

Labor Day, Past and Present©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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While tomorrow is Monday, it won't be a typical Monday. It won't be typical because it is, as we all know, a national holiday. Tomorrow is Labor Day. It is a Federal holiday and because of this all Federal and State offices will be closed. So unless you didn't check your mailbox yesterday there won't be anything in it tomorrow. Along with government offices, banks will be closed since many companies in the private sector, especially in the financial sector, give their employees the day off. The three-day Labor Day weekend is often thought of as the unofficial end of summer. The recent change in temperatures conveys that quite clearly. On the Labor Day weekend it is common for people to take a trip, have people over for a meal cooked on the grill or take advantage of the sales that many retail stores offer.

Trips, outdoor meals and shopping are the kinds of things that many people now associate with Labor Day. But such things aren't what the holiday was originally intended to celebrate. Originally, Labor Day was established to honor the American labor movement and the many contributions that workers have made to the strength, prosperity and wellbeing of our country. The first Labor Day parade, which took place in New York City in 1882, was organized by the Central Labor Union and the Knights of Labor. Five years later, in 1887, Oregon was the first state to make Labor Day an official public holiday. The fact that New York and Oregon are on opposite coasts indicates the pervasiveness of the call for recognition of workers and organized labor during that time.

In 1894 the U.S. Congress unanimously voted to approve legislation to establish Labor Day as a national holiday. Soon afterward President Grover Cleveland signed the bill into law. The legislation was an attempt on the part of many politicians, and in particular President Cleveland, to regain support among trade unions after what is commonly known today as the "Pullman strike" of 1894. During that strike President Cleveland called on the United States Army and the United States Marshals Service to end the workers' walkout and to get the trains that ran in and out of Chicago moving again. Thirty striking workers were killed and nearly twice that many suffered significant injuries at the hands of the U.S. troops and Marshals. Many people involved in the labor movement blamed President Cleveland for the deaths.

The strike initially failed to accomplish its objectives. The objectives included the reinstatement of wages that had been cut by the Pullman Palace Car Company, a company in Chicago that built railroad cars. After the strike was violently suppressed however, a national commission, as well as the Illinois Supreme Court, determined that there was merit in the workers' concerns and complaints. As a result, the Pullman Company was forced to change significant aspects of how it did business.

Throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century and during the first half of the twentieth century membership in labor unions increased. With labor unions growing, the bargaining power workers had during the course of contract negotiations grew as well. Workers in a wide array of industries and occupations experienced gains in a variety of areas. Hourly wages and salaries went up. Along with increases in income, other benefits improved as well. Vacation and sick time was established or increased.

Insurance and retirement packages were instituted or improved. Like the ebb and flow of waves on the ocean though, the rise of the labor movement was bound to end and a trough would follow. The peak of the wave came in 1945 when over 35% of workers in this country were members of a union. Since the 1970's the wave has crashed and the trough continues to deepen. In 2015 union membership across the U.S. was just over 11%, the lowest percentage of union membership in the past seventy-five years.

Before I go any further, I want to make it clear that I am not here today to praise or support labor unions. I believe that while labor unions have provided some definite benefits to many workers in this country, and for that matter in other parts of the world as well, they have also been guilty of abuses of power and, at times, have been rife with corruption. I am here, however to support and praise those who do the work, often the very hard work, of providing us with the services and products we use and enjoy. What I find quite concerning is that over the course of the period during which union membership declined most precipitously the earnings of the majority of workers has stagnated or even fallen. According to the Pew Research Center, the real wages of most U.S. workers have been flat or even falling for decades, going as far back as 1964. For the past fifty years that is what has been occurring for the majority of people in this country. Since 1979, however, the income of the top 1% of the population has gone up by more than 250%. I don't know about you but I find that troubling. To me that seems to be in contradiction with our Second Principle which states "justice, equity and compassion in human relations." It seems to me that a very few people are getting very wealthy at the expense of the many people who are doing the hard, often dirty and at times dangerous work that allows us to live the way we do.

