



## The origins of Labour Day

The Canadian labour movement can justly claim the title of originator of Labour Day. Peter J. McGuire, one of the founders of the American Federation of Labour has traditionally been known as the 'Father of Labour Day'. Historical evidence indicates that McGuire obtained his idea for the establishment of an annual demonstration and public holiday from the Canadian trade unionist.

Earliest records show that the Toronto Trades Assembly, perhaps the original central labour body in Canada, organized the first North American 'workingman's demonstration' of any significance for April 15, 1872. The beribboned parade marched smartly in martial tread accompanied by four bands. About 10,000 Torontonians turned out to see the parade and listen to the speeches calling for abolition of the law which decreed that trade unions were criminal conspiracies in restraint of trade.

The freedom of 24 imprisoned leaders of the Toronto Typographical Union, on strike to secure the nine-hour working day, was the immediate purpose of the parade, on what was then Thanksgiving Day. It was still a crime to be a member of a union in Canada although the law of criminal conspiracy in restraint of trade had been repealed by the United Kingdom parliament in 1871.

Toronto was not the only city to witness a labour parade in 1872. On September 3, members of seven unions in Ottawa organized a parade more than a mile long, headed by the Garrison Artillery band and flanked by city firemen carrying torches.

The Ottawa parade wound its way to the home of Prime Minister Sir John A. MacDonal where the marchers hoisted him into a carriage and drew him to Ottawa City Hall by torchlight. 'The Old Chieftan', aware of the discontent of workers with the laws which made unions illegal, in a ringing declaration from the steps of the City Hall, promised the marchers that his party would 'sweep away all such barbarous laws from the statute books'.

The offending conspiracy laws were repealed by the Canadian government in 1872.

The tradition established by the Toronto Trades Assembly was continued through the seventies and into the early 1880's.

In 1882, the Toronto Trades and Labour Council, successor to the TTA, decided to organize the annual demonstration and picnic for July 22. The council sent an invitation to Peter J. McGuire of New York requesting his services as a speaker for the occasion. McGuire was the founder and general secretary of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters which had organized the previous year.



It was in the same year, that McGuire proposed at a meeting of the New York Central Labour Union that a festive day be set aside for a demonstration and picnic. Labour Day was first celebrated in New York on September 5, 1882. It is apparent, however, that the custom had developed in Canada and the invitation sent to McGuire prompted his suggestion to the New York labour body.

Soon pressure for legislation to declare a national holiday for Labour Day was exerted in both Canada and the United States. In 1894 the government of Sir John Thompson enacted such legislation on July 23, with the Prime Minister piloting the bill through Parliament against the opposition of some of his Conservative followers.

Canadian trade unionists have celebrated this day 'set aside to honour those who labour' from the 1870's on. The first Labour Day parade in Winnipeg, in 1894, was two miles long.

There can be little doubt that the annual demonstrations of workers' solidarity each Labour Day in North America owe their inspiration to small group of 'illegal' members of the Toronto Trades Assembly.

*The above is an edited version of an article written in Sept. 1961 by  
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