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Maine Perspective

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# While It's No Time to Celebrate, It Is Time to Reflect This Labor Day

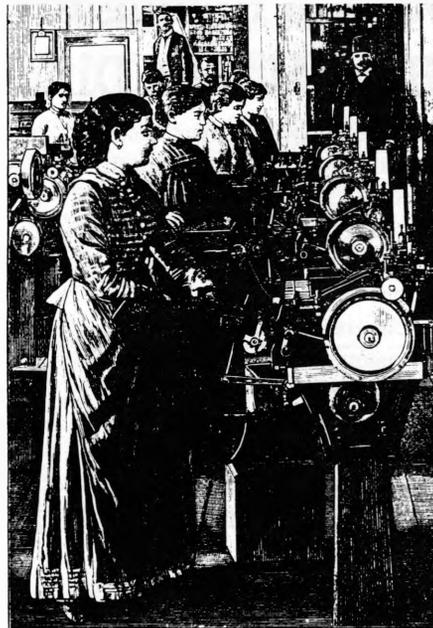
There appears to be little to celebrate this Labor Day. The country remains deep in a recession with New England bearing the brunt. Layoffs, plant closings and budget deficits are affecting blue and white collar workers. Unemployment is at an all-time high.

The status of labor in Maine is the worst it has been in three decades, according to John Hanson, director of the University of Maine Bureau of Labor Education. Of the state's three largest organized labor groups, the construction unions have a 95 percent-98 percent unemployment rate with no end in sight; organized labor in the papermills is facing reduced work hours; the shipbuilders' unions have experienced layoffs with more to come.

Because of that, Labor Day 1991 is perhaps more important than ever.

"In 1991 there is nothing to celebrate," Hanson said. "These are bad times for union and non-union workers. Real earnings continue to decline, unemploy-

ment is unacceptably high in Maine and throughout the country. Traditional industries are being lost and there's every reason to expect that it will continue for some time.



## History of Labor Day Rooted in Poor Working Condition of the Past

What is the significance of Labor Day?

Ask most people and they will tell you that it traditionally means a three-day weekend, the non-official "end" of summer, a soon-to-follow start to the school year and the kick-off of merchants' Labor Day sales.

Oh, and by the way, it honors all those who labor, right?

For many people, Labor Day has become one of those holidays whose significance has dimmed through the years as memories fade - memories of sweatshops and child labor, unsafe factories and contracts requiring trading at the company store, workers paying supervisors for the privilege to work. But among those who know the history of labor in America, the intent of the national observance is as vital - and crucial - as ever.

"Labor Day is a time we should be saying to the workforce that the country is appreciative," according to John Hanson, director of the University of Maine Bureau of Labor Education. "It is also a

time to pay homage to the dignity of labor. People don't take time to take stock of the contributions all working men and women, union and non-union make to our society."

The roots of Labor Day are found in the unsavory working conditions men, women and children toiled under before the turn of the century, and the labor unions that were organized in response. The indignities included not being permitted to sit for momentary relief on a job that required standing for 15 hours or longer. Workers who labored in the granite quarries on Dix Island in the 1870s were required to pay a tax to support a church as a condition of employment. And the uncertainty and irregularity of payment to workers is reflected by a comment from a quarry worker who, in 1889, in response to the question of how often he was paid, stated: "For someone who hasn't been paid in 15 years, your question is a stunner."

*continued on page 15*

"But while people don't have cause to celebrate this year, they do need to take the time to reflect on what they want as a nation and what position to place labor in. It's a time to decide whether to continue to worship the likes of the Donald Trumps and Ivan Boesky's - people who over the years have mismanaged or bilked stockholders and depositors, or whether to reassess the values we want the nation to have - values that include rewarding work well done and applauding the dignity of work, including that work that constitutes the necessary tasks."

In recent years, many of the nation's leaders have insisted that the dignity of work is being upheld. Public policy, however, belies that, Hanson said. "It is unnecessary and irresponsible to be debating something as basic as the Civil Rights Act," he said. "Instead, we ought to be saying as a matter of course that the U.S. believes in civil rights for all.

"It's simply wrong to say that workers have the right to go on strike and then bring in permanent replacements. The same is true in the debate over raising the minimum wage. In real dollars, the minimum wage is less than it was 14 years ago."

*continued on page 15*

### Maine Perspective

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Assistant Vice President  
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Adrie Nab

Executive Editor  
Margaret Nagle

Contributing Writers: Melissa Adams,  
Development Office, Fogler Library Staff,  
Kathleen Gaede,  
Office of International Programs,  
Marc Kusnitz, David C. Smith,  
Scott Wilkerson

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## History of Labor Day *continued from page 2*

The nation's first major labor movement, the Knights of Labor, reached Maine in 1882 and five years later, there were 27,900 members in the state encouraged by its spirit of reform, according to UM historian Charles Scontras in his book, The Origins of Labor Day in Maine and Historical Glimpses of Labor in Parade in Early Nineteenth Century Maine. Originally a craft society, the Knights of Labor included "men and women, skilled and unskilled, black and white, merchants, farmers and employers" - anyone engaged in "honorable toil" (that excluded bankers, stockbrokers, lawyers, professional gamblers, and those involved in liquor sales/manufacture).

