

The origin of Labor Day, like many of our national holidays, has gradually faded from our collective consciousness. Today, for most, Labor Day marks summer's last hurrah: one more long weekend at the cottage, a final quick road trip, or simply a barbeque at home. It also marks a time of beginning — a new school year, and a new Green Bay Packers season. But the holiday's history is worthy of consideration.

In 1893, during the height of a major economic recession, demand for railroad cars built by the Pullman Palace Car Co. plummeted. To offset the decline, wages at the production plant in the company town of Pullman, Ill., were cut. Employees, who worked 16-hour days, complained about the cut in wages, especially since the rent they paid for company housing, and prices of goods at the company stores, remained fixed. Company owner George Pullman refused to consider their appeals.

As members of the American Railway Union, Pullman workers got support from other railroad workers who refused to operate any trains containing Pullman cars. On June 26, 1894, the union launched a boycott. The 125,000 workers on 29 railroads walked off the job rather than handle Pullman cars. A few days later, striking protesters set fire to several buildings and derailed one locomotive. Other unions joined in the action, preventing the transportation of goods, obstructing railroad tracks, and attacking strike-breakers.

By late summer, President Grover Cleveland, citing interference with the U.S. Mail, violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act, and a general threat to public safety, called up teams of U.S. Marshals and 12,000 Army troops to quell the strike. During the ensuing conflicts, 13 strikers were killed and 57 were wounded. Six days after the strike ended, President Cleveland and Congress (in a token of reconciliation with the unions) quickly passed legislation establishing Labor Day as a national holiday.

From time to time we should reflect upon such tragic episodes of our history to avoid making similar mistakes, and to continue progress on alleviating the factors that led to such desperate circumstances in the

Dan Linssen

Commentary



first place. Since the Pullman Strike 117 years ago American workers have attained enormous improvements in working conditions. Long gone are the indentured, oppressive conditions of company towns in the industrial revolution. But as we acclimate ourselves to continually higher standards of living, setbacks like the current recession, with its high unemployment rate, still create stress on workers and their families.

And while the 16-hour, back-breaking labor of 100 years ago is no longer the standard, the highly-paid, unskilled factory labor of 50 years ago is almost gone as well. Building a sustainable, comfortable, middle class for the future is going to require a new focus in our high-tech, global economy.

Workers will need to adopt a new mindset. Showing up ready to work will no longer be sufficient to retain middle-class income. Going forward, the focus must be either on acquiring the types of specific skills needed by employers, or else developing an entrepreneurial idea into your own revenue-generating enterprise.

Business owners may need to rethink the nature of compensation, and focus more on incentive-based pay that allows high-performing work groups to share in the financial reward of their output.

Unions, if they hope to remain relevant, will need to shift their focus from protectionism to building a highly capable work force whose value-added warrants high compensation.

Government will need to focus on economic development and guard against bureaucratic regulation that does little to promote job growth.

So, on this Labor Day, enjoy that burger fresh off the grill. But also give some thought to how we can build a strong and sustainable middle class for the next 100 years, while avoiding the kinds of tragedy that gave rise to this holiday.

Dan Linssen of Green Bay advocates for personal responsibility and thinking outside the box. His book "Who's to Blame?" is available at www.whostoblame.net and other online sources.