

## Labor Day and the Importance of Unions

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The first Labor Day parade was organized by New York City's Central Labor Union when 10,000 to 20,000 people of all trades paraded together on September 5, 1882. A little over a decade later, in 1894 the Pullman Strike shaped our national labor policies and Labor Day became a national holiday when President Grover Cleveland signed the law that Congress passed designating the first Monday in September a holiday to celebrate, and pacify, workers.

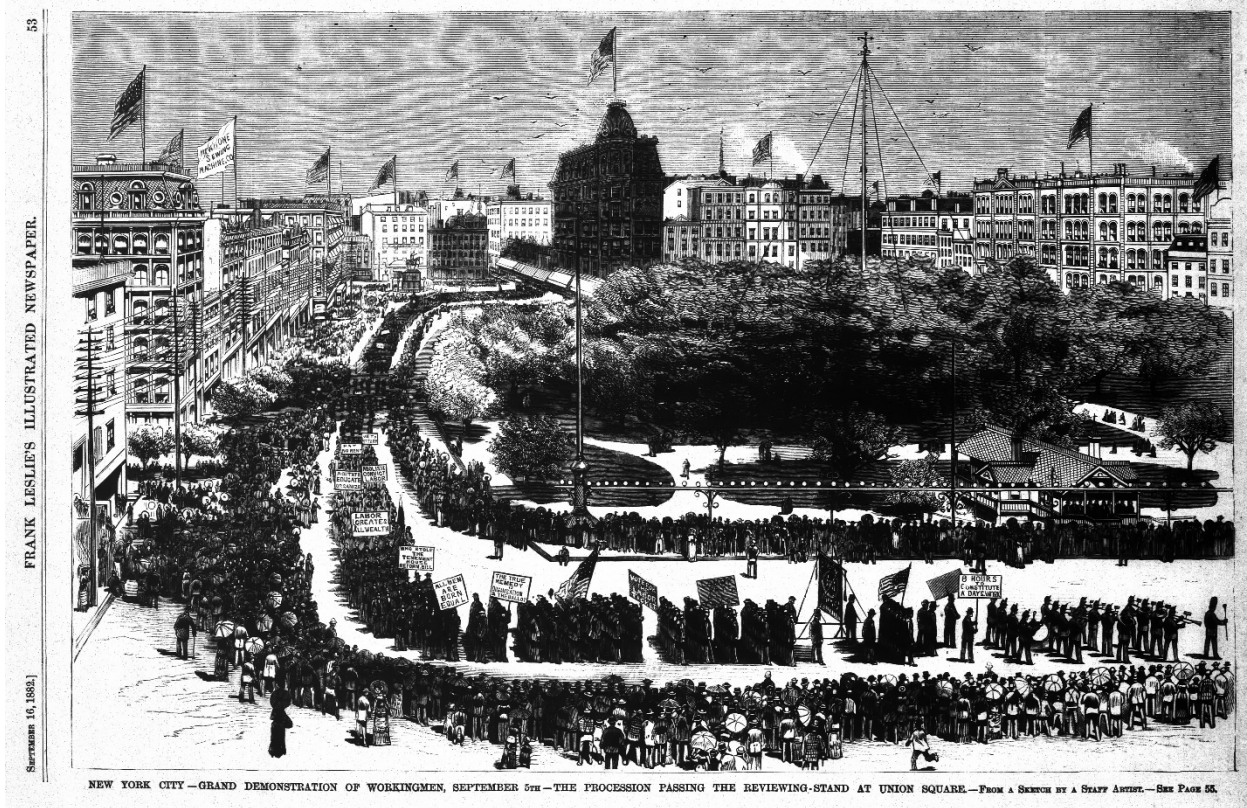
Throughout the 1880s, labor strikes became increasingly common. Many workers were protesting their long hours and difficult, sometimes even dangerous, working conditions. They also lived in "company towns" that were constructed with a plan to keep everything within a small vicinity to keep workers close and keep their money within the company coffers. Using company-run shops and housing took away competition, exploited workers, monopolized access to basic needs, and created high prices. These conditions were exacerbated for Pullman workers when George Pullman reduced wages 20% to 30% on account of falling sales. When he reduced wages, he did not cut rents nor lower prices at his company stores, meanwhile the rent for these houses was also about 25% higher than normal for the area. Workers had to live in Pullman's houses and shop the company stores, they couldn't live elsewhere. The workers formed a committee and on May 7, 1894 went to Pullman to ask to have the rent lowered and the president of the company, George M. Pullman refused to meet with them and even ordered some of them be fired. This caused the workers to declare that they were going to strike, and on May 11, 1894 they marched and stopped working.

The Pullman Strike was the first national strike in United States history as the American Railway Union, which represented 35% of the Pullman workers, backed the strike. The union refused to handle Pullman cars or trains with Pullman cars until the railroad cut ties with the company, prompting 125,000 workers on 29 railroads to quit by the end of June. The Pullman Strike of 1894 was also a gruesome milestone in American labor history, as the widespread strike resulted in an injunction and federal troops coming in to break the strike. President Grover Cleveland had ordered federal troops to crush the strike and dozens were killed in violent clashes while many more were injured. Gradually the strike ended, trains resumed their normal schedules, and federal troops were pulled out on July 20. In the midst of these clashes, Grover Cleveland signed the bill to make Labor Day a national holiday into law on June 28, 1894.

While the Labor Day holiday is often associated with this strike and other celebrated strikes that won worker rights, the use of an injunction to break this strike also opened the door to greater court involvement in limiting the effectiveness of strikes. Many strikes since this pivotal one have been less violent, but also less effective. We can see this with the government stepping in on the most recent rail workers' strike. This Labor Day, while we celebrate having weekends, overtime, and other workers' rights, we should also focus on strengthening Labor Unions! Buy Union made products and support striking workers. See the links below to learn more about the rights strikes have won for us.

For more info: <https://www.pbs.org/articles/workers-rights-activists-and-the-history-of-labor-day>

The first Labor Day Parade in New York's Union Square, 1882.



Armed soldiers during the Pullman Strike.

