

ORIGINS OF LABOR DAY

The origin of Labor Day dates back to two politically motivated gatherings. One was an event planned by the Central Labor Union featuring a parade of unions and accompanying picnic, which took place on September 5, 1882, in a New York City park. That gathering reportedly attracted as many as 10,000 marchers. People listened to speeches in support of workers' rights, and participated in lighthearted activities more in the spirit of what goes on today – people drank beer, danced, and set off fireworks.

The other event was a darker one. On May 11, 1894, in a company town outside Chicago, employees of the railway manufacturer George Pullman went on strike when their wages didn't go up after the economy tanked. In a show of solidarity, the American Railway Union – said to have boasted 150,000 members at the time and led by famous socialist Eugene V. Debs – refused to operate Pullman train cars, snarling mail delivery and prompting President Grover Cleveland to send in federal troops to break up the strike. Rioting and arson broke out, and it evolved into what's now considered one of the bloodiest episodes in American labor history. A national Labor Day holiday was declared within months.

By 1894, 23 more states had adopted the holiday, and on June 28, 1894, President Grover Cleveland signed a law making the first Monday in September of each year a national holiday.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Labor Day was created to pay tribute to the American worker. Many Americans celebrate Labor Day with parades and parties – festivities very similar to those outlined by the first proposal for a holiday, which suggested that the day should be observed with – a street parade to exhibit "the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations" of the community, followed by a festival for the recreation and amusement of the workers and their families. This became the pattern for the celebrations of Labor Day.

During the second half of the 19th century, industrialization brought about a period of tremendous economic growth and major social changes. American workers helped raise the nation's standard of living. Labor unions emerged to negotiate for better wages, reasonable working hours, improved safety conditions and the ban on child labor. The labor movement challenges our nation to pursue economic and political democracy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ENDING RACISM

Revisiting the history of American slavery offers a powerful example of what business can look like when the law prioritizes property over people. There are, of course, vast distances between the conditions facing American workers today and those experienced by enslaved workers in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, unsettling parallels can be drawn between slaveholders and modern capitalists: these include a willingness to go to immense lengths in the pursuit of profit and aspiring to change the law when it does not serve their interests. Much like modern industry representatives protesting legal restrictions, slaveholders lobbied hard to protect their property and profits.

A new industry has emerged out of the need to have trained advocates to assist employers and employees in navigating the stress in workplaces. Much of that stress is traced back to the inability or unwillingness to recognize the way implicit biases impact our ability to treat people who are different from us with respect and dignity. Diversity, equity and inclusion must be more than buzzwords.