



# Speak Out Now

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## Labor Day – Our Struggle Continues!

Labor Day is a long weekend with barbecues and family gatherings, at least for those of us who actually get the day off. It will be accompanied by election-year speeches with promises to improve the economy so that working people's lives are improved. But no matter whether the promises come from Republicans or Democrats, they won't last. The real future they promise working people is more of the same: debt, stagnant wages, inflation, and having to bear the brunt of an economy that doesn't work for our needs. With this in mind, it's worth remembering why we have a holiday called Labor Day, and where real change for workers comes from.

Labor Day was born out of the fight for a shorter workweek. In 1882, many workers worked 12-hour days, six and seven days a week even though masses of people were unemployed. Workers in the 1880s began to challenge this situation and organize themselves to fight for better lives for working-class people.

In New York City on Monday, September 5, 1882, workers organized a march calling for shorter hours, higher pay, safer working conditions and a holiday to celebrate labor. The march became an annual event and spread to other cities and states, and a few years later cities and states began declaring the first Monday in September a workers' holiday. Even though politicians eventually made Labor Day a national holiday, at first it was a holiday founded locally by the working class.

But in 1886 the workers' holiday in September was eclipsed by a much more important event. In the first days of May 1886, workers across the U.S. struck to shorten their working day to eight hours. Their slogan was: "Eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep, eight hours for what we will!" This eight-hour movement was met with brutal repression, especially in Chicago where the workers were most organized and led by revolutionary socialists who sought to transform the society and put an end to capitalist exploitation. The Chicago authorities arrested and tried eight of the workers' leaders on false charges of instigating violence,

but they were really tried for their role as leaders of the movement and revolutionary thinkers. They were sentenced to death and four were executed, while one committed suicide in prison. To honor the Chicago martyrs, May 1 was declared a workers' holiday by the international workers' movement, and was celebrated to honor the dead and organize for the future. The bosses had turned the leaders of the movement into an inspiration for future workers' struggles.

The class struggle couldn't be stopped by repression, and in 1894, facing cuts in wages, increased hours, and layoffs, railroad and other workers went on a nationwide strike that shut down the nation's railroad system. Federal troops were sent in to violently end the strike to protect the profits of the owners.

After the strike, politicians looked for ways to defuse workers' consciousness. They declared Labor Day a national holiday, based on the old workers' holiday in September. This wasn't an honor to the workers' movement. It was a way for politicians to claim they represented workers and keep workers in the U.S. from celebrating their solidarity with workers worldwide.

Much has changed since 1882, but much is still the same. There are still too many of us working too many hours, while millions of us can't find work at all. The solution is still the same: an organized struggle is needed for full employment with fewer hours, and without any cuts in wages.

The politicians today, just like in the past, would like us to accept Labor Day as "our" holiday, to eat, drink, and listen to their speeches. But they made Labor Day an official holiday because they are afraid of us organizing independent of them. Let's celebrate the real workers' holiday on May 1 by organizing our forces, remembering the Chicago martyrs, and picking up the fight for the world we still need today – safety, security, freedom from exploitation, and time to enjoy life – all the things that the rich, their corporations and their politicians want to deny us!