

Labor Day
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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks

Earlier this year, a series of labor actions swept through several southern and southwestern states. Teachers, first in West Virginia, and then in Oklahoma, Kentucky, Colorado, Arizona, and even North Carolina staged rallies, protests, “walk-ins” in schools where they distributed literature and spoke with parents, students, and the public, and strikes. Many of their concerns were about teacher salaries, health care, and pensions. Most of the affected states, including North Carolina, are in the bottom 10th of all states for teacher compensation.

But there was another theme as well, and in at least two of the actions—West Virginia and Oklahoma—teachers specifically called for increases in general funding for education, arguing that students and therefore all citizens of their states were being shortchanged by the low priority their state legislatures placed on providing quality education for all our children.

I remember watching the West Virginia and Oklahoma efforts in particular this Spring with enormous admiration. Do you remember watching it all unfold? I remember days of waking to realize the teachers were still out there, still putting themselves on the line for what they knew was right. I remember all the efforts of governors and legislators, and anti-union or anti-public education commentators, to brand the teachers as selfish, overpaid, spoiled, and uncaring about their students.

I remember the teachers refusing to let themselves be misrepresented that way, insisting that their demands were about how much the states value the education of our children. I watched the repeated rejection of efforts to buy them off cheaply. Not all the actions were strikes, and not all the strikes were completely successful, but some remarkable concessions were won.

Maybe the most remarkable thing for me was that in the space of a few weeks educators around the country gave us all an absolutely essential lesson for the times we are living in. They reminded us of the power of people organizing together to make life better, not just for themselves, but for everyone.

That’s what Labor Day is about. We’ve gotten used to thinking of it as the end of summer, and as a holiday that’s somehow connected with honoring work, or honoring people who work. But Labor Day started out as a celebration of the Labor Movement, of unions and of their effort to bring workers together to balance the power of the corporations and business magnates who employed them. Organized labor as an institution has been one of the most significant influences shaping industrialized nations in general and the United States in particular into the way we live today.

Labor Day was established as a national holiday in 1894 as a response to a turbulent time. Working conditions in the late 1800s were dreadful by today’s standards, with 12 hour days and

six- or seven-day weeks as the norm in the mills, factories, and mines of the country. Child labor was common, keeping adult wages low; safety and healthy working conditions were not a concern to the vast majority of employers.

Against this backdrop workers began organizing into small unions that gradually merged and joined forces to increase their power to bargain collectively on behalf of individuals, and to use the power of the ballot and of public actions to force local, state, and national governments to create laws protecting the lives of workers.

Many employers, local police, and the United States government often reacted violently to strikes and rallies, and there was no protection for the jobs of workers who were caught organizing for the union. Nevertheless, as the saying goes, they persisted, and on September 5th, 1882, ten thousand workers walked off the job to march from City Hall to Union Square in New York City, effectively holding the first-ever Labor Day parade. Marches and rallies in early September became common.

After the great Pullman railway strike and boycott of 1894 and Grover Cleveland's use of the military to violently put it down, Congress voted to establish the first Monday in September as Labor Day. A cynical view might say that it was an effort to contain some of the unruly energy of the unions, and it's worth noting that President Cleveland pushed for the September date rather than May 1st, which was already becoming recognized globally as International Workers' Day and which he felt was too radical for any government support. Instead the day was described as a "workmen's holiday" to celebrate all the laborers whose productivity and hard work made the nation so prosperous. But it was the Unions' day first.

In the first half of the twentieth century, it was the work and the political power of labor unions that brought about the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which made the five-day work week a national standard and banned child labor at last. Organized labor has been substantially responsible for many of the things we think of as normal employment practices today—paid sick leave, employer-based health insurance, breaks in the workday, paid vacation, the 8-hour day and the 40-hour week, protection from wrongful termination, paid holidays, and much, much more. Organized labor provided a major part of the political muscle behind the creation of Social Security and Unemployment Insurance, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, minimum wage laws, the Equal Pay Acts of 1963 and 2011, and laws protecting collective bargaining rights and the right to strike.

My own first encounter with a union wasn't all that auspicious. The summer after my first year of college, I came home a convinced libertarian capitalist, sure that anything with the word "collective" associated with it couldn't possibly have a good side. Then my brother-in-law, a manager at a big Washington D.C. Safeway Bakery plant that served a big part of the Eastern Seaboard, got me a summer job there. I was determined that no one would think I was just a nepotism hire. I was sure that my hard work and fast learning would be the only factors that affected my employment.

