

Don Vruwink: Thank you to the workers of Wisconsin

Posted on Friday, Sep 2, 2022

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Labor Day is commonly thought of as the last blast of summer – the transition from the lazy, hazy days to the regular grind. During my teaching and coaching years, Labor Day meant meeting new faces at the high school and the launch of the fall sports season.

What gets lost in the end-of-summer merriment is the origins of Labor Day. It sprang from America's labor movement, a hard-fought struggle that continues today. The labor movement grew out of the need to protect the common interest of workers in the areas of better wages, reasonable hours, and safer working conditions. It also led efforts to protect minors in the workplace, offer health benefits, and provide aid to workers who were injured or unemployed.

The “captains of industry” were lauded for empires they built that became essential to life in the United States. But to working men, women, and children, they were “robber barons,” exploiting their labor for egregious profits.

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In those times, workers in Wisconsin and across the nation began to advocate for an 8-hour workday. When the robber barons made no efforts toward reform, workers organized into unions and turned to walk-outs.

In Milwaukee, a strike on May 2, 1886, known as the “Eight-Hour Day Parade,” led Gov. Jeremiah Rusk to call out the state militia. Three days later, as the labor unrest continued, strikers headed to a mill to call on workers there to join them. The militia fired on the crowd, killing seven people and wounding four. Today it is known as the

Bay View Massacre, and it has an official state observance every year on May 5th.

Similar clashes occurred across the nation as workers demanded decent pay and working conditions. Over time, a series of government regulations at the state and federal level improved conditions, such as limits on child labor, a 40-hour work week, a minimum wage, occupational health and safety standards, and worker's compensation.

The reforms that came with the labor movement show that when workers prosper, America prospers. Workers' income fuels the local, state and national economy. Likewise, when workers suffer, America suffers. Across the country, millions of workers toil at poverty wages with no sick leave, no medical leave, and no vacation time. Now, America is facing a labor shortage, and businesses everywhere are being forced to close their doors.

Last Labor Day, I wrote about the need for paid apprenticeships, better wages, and benefits to address the labor shortage. Just as in the past, labor unions are essential to making these needs a reality. For decades, union membership has been on the decline, until the start of the pandemic. With lockdowns nationwide, young workers finally saw the power of their labor, and the power of its absence. Employees at Amazon, Apple, Starbucks and corporations across the country began to organize for better conditions.

The workers have the support of the people. Over two-thirds of Americans approve of labor unions, the highest level support since 1965. It's easy to see why. On average, union members make more money, have better healthcare benefits, have more job security, and work better hours. In a time of economic uncertainty, where international corporations are seeing record profits, America needs unions to ensure the working class is not left behind.

The first Labor Day parade took place in New York City on September 5, 1882. "Working Men on Parade" read the New York Times headline. On June 28, 1894, after more than a decade of labor strikes, President Grover Cleveland signed a bill into law declaring Labor Day a national holiday. By then, 30 states officially observed Labor Day.

This Labor Day, on Monday, September 5, I ask you to think about how blue collar men and women built our nation's economy. Let's recognize and reward them for their role in our nation's economic success.

- *Vruwink, D-Milton, represents the 43rd Assembly District.*