

All the Prayers of God's People
September 1, 2020

Labor Day pays tribute to the contributions and achievements of American workers and is traditionally observed on the first Monday in September, this year September 7. It was created by the labor movement in the late 19th century and became a federal holiday in 1894, symbolizing the end of summer for many Americans, and is normally celebrated with parties, street parades and athletic events. In the South, many still hold the "no white after Labor day rules", this is part of our American history.

Labor Day originated out of one of American labor history's most dismal chapters. In the height of the Industrial Revolution in the United States, the average American worked 12-hour days and seven-day weeks in order to eke out a basic living. Despite restrictions in some states, children as young as 5 or 6 toiled in mills, factories, and mines across the country, earning a fraction of their adult counterpart's wages.

Today while many of these circumstances are improved, there are also many who work unreasonable hours for a pittance of pay. People of all ages, particularly the very poor and immigrants, then and now often face extremely unsafe working conditions, with insufficient access to fresh air, sanitary facilities, and breaks. As manufacturing increasingly supplanted agriculture as the wellspring of American employment, labor unions grew more prominent and vocal. They began organizing strikes and rallies to protest poor conditions and compel employers to renegotiate hours and pay.

The first observance of Labor Day is believed to have been a parade of 10,000 workers on Sept. 5, 1882, in New York City. By 1893, more than half the states were observing "Labor Day" on one day or another, and Congress passed a bill to establish a federal holiday in 1894. President Grover Cleveland signed the bill soon afterward, designating the first Monday in September as Labor Day.

For us today, Labor Day is often a celebratory event. But as God calls us into the world to be observant, we also see many in our own country who do not have this privilege. Our neighbors who call for assistance and cannot maintain a living wage, despite multiple jobs for instance. Migrant workers who continue to work from sunup to sundown, all ages on farms right around the corner in Leesville, SC,

as well as across the South. Others fighting within their unions for safe and effective work conditions, whether fracking or mill work to sustain our country's economy. And then there is the added reality of Covid which has ceased labor for so many, with an anticipated more on the way towards this country's recovery. The meaning of Labor Day is in many ways both old and brand new when we consider all of those who do not "get" to celebrate a labor free day. So while this is a national holiday (and not a religious day), we can remember all those who labor and toil for the good of all our communities. We can offer special prayers such as these¹:

Creator Lord, the source of all wisdom and purpose, and the blessing of those who labor; be with us in our work to guide and govern our world. Give to all people work that enhances human dignity and bonds us to one another. Give us pride in our work, a fair return for our labor, and joy in knowing that our work finds its source in you; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

O God, through human labors you continually perfect the immense work of your creation. Listen to the prayers of your people, and grant to everyone employment that calls us to our best and unite us with each other, so that we can serve our brothers and sisters, and your world, through our work. This we ask through your Son Jesus Christ, who lives in unity with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. *Amen.*

Almighty God, whose Son Jesus Christ in his earthly life shared our toil and hallowed our labor: Be present with your people where they work; make those who carry on the industries and commerce of his land responsive to your will; and give to us all a pride in what we do, and a just return for our labor; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.* (*Book of Common Prayer*, pg. 259)

¹ <https://buildfaith.org/prayers-for-labor-day/>