

Labor Day Hypocrisy

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Labor Day is commemorated on the first Monday in September each year since the first one was celebrated in New York in 1882. Around the world outside the US, socialist and labor movements are observed on May 1 to recognize organized labor's social and economic achievements and the workers in them. This day gets scant attention in the US, but where it's prominent it's commonly to remember the Haymarket Riot of May 4, 1886 in Chicago. It followed the city's May 1 general strike for an eight hour day that led to violence breaking out on the 4th.

Labor Day became a national federal holiday when Congress passed legislation for it in June, 1894 at a time working people had few rights, management had the upper hand, only wanted to exploit them for profit, and got away with it. It took many painful years of organizing, taking to the streets, going on strike, holding boycotts, battling police and National Guard forces, and paying with their blood and lives before real gains were won. They got an eight hour day, a living wage, on-the-job benefits and the pinnacle of labor's triumph in the 1930s with the passage of the landmark Wagner Act establishing the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). It guaranteed labor the right to bargain collectively on equal terms with management for the first time ever.

All of it was won from the grassroots. Management gave nothing until forced to and neither did government. It always sides with business never yields a thing unless threatened with disruptive work stoppages or possible insurrection. All this is in a democracy that claims to be a government of the people, by the people and for the people, most of whom are ordinary working class ones.

Since a worried Congress passed the 1935 Wagner Act during The Great Depression, the state of organized labor declined, especially post-WW II. It accelerated precipitously during the Reagan years under an administration openly hostile to worker rights in its one-side support for management. It continued unabated, under Republican and Democrat administrations, and today stands at a multi-generational low.

Under George Bush conditions got much worse. Since coming into office in 2001, he sided with management openly on policies to strip workers of their right to organize and be able to bargain for a living wage and essential benefits. He hired anti-union officials, denied millions overtime pay, cut pay raises for 1.8 million federal workers claiming a "national emergency," and schemed to end Social Security as we know it by plotting (unsuccessfully so far) to let Wall Street sharks take it over.

Since labor's ascendancy decades earlier, corporate America, in league with government, shamelessly denigrated unions and the rights of working people in them. In 1958, 34.7% of

the work force was unionized, but now the figure is around 12% overall, and only 7.4% in the private sector – the lowest it’s been in seven decades.

Even worse, most jobs are low-pay service sector ones because the nation’s manufacturing base and many higher-paying positions in finance and technology have been offshored to low-wage developing nations. Workers there can be hired for a fraction of the pay scales here or as virtual serfs at below poverty wages as low as \$2 a day or less and no benefits. They fill legions of sweatshop factory jobs in countries prohibiting unions and fair worker practice standards for Wal-Mart’s “Always low prices” on the backs of ruthlessly exploited working people.

Nonetheless, on the first Monday each September, this nation “remembers” working Americans with a federally-mandated holiday in their “honor.” Who’s celebrating when it’s disingenuously commemorated at a time worker rights are threatened, ignored, forgotten, and uncared about by heartless governments beholden to capital. They scorn working people who are no longer as deceived with meaningless bread and circus droppings at the expense of what they need most: good jobs at good pay, essential benefits, job security, and a government on their side doing what counts most – supporting their rights with worker-friendly legislation.

Workers are reminded every day that backing like that is off the table by governments shamelessly mocking their day. It’s commemorated in name only by a nation beholden to capital, the corporate giants controlling it, and the best democracy their money can buy for them alone.

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