



Labor Day Is a Scam To Keep You Poor & Miserable Forever

Labor Day is a complete rip-off. Labor isn't celebrated at all—instead, a single day's break from labor is celebrated. You might think this is a stupid thing to care about, because Labor Day is really just about getting drunk in your yard, again. But that's actually evidence of this very successful con job pulled on you, the American worker (or unemployed person, or discouraged worker, or "grad student"). You probably don't even believe in Labor Day.

America, as you've surely been told, is a very special country. One example of the superiority of the United States is that it managed to deport the global workers holiday called May Day. This was especially skillful because May Day began not in Russia or Finland or Middle Earth, but in Chicago, a major American city built specifically to exploit the labor of poor immigrants.

On May 4 of 1886, police opened fire on laborers demanding an eight-hour workday. The cops had been sent over by their bosses at the slaughterhouses and City Hall to break up the rally and smash skulls. The chance to open fire on the workers conveniently arrived when a crude bomb was tossed toward the coppers by persons unknown; eight local anarchists were rounded up and convicted—four of them were slowly strangled in an intentionally botched public hanging, while a fifth condemned man blew off a significant portion of his own head by chewing on a blasting cap he'd smuggled into prison.

The phony trial gave fuel to the new global labor movement, and it inspired the creation of International Workers' Day on May Day of 1889, meshing with the European spring festivals held on May 1.

Leaders of other countries would've loved to kill off May Day. But it was too wrapped up in the old pagan spring celebrations, now starring cheery mobs of laborers singing ancient songs about smashing the system and sawing off the head of the screaming king. After dancing around the maypole and drinking everything in sight, the festively clad young people would tear off their folk costumes and screw each other in the forest, like wood sprites.

But every now and then, the revelers would launch a real revolution, which is how we got the Soviet Union and leftists and all that.

Very crafty U.S. holiday planners within the federal government were told by bankers and industrialists to find a way to get rid of this phenomenon. They had watched with interest as the Catholic Church tried (and failed) to steal May Day from workers by renaming it Saint Joseph's Day—the mythological Joseph, the cuckold in the tale of Mary's supernatural pregnancy, was the patron saint of going along with the system even though you're utterly dead inside.

For Washington, the answer was to simply have a different kind of May Day—one that was more about sitting in the yard getting drunk, instead of storming the Bastille or seizing the means of production. After U.S. marshals and soldiers slaughtered railroad workers during the 1894 Pullman Strike, the federal government quickly whipped up a national workers' holiday. This "Labor Day," the first Monday in September, was preferable to the May Day agitations that called for worldwide socialist revolutions.

The American authorities re-christened May Day as "Law and Order Day," a deft bit of word magic that knocked the life out of U.S. celebrations of May 1. The commemoration of the Haymarket Massacre itself, on May 4, is now a fake Disney holiday—May the Fourth Be With You celebrates the immense financial success of Star Wars products.

Labor Day worked all right during our brief mid-20th century era of a prosperous middle class and a less desperate working class and a fully marginalized poor with no access to Twitter. But as a salaried job went from the norm to a prize held by the fortunate, the hard-won eight-hour workday became

something sadder and stranger.

One of every three workers is now part of the "contingent workforce"—the exact number is conveniently hidden, because "the Labor Department does not regularly collect data about this group." When the Bureau of Labor Statistics stopped counting this contingent workforce in 2005, it was already at 30 percent of all workers. They're temps, contract workers, seasonal workers, and warehouse labor filling boxes for Amazon. They're generally in service, retail, food production and dead-end office jobs: stocking shelves, killing meat animals in a factory, doing telemarketing or data entry, cleaning bathrooms, working security, etc. And they're often deliberately kept from working 40 hours a week, because only then would they be entitled to benefits and legal protections reluctantly granted to full-time employees.

The modern Labor Day is one of the major retail sales weekends, right up there with the ominous Black Friday of Walmart riots and the unsatisfied mobs haunting Day After Christmas sales. With 70 percent of retail workers kept as part-timers and low-end retail increasingly being a round-the-clock operation, Labor Day is likely to be just another day of labor for the nation's worst-paid not-quite-employees.

Retail, along with "customer service representatives" and "fast food preparation," is one of the top five "largest job growth" occupations, according to the Labor Department. But don't get used to such horrible jobs, because even these are going away. The burger-flipping robot and the self-service checkout computer are killing off the crappy jobs just as machines killed all the jobs in agriculture and manufacturing.

This is the worst part of Labor Day, for those who want to think about it: Nearly all remaining jobs will be eliminated, probably in your own lifetime! The American-led destruction of the labor movement has been remarkably successful, and three decades of aggressive anti-union propaganda has made the few remaining trade unions with their pensions and vacations seem decadent and greedy to people struggling with a shift at the Del Taco followed by a shift at the Walmart, leaving children and elderly parents with whatever member of the casual family is without paid work of any kind.

But don't feel smug if you've got a law degree or work for an accounting firm or manage some department selling whatzits. The management massacre of 2008 and 2009 was just a way to get rid of dead-weight white-collar workers. Those jobs will never return. Most everything that anyone does can be done better and more cheaply by computers, and the price of robots is dropping just as the price of mainframes plummeted 20 years ago with the introduction of cheap but powerful PCs.

The next mass movement, if it ever happens, will not be about increasingly scarce laborers, but about people in general. Nationalism, oxycontin, despair, television, alcohol and slob propaganda have all done a very good job of keeping the 80 percent of Americans who are "financially insecure" too worn down and miserable to realize they've got a common enemy. If they ever do figure this out, there will either be a long internal war—the "class war" that worries rich liberals and rich conservatives alike—or the Pentagon is just going to poison the whole country between Silicon Valley and Manhattan.

Enjoy the barbecue.

Ken Layne writes his American Almanac to mark the nation's important holidays and traditions. Next up: Halloween! (UPDATE: The original version of this post mixed up the 1884 and 1894 railroad strikes; thanks to commenter sjk333 for the correction.)