

This Date in Safety History: Labour Day—Canada’s Gift to the World’s Working People



Labour unions in this country claim that Canada created Labour Day; unions south of the border claim that the U.S. did. While the controversy remains unresolved, what is clear is that Canada did play a leading role in bringing the international labour movement’s advocacy for a holiday to celebrate the economic and social achievements of workers to fruition.

The Printer’s Strike of 1872

It began in the 19th century when the deplorable conditions, low wages, and long hours of the industrial workplace spurred the rise of labour unions. In 1872, Toronto printers went on strike for a 54-hour work week. When the union leaders were jailed, the Toronto Trades Assembly a “workingman’s demonstration” parade that marched in military order across the town accompanied by 4 bands to the cheers of over 10,000 spectators. Speakers called for the release of the jailed union leaders and abolition of the laws making union membership a crime. Eventually, the government met these demands.

But the massive labour parades and protests continued, most notably in Hamilton where 1,500 workers marched demanding shorter work hours (12 hours was the standard shift at the time), kicking off a national “9-hour movement.” However, the

Canadian government dug in and didn't adopt Labour Day as an official statutory holiday until 1894.

Labour Day Outside of Canada

The first Labor (note the odd spelling) Day in the U.S. was celebrated in New York City in 1882. In 1887, 5 states officially adopted the holiday: Oregon, Colorado, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York. It would take another seven years for the federal government to recognize Labor Day as a national holiday. As in Canada, impetus for adoption was supplied by an incident of labour unrest—the Pullman strike of 1893-94. The U.S. Congress adopted the law-making Labor Day an official holiday in June 1894.

Today, Labour/Labor Day is celebrated in over 160 countries throughout the world. In most countries, the holiday occurs on May 1, the international day of the worker. Canada and the U.S. celebrate the holiday on the first Monday of each September.