I know I am not alone in my concern. Many others share it as well. It is a concern of such significance that at the 1997 General Assembly of our Unitarian Universalist Association a resolution titled "Working for a Just Economic Community" was proposed and easily passed. That resolution stated in part: "The Unitarian Universalist Association urges its member congregations and individual Unitarian Universalists in the United States to work... in support of a more just economic community...." Early in my preparations for today's sermon I thought I would share with you some of the specific recommendations for action contained in that resolution. As I read them over however, I found myself being overwhelmed by what they seemed to ask of me. I realized that if I was feeling overwhelmed it probably wasn't reasonable for me to think that you would be inspired and energized if I were to share them with you. So instead of talking further about that resolution and its recommendations, I encourage you to go to the UUA website and read it for yourself. The title again is "Working for a Just Economic Community." And after you have read it I encourage you to let me know your thoughts and feelings about it.

I imagine that many of us agree that working for a more just economic community is important. The task seems so complex and incredibly large however that we might feel there is nothing significant we can do to make a positive difference. Over the course of my life I have discovered that when a problem seems too complex and too large to address, I need to find a way to break it down into small bits. When I am able to get things broken down into bits my ability to imagine the likelihood of doing something beneficial increases significantly.

So I want to share with you an idea I have for making a difference. I don't propose that the idea will create the just economic community many people would want. It could, however make a significant positive difference for workers in one particular type of work situation. The work situation I am referring to is one that I believe all of us have frequented, a restaurant. You may not know it but the Federal minimum wage for most people who work in restaurants is \$2.13 an hour. That is less than one third of the minimum wage of \$7.25 which has been set for most other types of work. \$2.13! Who in this country can possibly live a decent life on such a wage? Thankfully the elected officials of our State recognized that \$2.13 was woefully inadequate. In Montana, the minimum wage for most workers, including most restaurant employees is \$8.05. Yet while restaurant workers in Montana get a more appropriate wage they typically get few if any other benefits. By benefits I am referring to such things as employer sponsored health insurance or retirement plans and paid vacation or sick leave. Even the issue of restaurant employee benefits still seems too big of a chunk for me to deal with. But if I look at just one small bit of the missing benefits I just mentioned it seems possible that I may be able to make a positive difference. The small bit I am talking about here is sick leave.

I must admit, there is an ulterior motive to my decision to focus on the issue of sick leave for restaurant employees. That ulterior motive is my health and the health of those I know and love. You see, when a restaurant worker has no paid sick leave they may feel their only option is to go to work even when they have a contagious illness. Saru Jayaraman writes about this in her book *Behind the Kitchen Door*. The UUA selected *Behind the Kitchen Door* as the "common read" book for the 2013-14 church year. The issue of no paid sick time is such a significant problem that chapter three is titled "Serving While Sick." Restaurant workers working with food when they are sick isn't just a problem for the workers themselves. It is a potential problem for anyone who eats the food the sick worker is around or has contact with. It is a public health issue.

So what can you or I do about this issue? First, we can become informed. I recommend people read *Behind the Kitchen Door* as a first step. Another way to get informed is to simply ask the employees at a restaurant you eat at if their employer provides paid sick leave. Asking this question has a secondary benefit. By asking the question you let the employee know the people they serve think this is an important issue. It will convey that you are concerned for them. As you become more informed and aware, the next step is to take action. Action can be as small as letting a restaurant worker know you support them in asking for paid sick leave. It might include writing a note on one of those "give us feedback" cards some restaurants offer. If you feel especially motivated you might even want to speak directly to the manager or owner of the restaurant. These are a few action steps you might take and there are many others you might consider or take as well.

These may seem like small and insignificant actions. You may think that your doing such things will have no significant impact. You may be correct. But imagine for just a moment if people from all over the country began taking such actions. Imagine if restaurant workers felt that the people they served really cared about them, their health and their wellbeing. Imagine what might begin to happen if hundreds, or thousands or tens of thousands of people started talking about and asking for paid sick leave time for the people who work in restaurants. What are the possibilities of such a movement? I

believe this is an issue each of us can and should have a voice in. I believe we can make a difference. A difference that will benefit workers, their families, and the people they serve. On this Labor Day weekend I encourage you to become informed, to take action and to keep imagining how you can strive to create a more just economic community. With all of us working together we can make a difference.

May it be so.