

Let's not forget Labor Day's spirited beginnings as we face pressures from new economy

By Charles Scontras, Special to the Sun Journal

In 1891, following a period of agitation for a holiday which symbolized the dignity and value of labor, and the general and persistent struggle for human decency and social justice, Maine enacted legislation giving birth to Labor Day.

The early Labor Day celebrations were stories in themselves. There were the endless parades with their bands, drum corps, horses, floats, colorful uniforms of the various unions in line, the placards and banners expressing the aspirations of labor, the walking canes, the flags, etc. There were the games, the competitions, the prizes, the oratory, the dignitaries, the Labor Day ball and, so it seemed, everything else the imagination could invent and add to the mix.

Witness, for example, members of the cigar makers' unions who smoked their cigars as they stepped in rhythm to the beat of the band and who, through clouds of smoke, acknowledged the applause of the onlookers.

Their handsomely decorated wagon, adorned with expressions of praise for the "blue label," transported a mammoth cigar.

Or witness the boot and shoemakers' float that carried a Goliath-sized shoe, the seams of which were made of large union buttons, while the inside of the shoe housed six little girls "prettily dressed," and words mounted on the side of the float shouted out against "sweatshop, child, and prison labor."

Take a glance at the float of women paper workers dressed in flowing white gowns, with their parasols and decorative hats. Surely a sense of pride was experienced by these and other workers as they paraded through their communities on the day set aside to recognize them as the "bone and sinews" of the community, and their indispensable role in the production of wealth.

On the first Labor Day, Republican Gov. Edwin Burleigh paid tribute to organized labor, and the labor theory of value, when he noted, "All wealth is primarily the product of industry, and every step in our material prosperity has been accomplished through the combined and persistent efforts of laboring men and women."

Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, was present to help baptize labor's holiday. He reminded all that "wealth is a public trust, and the right to have something to say about wages and hours of labor pertains to the workers from whom the wealth comes." He expressed impatience with the impersonal, quantitative, and abstract discussions of political economists which dealt "only with weights and measures, with bushes and yard sticks," and which treated labor like any other commodity in the market place. When studying men, he declared, "the souls and minds and hearts are the important factors." It was a loud call for recognition of the "human" dimension of economic relationships and economic activity.

There were reminders, however, that Labor Day, with all its pageantry and excitement, and for all its symbolic value, was not synonymous with a magical transformation of working conditions, and clearly did not address the issue of workers' collective rights and democracy in the workplace, or erase ideological resistance by employers and their determination to maintain sovereignty over the

workplace.

Glimpses of the problems that faced organized labor were reflected by legislative actions in 1889, on the eve of Labor Day, that voted down a measure to prevent the blacklisting of discharged employees, and that enacted a conspiracy law which had a chilling effect on a budding labor movement (the financial penalties for violating the law exceeded the annual income of many families).

An embryonic state branch of the American Federation Labor, organized in the same year which gave birth to Labor Day, signaled the sense of urgency that hovered over a young labor movement when it called for legislation that made it a criminal offense for an employer to prevent workers from joining unions. Also, when the Steam Railroad Men's Protective Union of Portland submitted a petition to the Legislature in 1891 which called for a reduction of hours and employers' liability legislation, their 40 signatures "were written in the form of a circle or round robin, no one's name heading the list," suggesting that "leaders" or labor "agitators" were suspect in some quarters. These illustrations are drawn from labor's lengthy catalog of indignities and grievances.

Maine Labor Day was created when the nation was marked by industrial conflict (at least 23,000 strikes between 1880 and 1900) and the unbridled concentration of capital and pronounced inequality in wealth. In his message to a joint session of Congress in 1888, President Grover Cleveland remarked that "As we view the achievements of aggregated capital, we discover the existence of trusts, combinations and monopolies, while the citizen is struggling far in the rear or is trampled to death beneath an iron heel. Corporations, which should be carefully restrained creatures of the law and the servants of the people, are fast becoming the people's masters."

Cleveland's words were echoed by Maine's first Labor Commissioner who, in 1889, summarized the significance of facts he presented to labor audiences, stating that they show "how unequal is the distribution of wealth of this country." He declared that "the immense fortunes, which of late years have so rapidly multiplied have swallowed up the shares which an equal distribution would give to the masses. The wealth of this country is largely in a few hands."

The theme of "wealth against commonwealth" filled the air, and the issues economic concentration and inequality was highlighted by the enactment of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890, and by the fact that one percent of the population controlled more wealth than the wealth of the remaining ninety-nine percent.

Yes, this is a world of new realities spawned by science and technology. Today, workers face a world a world highlighted by global markets, global competition and global hiring halls. It is one of liberalized trade policies, a renaissance of laissez-faire ideology, employer demands for flexibility in business operations which often translates into union concessions and give-backs, the decline of smokestack industries and the emergence of the new economy, pronounced demographic changes, rise of "contingent" workers, a declining middle class, and growing disparities in societal income and wealth. It is a world in which skill no longer lasts a lifetime, one in which no matter what one knows or does it is much easier to feel obsolete and insecure and entertain thoughts of who or what is next to fall. (e.g., in 2012, 50,000 manufacturing sites in the nation closed their doors and six million Americans lost their means of livelihood.) It is a world in which the spectrum of white-collar workers is increasingly experiencing a phenomenon previously reserved for blue collar workers, i.e., economic insecurity.

Labor Day, however, remains a tribute to the dignity and value of labor and the vital role of workers in the creation of wealth and the myriad public and private services they provide. It is a reminder that

even in the “new economy” workers are more than units of energy or simply matter in motion, and more than impersonal costs, fodder, or disposable commodities in the production of goods and the delivery of services whose “value” is determined solely by supply and demand curves and the profit motive.

In this world of tumultuous change, today’s celebrants of Labor Day will be reminded of the “spiritual” heritage of the day and implored to prevent it from being assigned to the dusty pages of history.

Charles A. Scontras is a historian and research associate, Bureau of Labor Education, at the University of Maine Orono.