

## International Conversation Cafe

Lifestyle Topic: Labor Day in the United States

### What is Labor Day?

On the first Monday in September, Americans celebrate a national holiday called, "Labor Day." This national holiday was established in 1894. The word "labor," refers to hand physical work. Thus, Labor Day honors people in the United States who are involved in hard physical labor. The day recognizes contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of the United States.

*Name jobs that involve physical labor.*

*Have you known people who have jobs that require physical strength? Tell about them.*

### History of Labor Day

In the 1800's, the United States began moving from an agrarian society toward an industrialized nation. People began moving from the farms to cities where they could find jobs in factories. For the first time, these workers became dependent on their employers to pay them. This is where the problem began. Owners of businesses could and did take advantage of workers. So, the workers organized themselves into Labor Unions.

Unions are organizations of workers who join together as a group to bargain with the owners of the businesses that employ them. Unions bargain with owners for higher wages, shorter hours, better working conditions, and union recognition.

A union's power lies, in part, in its ability to **strike**. A strike is when workers refuse to work (and prevent others from working in their place if possible), leaving factories and mills idle and costing businesses valuable production time. Unions are valuable to their members because they protect individual workers' jobs and enforce ongoing labor-management contracts.

Owners, in turn, have a variety of options available to combat strikes. Owners can, for example, fire striking workers and hire new workers, or hire short-term workers for the duration of the strike (known as strikebreakers or scabs).

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-us-history/period-6/apush-gilded-age/a/the-knights-of-labor>

*Tell about organizations in your country that protect the rights of workers.*

*What kinds of abuses can a union protect a worker from?*

*Why do you think a worker would join a union or not join a union?*

People felt very strongly about unions. They displayed their feelings in music and art. The following song was written in 1931.

*Read through the song.*

*Define new words.*

*Tell the message of the song in your own words.*

## Which Side Are You On? By Florence Reece

Come all you good workers  
Good news to you I'll tell  
Of how the good old union  
Has come in here to dwell

Which side are you on boys?  
Which side are you on?

My daddy was a miner  
He's now in the air and sun  
He'll be with you fellow workers  
Until the battle's won

Which side are you on boys?  
Which side are you on?

They say in Harlan County  
There are no neutrals there  
You'll either be a union man  
or a thug for J.H. Claire

Which side are you on boys?  
Which side are you on?

Workers can you stand it?  
Oh, tell me how you can  
Will you be a lousy scab (someone who goes to work when everyone else is on strike)  
or will you be a man?

Which side are you on boys?  
Which side are you on?

Don't scab for the bosses  
Don't listen to their lies  
Poor folks ain't got a chance  
Unless they organize

Which side are you on boys?  
Which side are you on?