The first Maine observance of Labor Day occurred in 1886, four years after the country's initial celebration in New York City. The Knights of Labor in southern Maine were the first to observe Labor Day in the state when 3,000 workers from Biddeford and Saco, and supported by several businesses which had closed for the day, gathered at Peaks Island "for a day of rest and recreation."

The following year, the Portland Knights called "all mechanics and laboring people" to join in a special day of "solidarity and celebration." Businesses closed, the city of Portland closed offices to officially recognize the day, and other cities and towns joined in the observance.

There were, indeed, critics of the Labor Day observance who noted that "there were holidays enough in the world that interfered with the industrial process," and that this was "simply another concession to labor." But for those who took a more humanitarian view, for those "who were compelled to 'toil and spin' amid the din of machinery, week in and week out, through the hot summer months, the anticipation of a day of rest and recreation brings hope to heavy hearts, and its realization (Labor Day), renewed strength and vigor to tired limbs."

Workers in the state continually petitioned the Maine Legislature for creation of Labor Day as a state holiday. In 1891, their lobbying paid off as Maine became the ninth state to declare Labor Day a legal holiday - three years prior to it becoming a national observance.

While Labor Day celebrations in the state had their setbacks, like the depression of the 1890s that "all but destroyed the labor movement in Maine" and caused festivities to be fewer in number, the observance continued. "With the revival of unionism in Maine at the turn of the century, however, Labor Day again was widely celebrated," according to Scontras. By 1903, Portland, Bangor, Lewiston and Augusta combined "reported an estimated 20,000 men in line." In 1904, "only a Fourth of July, or a visit by a president" could exceed the turnouts on Labor Day.

Monumental Labor Day celebrations in the state, most highlighted by large parades, continued through the 1930s and '40s. By the 1950s, the Labor Day parades were dying out. Industrialization and commercialization became overriding priorities, even though it was working men and women who were making it all possible.

Today Labor Day continues to be observed, most often by organized labor in a show of solidarity. In 1981, a statewide celebration was held in Waterville, led by the labor unions of the state. Since then, statewide observances have also been held in Portland. Both attracted increasingly large audiences through

1989; Waterville's Labor Day observance in 1988 attracted an estimated 12,000 people. For the last two years, Labor Day observances by unions in Maine have taken the form of solidarity demonstrations for striking fellow workers. This year, the AFL-CIO and its affiliated unions are taking their state observances to Washington, D.C. to draw attention to pressing national issues including the state of the economy, worker replacement legislation and health care.

But while the numbers who recognize the true meaning of the holiday have dwindled, the intent of the observance springs eternal among those who carry on the tradition.

"Nowadays in this state and others, people are trying to resurrect some consciousness of what the day is," Hanson said. "The effort is to instill some consciousness about working people and their contributions to our community, state and overall well-being.

"It needs to be kept alive," Hanson said. "It ought to be 365 days a year. In a nation of so much wealth, we ought to realize that ultimately all the wealth is created by labor."

## Reflecting on Labor Day 1991 *continued from page 2*

It is time, Hanson said, to insist that "actions back rhetoric" when it comes to the nation's laborforce - both union and non-union. There is need for a national training program for displaced workers, economic development policies void of tax breaks for companies that invest abroad and trade policies that are made for the nation's good - not for the good of companies looking to shirk responsibilities.

"The open trade policies between the U.S. and Mexico are now on the front burner," Hanson said. "They are on the fast track in the name of improving economic development in Mexico. But why even negotiate a trade policy with Mexico and legitimize the flight of U.S. companies seeking to avoid equal opportunity requirements, unions, environmental protection restrictions and occupational safety standards?"

Labor Day should provide an opportu-

nity to "commit ourselves as a society to programs and policies that have real meaning to working men and women in the state and nation," Hanson said. As was clear in the groundswell of support nationwide in the Persian Gulf crisis, it is obvious that "when we as a country have a purpose and a mission that we set our mind to, anything is possible.

"We need to take that same zest and zeal and put it into revitalizing the nation," he said. "There's a lot of work to do (to help revitalize the nation) and people wanting to work. It will take changes in public policy. I suggest that what we really need to do, instead of rewarding and facilitating the flight of American enterprise overseas, is to invest publicly and privately in our own nation.

"It's time to rebuild the infrastructure of the country - rebuild our cities, roads, bridges, etc. - and provide the jobs that people so desperately want."