

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Significance of Labor Day

SAMUEL GOMPERS

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Samuel Gompers (1850–1924) was the first and longest serving president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), holding the office nearly continuously from 1886 until his death in 1924. Gompers was born in England and put to work at the age of ten as a cigar maker. The young Gompers continued in this trade as a teenager when his family immigrated to New York City, where he soon became involved in the labor movement. In 1875, at the age of twenty-five, he was elected president of his local union, and, in 1896, was made the first vice-president of the Cigarmakers' International Union—a position he held until his death. Gompers became an early advocate of a national Labor Day celebration, and in this selection, originally published on September 4, 1910, in The New York Times, he explains the day's significance.

What, according to Gompers, is the significance of Labor Day? What does it celebrate? What, specifically, does it hope to promote for the American worker and for America? Does Labor Day today have the same meaning and purpose?

Labor Day marks a new epoch in the annals of human history. It differs essentially from some of the other holidays of the year in that it glorifies no armed conflicts or battles of man's prowess over man.

It is a deep-seated propensity of human nature to observe with appropriate ceremonies the periodical return of certain times, suspending the ordinary business of life on certain days for the purpose of preserving the recollection of some important event or principle. The observance of such festivals is an evidence of growing civilization. Our inferior fellow-animals pursue an unvaried course from day to day, but man varies his life by elevating some days above others.

The institution of the weekly rest day or festival called Sunday has been of incalculable benefit to mankind, and in comparatively recent times there were numerous other holidays to give needed relaxation to the laborers and cheer the heart of man.

Among all the festive days of the year, of all the days commemorative of great epochs in the world's history, of all the days celebrated for one cause or another, there is not one

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which stands so conspicuously for social advancement of the common people as the first Monday in September of each recurring year—Labor Day.

Labor Day is the day conceded by no one class or set of people to another; it is the day of the workers, secured by the workers for the workers, and for all. Its observance now is sanctioned by law in thirty-three States, in the District of Columbia, and in the United States Territories.

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But Labor Day—labor's holiday—was celebrated by organized labor years before its recognition as a legal holiday by the enactment of law. It appears that a beneficent purpose must be demonstrated by the people before our legislators give it the dignity of the law's authority.

No martial glory or warlike pomp signals Labor Day. The marching host of workers manifest their growing intelligence and unalterable determination for the effacement of the unnatural and brutal causes that impel man to raise his hand against his brother. Labor Day stands for industrial peace and for the toiler's economic, political, social, and moral advancement.

Organized labor in its essence presents a rational, hence a peaceful, means for the introduction of normal, fair and just conditions for all; so there ought not to be, and in the near future will not be, conflicts other than those which are conducted normally, peacefully, and rightly. It is in the best sense the modern knighthood in defense of the toiling men, women, and children of our day and of the future.

The struggle of labor is to free man from his own weakness, from his own cupidity, from his own unfair, unjust, and unnecessarily cruel environments. The struggle is for home and fireside, for a higher life, a nobler manhood, womanhood, and childhood, which may look forward to the day of deliverance from absurd economic conditions and cruel burdens. The future will substitute the college and forum for the arsenal and jail; the home, and not the factory, for motherhood; the playground, school, and sunlight, and not the mill or workshop, for childhood.

In our time, when so many look upon the dark side of the progress of the labor movement, and predict worse things in store for the laborer, it is not amiss to call attention to the fact that the life of the human family is one vast struggle, and that though the progress is not so swift as I, as well as some of my impatient brothers and sisters of

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labor, would like it to be, yet the fact is that in our decade we can see the rights of labor more clearly defined, the vantage ground obtained, and obtaining a clearer insight into existing wrongs, the more intelligent perception of and determination to achieve labor's rights.

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There is only one danger of the failure of constant and peaceful evolution for the elimination of all abnormal conditions under which workers are compelled to toil, and this danger is the possible failure of the wage earners to realize the necessity of more general and thorough organization in the unions of their respective trades. Such a failure, beyond doubt, would be taken advantage of by all the elements which prey upon and take advantage of the weak, and it is a source of great gratification that the workers have organized and federated so largely and comprehensively that there is little fear of a step backward.

On the contrary, every evidence is shown that the toilers have awakened to the new-found power of organized effort. Never before in the history of our country have they been so well organized as they are to-day, and the good work is going on day by day.

In spite of the fact that occasionally we have great industrial disputes, yet the organized labor movement in its essence stands for industrial peace, and presents a rational method for the inauguration of fairer and more just conditions for all. The trade-union movement carries the scars of many cruel battles of the past. It exemplifies all tenderness and genuine sympathy with the sufferer of the present. It voices the hopes and aspirations of the masses for future freedom and justice.

At no time in the history of the world have the workers demonstrated more clearly their purpose not only to be just, but to demand justice. They realize that without organization in this day of concentrated wealth and industry their lives and their liberties are doomed. They have organized, and are organizing, with greater rapidity than ever. The earnestness of their expressions, the sincerity of their actions, the solidarity of their movements, the fraternity which they engender, all bespeak a brighter future for all who toil, for all who are dependent upon them.

Our labor movement has no system to crush. It has nothing to overturn. It purposes to build up, to develop, to rejuvenate humanity.

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It stands for the right. It is the greatest protestant against wrong. It is the defender of the weak.

Its members make the sacrifices and bear the brunt of battle to obtain more equitable and humane conditions in the everyday lives of all the people.

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It may be true that here and there a setback is encountered in the battle of labor; but it is simply a skirmish, for the grand army is ever moving onward and forward. One column in our ranks may be defeated, yet it is only a retreat for greater organization, better preparation for a more propitious time.

Splendid as has been the progress in organization and federation within the recent past, yet there is much to do to convince the yet unorganized workers that their duty to themselves, their wives and children, their fellow-workers, their fellow-men is to organize and help in the great cause. We must win or regain the confidence of the indifferent, negligent, or ignorant non-unionists, to impress on his mind that he who will not stand with his brother for the right is equally responsible with the wrongdoer for any wrong done. The excuse and justification for tyranny is the servility and indifference of the slaves.

By the organization of the workers we not only quicken the conscience of those inclined to the wrong, but we create a healthier public opinion regarding the great cause for which we stand. Hence, our fellow-unionists, rank and file, officers, organizers, leaders, in fact all, are devoting themselves unfalteringly and persistently to the work of bringing the non-unionists within the fold of organization.

The workers can be free. Justice and right can and must be proclaimed, established, and maintained.

The full realization of these principles and potent purposes can come only by the work, and if necessary, the sacrifices, of the hosts of unionists through whose earnest effort must be fulfilled the mission to unite the world of workers and usher in the dawn of that bright day of which the poets have sung, philosophers dreamed, and the workmen struggled and yearned to achieve for the human family.