

The History of Labour Day

Over one hundred years ago, in 1894, the Canadian government proclaimed the first Monday in September as Labour Day, a statutory holiday. The fact that this holiday was only the second declared in Canada, speaks volumes about the working conditions at the time. In the early 1800's, a normal work week in Canada and the U.S. was 14 to 16 hours a day, 7 days a week. As you can imagine, workers were not happy with these working conditions, and were forced to go on strike to reduce their working hours.

Canadian workers went on strike in 1834 for a 10 hour day, and again in 1872 for a 9 hour day. By the late 1800's, workers began to organize and challenge employers to further reduce working hours to 8 hours per day. Thousands of workers and their families took to the streets. They marched peacefully to local parks, enjoyed picnics and talked about worker's issues. Leaders promoted the concept that if workers were prepared to challenge those in power, the rewards would be dignity and respect in the workplace and shorter working hours. In the 1880's, workers voices united across Canada and the U.S. Their common demand supported by all was simple, an 8-hour work day. 130,000 workers had successfully negotiated a shorter work day by April of 1886. In May of the same year, 3,500 strikes were taking place throughout the U.S. and Canada.

Workers Died Demanding Rights

Obviously factory owners, bankers and merchants were all strongly opposed to any such concept; shorter hours would impact their profits. They reacted by lobbying the government, who opposed the growing militancy with vicious police attacks and arrests of activists.

On May 1st 1886, at a peaceful rally in Milwaukee, blood started to spill. Police opened fire on protesting workers. Tragically, nine workers were killed. On May 3rd 1886, the Chicago police killed six more demonstrators. One day later, on May the 4th, the bloodshed continued. 5,000 demonstrators stood in a light rain at Haymarket Square in Chicago to listen to August Spies talk about workers rights and the need for an 8-hour day. The crowd was so calm that the Mayor of Chicago, who had stopped by to watch, walked home early. As the rain intensified, the crowds started to leave. With only 400 demonstrators left, the police marched forward in formation. As they surrounded the workers, "all hell broke loose". A bomb exploded and shots were fired. At the end of the confrontation 8 were killed; of which 6 were police officers. Countless protesters were injured and did not seek medical attention for fear of repercussions. It was noted that most of the injuries were from bullets and only the police had guns

In the aftermath of the protest, eight U.S. labour leaders were charged, tried and found guilty. Seven were sentenced to hang and one received a life sentence. Protests and demonstrations followed. World leaders asked for leniency, but the government and businesses wanted their

pound of flesh. The workers had demanded too much and had to be put in their proper place death was the only answer.

The 8 Hour Day Was Born

Demonstrations continued on May 1st in the following years. In July 1889 the International Labour Congress met in Paris. Labour groups from around the world came to discuss workers issues. At this conference they voted to declare May 1st an International Day of Demonstration in support of the 8-hour day. The pressure continued by trade unionists, and in 1894, both Canada and the U.S. governments passed similar laws. However, they declared the first Monday in September as Labour Day rather than May 1st. This was to draw attention away from the bloody events that occurred in May and what it symbolized to workers.

"It is our responsibility not to forget those workers and the history of Labour Day. It is important that we retell this tragic story and remind ourselves that workers died in the streets so that we can enjoy an eight hour work day"

~CAW~