

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

# Labor Day

"American Workers, We See Them"

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. In the 1800s, women and children were a large part of the factory workforce. They worked long and hard hours just as men did, but they often earned smaller wages. Most female workers were between the ages of 16 and 25. Even though the labor was hard, many liked the independence of working. Some children started work at as young as 10. So-called "factory families" were common, too. These were whole families that worked at factories.

Notes

2. Working conditions in factories were very difficult. Laborers suffered both physically and mentally. They worked long, tiring hours, for very little pay, and they often did repetitive and boring tasks. They used heavy machinery that was dangerous to work with. And if workers got injured, they often couldn't afford to see a doctor.

Notes

American author Herman Melville visited a paper factory in 1855. He later wrote about the women who worked there.

"At rows of blank-looking counters sat rows of blank-looking girls, with blank, white folders in their blank hands, all blankly folding blank paper. Not a syllable was breathed. Nothing was heard but the low, steady, overruling hum of the iron animals."

3. Workers began to band together against abusive employers. They formed unions to fight for fair pay and safer working conditions. They also organized strikes, refusing to work. One major union, the Central Labor Union, organized a parade in New York City on September 5, 1882. This was the very first Labor Day parade. Very few workers joined at first. They did not want to lose a day of pay to join the rally. But by the end of the day, over 10,000 people had marched. The press called it "a day of the people." In 1887, Oregon was the first state to make Labor Day a holiday. Later, New York, Massachusetts and Colorado also established the day as a holiday. But it wasn't until 1896 that Labor Day became a national holiday across the US.

Notes

4. The true founder of Labor Day is unknown. Some say Peter McGuire should get credit for the holiday. He helped found the American Federation of Labor, which led many strikes and pushed for the eight-hour work day. McGuire may have suggested the idea of a yearly holiday for American workers. Others say Matthew Maguire is responsible for the holiday. He was the secretary of the Central Labor Union (CLU) and led many strikes. To this day, historians still disagree over who began the movement that created Labor Day.

Notes

5. During the labor movement, solidarity was important. A strike against unfair employers couldn't be successful unless all the workers got together to strike. But some workers weren't allowed to get involved. Because of racism, some labor unions discriminated against African Americans. They didn't allow black workers to join them. This hurt union causes. Employers benefited when unions wouldn't let African Americans join strikes. They were able to hire black workers as strikebreakers. It was hard for a labor union to carry out a successful strike if black workers could be hired instead. Still, black workers fought for their rights and made their own organizations. Eventually, things changed. During the late 1900s, union leaders started to realize that racism and discrimination were hurting the labor movement. Black workers were allowed to join unions. Ultimately, the labor movement helped African Americans get better pay and working conditions.

Notes

6. The 1894 Pullman Strike was a nationwide railroad strike. It affected much of the United States. Railroad workers boycotted trains and mail trains were interrupted. When the strike turned violent, it caught the attention of President Grover Cleveland. He sent in the army to break up the strike. Many workers died. This helped change US labor laws. The strike also helped turn Labor Day into a nationwide holiday. After the strike, Congress approved Labor Day as a federal holiday to honor American workers. President Grover Cleveland signed the bill to help gain support from the unions and appease workers.

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