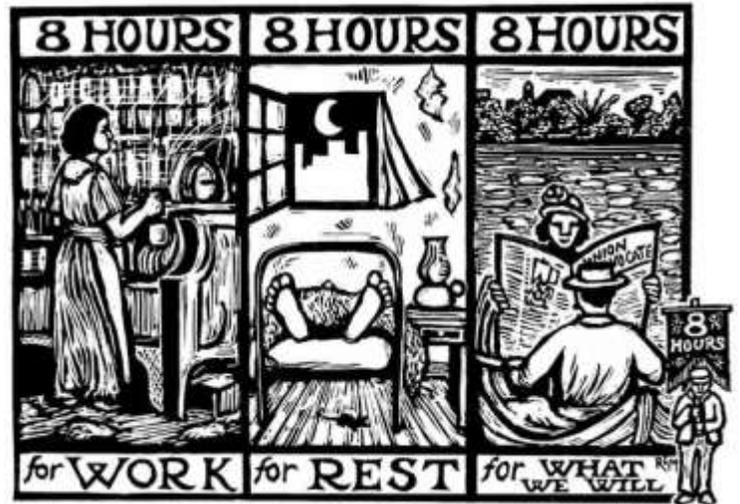
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Most of the world marks Labor Day on May 1 with parades and rallies. Americans celebrate it in early September, by heading to the beach or firing up the grill. Why the discrepancy? Here's a hint: The answer would have been a great disappointment to Frederick Engels.

Engels, the co-author of *The Communist Manifesto*, had high hopes for May Day, which originated in the United States. When the socialist-dominated organization known as the Second International jumped on the American bandwagon and adopted May 1 as International Labor Day, Engels confidently expected the proletariats of Europe and America to merge into one mighty labor movement and sweep capitalism into the dustbin of history.

Things didn't work out that way, of course, and the divergent Labor Day celebrations are part of the story.

May Day's origins can be traced to Chicago, where the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, under its leader Samuel Gompers, mounted a general strike on May 1, 1886, as part of its push for an eight-hour work day. On May 4, during a related labor rally in Haymarket Square, someone threw a bomb, which killed a policeman and touched off a deadly *mêlée**. As a result, four radical labor leaders were eventually hanged on dubious charges.



In 1888, Gompers's union reorganized itself as the American Federation of Labor, and revived its push for the eight-hour day. Gompers laid plans for a strike to begin on May 1, 1890--the fourth anniversary of the walkout that had led to the Haymarket affair. Meanwhile, in Paris, a group of labor leaders were meeting to establish the Second International. To these Europeans, the executed Chicago radicals were revered martyrs. In an act of solidarity, the Second International set May 1, 1890, as a day of protest.

Engels was thrilled. "As I write these lines, the proletariat of Europe and America is holding a review of its forces; it is organized for the first time as one army," he wrote on the first May Day. "The spectacle we are now witnessing will make the capitalists and landowners of all lands realize that today the proletarians of all lands are, in very truth, united. If only Marx were with me to see it with his own eyes!"

The first May Day was deemed a success, so the Second International adopted it as an annual event. And for a few years, it seemed as though May 1 might be on the way to becoming a rallying point for socialists in America, as it was elsewhere. The Panic of 1893 touched off a national wave of bankruptcies that plunged the nation into a deep depression--and depressions generally push workers toward radical solutions. Things came to a boil with the Pullman Strike, which erupted in Chicago in May 1894. The striking Pullman Palace Car Co. workers quickly won the support of the American Railway Union, led by Gompers's rival Eugene V. Debs. Railroad traffic in much of the country was paralyzed.

President Grover Cleveland, a conservative Democrat, was determined to squash the strike. But he did not want to alienate the American Federation of Labor, which was not yet involved in the Pullman dispute. Moreover, 1894 was a midterm election year, and the Democratic Party could ill afford to be seen as an enemy of labor. Cleveland and the Democrats hit upon a possible solution: They would proclaim a national Labor Day to honor the worker.

But not on May 1--that date was tainted by its association with socialists and anarchists. Fortunately, an alternative was at hand.

Back in September 1882, certain unions had begun to celebrate a Labor Day in New York City. By 1894, this event was an annual late-summer tradition in New York and had been adopted by numerous states, but it was not a national holiday. Nor was it associated with the radicals who ran the Second International, and who liked to run riot on May Day.

On the contrary, the September date was closely associated with Gompers, who was campaigning to have it declared a national holiday. Gompers opposed the socialists and was guiding the AFL toward a narrower and less-radical agenda. Gratefully, Cleveland seized upon the relatively innocuous September holiday as a way to reward labor without endorsing radicalism. On June 28, 1894, he signed an act of Congress establishing Labor Day as a federal holiday on the first Monday of September. (He made a point of sending the signing pen to Gompers as a souvenir.) Less than a week later, the president sent federal troops to Chicago. Gompers refused to support the strike, which soon collapsed.

With his union in ruins, Debs went into politics, but his Socialist Party ultimately failed to catch on as America's party of the left. Organized labor did not regain its momentum until the 1930s--and by that point, Gompers's September holiday had been institutionalized as America's Labor Day. May Day, meanwhile, had become the occasion for big annual parades in Moscow's Red Square, which did not improve that holiday's reputation in the United States.

May Day today is well established in most of the world as International Labor Day. May 1 also remains a traditional date on which leftists and anarchists of various stripes take to the streets to demonstrate their scorn for capitalism. But America, which has proved impervious to socialism, still celebrates Labor Day in September--and not by marching. AFL officials in New York long ago gave up holding their annual parade on Labor Day itself, because it could not compete with the prospect of a three-day weekend. The parade in recent years has been held on the following Saturday, and even so has been sparsely attended. This year, it has been canceled altogether.

Only 12% of the U.S. workforce belongs to a union these days, down from a peak of 33.2% in 1955. But whether they belong to a union or not, most Americans still have to work, so they appreciate a day off--and they prefer to spend it by relaxing, rather than storming the barricades.

https://www.forbes.com/2007/08/30/labor-day-history-forbeslife-cx_ml_0830mayday.html#77cf19b662fe

*Other sources are more accurate. "Enraged, the police fired into the crowd. The exact number of civilians killed or wounded was never determined, but an estimated seven or eight civilians died, and up to forty were wounded. One officer died immediately and another seven died in the following weeks. Later evidence indicated that only one of the police deaths could be attributed to the bomb and that all the other police fatalities had or could have had been due to their own indiscriminate gun fire. Aside from the bomb thrower, who was never identified, it was the police, not the anarchists, who perpetrated the violence." https://www.iww.org/history/library/misc/origins_of_mayday