Imagine my surprise when my direct supervisor on the line, who was the shop steward for the union, told me I needed to fill out my paperwork to join and get my dues paid as soon as my first paycheck arrived. *What?* I didn't want to join any union! I didn't believe in them! I was only working there for the summer, it's not like they were going to have to do anything for me, why should I give them a couple hundred of my hard-earned dollars for three months of nothing?

I cringe now at my own strident, crabby voice as I look back and remember myself sitting in the air-conditioned breakroom that the union had gotten, taking one of the two breaks or a lunch break the union had won for me, taking home my generous checks with time-and-a-half for overtime and enjoying my two days a week off and my paid leave on the Fourth of July, maybe keeping all my fingers because of union-negotiated rules about how fast the line could operate—and complaining that the union wasn't going to do anything for me that summer.

It's a lot easier to be absolutely certain about things you know absolutely nothing about.

Ignorance about what organized labor has done for us over the decades is a natural outgrowth of the fact that we don't study it in school, or at least I didn't in my very good public education. “Norma Rae” aside, most popular culture portrayals of unions focus on stories of corruption, and so does news coverage, because stories of misdeeds get a lot more interest than stories of the countless small and large ways the fabric of our lives is shot through with benefits that come from collective bargaining and the political power of organized labor.

With all the expertise of my one summer in a union shop, I was a fan of “right-to-work” laws in the 70s. These are laws that are presented as guaranteeing a person the freedom to work in a unionized workplace, without having to join the union or pay any fees to it. Laws like this gained a lot of traction in the 1980s, as political polarization among blue-collar workers grew. Some workers felt that unions were using their money to support political candidates or public causes they didn't agree with. Rather than be part of the union and work democratically to influence them, some people preferred to opt out. Today more than half of all states have right-to-work laws.

It took me a while to realize that right-to-work laws operate on the same premise as the unhelpful farm animals in the story of the little red hen. The union and its members have already done all the hard work of organizing and bargaining to establish the norms for the place I want to work, but I want to enjoy the benefits without having to pay for them. Nowadays I'm fine with the idea of someone not having to join a union to work in a union shop—as long as they're willing to do without everything the union has gotten for the workers there—no weekends, no holidays, no vacations, no sick leave, no break time; longer hours, lower wages. Not many people are clamoring for that kind of freedom, but of course it wouldn't matter if they did, because—thanks to unions—it's illegal to treat workers so differently. Tough luck, Little Red Hen.

As it happens, there was an interesting development recently in Missouri, where the state government had passed a right-to-work law, but enough Missouri citizens signed a petition opposing it that it had to be put to a referendum a few weeks ago. Voters in Missouri overwhelmingly rejected the law by a margin so large that the Legislature can't bring it up again. Like the teachers' strikes of this Spring, this is a hopeful sign for me.

It's hopeful because I've come to realize over time that the labor movement isn't just about everyday workplace issues like pay, benefits, and safety. It's about human dignity and equality. The labor movement historically has used the power of organization and numbers to balance the power that flows from the wealth of corporations and owners. The massive inequality of wealth that exists in our country today, and the inequality of political power that results from it, are partly a direct result of the weakening of unions in the last twenty years. I don't think it's a coincidence that the American middle class was larger and stronger, and income inequality was less in the 1950s and 60s, when organized labor was at its peak, than it is today.

The fierce effort to undercut the power of unions in recent years hasn't been about giving more rights to individual workers, it's been about keeping workers as a group powerless to resist the concentration of wealth and power that is the main agenda of some politicians and their wealthiest donors.

That's why I think it matters to us, to Unitarian Universalists, this Labor Day, to honor the history and the benefits that organized labor has won over the generations. Our faith calls us toward a society built around justice, equity, and compassion. We have a stake in the struggles of teachers, and farmworkers, and factory hands, and everyone striving to use the collective power of organizing to protect the hard-earned advances of so many years.

The twentieth-century Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams said, "The faith of a church or of a nation is an adequate faith only when it inspires and enables people to give of their time and energy to shape the various institutions - social, economic, and political - of the common life."

May we all seek to shape the institutions of our common life toward justice, equity, and compassion. Solidarity forever!