
Craig Heron and Steve Penfold (2005). *The Workers' Festival: A History of Labour Day in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 340 pages.

I have been a labour activist for almost fifty years. I have walked on dozens of picket lines - for optical workers, CBC workers, aircraft workers, garment and garbage workers and many more. But until a few years ago I had never marched in a Labour Day parade. That is a symptom of the limited importance many current unionists place on Labour Day parades. In fact there wasn't a Labour Day parade in Ottawa for half a century. The parade idea was only revived in Ottawa in 1996 in response to the attack on Labour rights by the government of Mike Harris.

For the 2002 Ottawa Labour Day parade I was officially named as a Labour Pioneer. I felt honoured being driven about in an open car at the head of a march dedicated to a cause that I deeply believe in. But at the same time I had this nagging feeling that has bothered parade organizers all over Canada for over a century. "Where is everybody? Why on this day are there not thousands and thousands of union members marching and proclaiming their rights to greater recognition of their work?"

I have now found some answers in a new book by labour historians Craig Heron and Steve Penfold. In this thoroughly researched volume they illustrate how Labour Day parades have had glorious moments in our history. Originally the parades were a popular festival intended to draw attention to the role and needs of Labour. They became a very rich art form developed collectively by organized workers in Canada. Yet they were also deeply disappointing to those who tried to involve masses of workers in the celebration.

The first Labour Day demonstration was in Toronto in 1882. One of the demands of Labour at the time was for a public enquiry into the status of labour and capital. Such a Royal Commission was established and reported in 1889. To the chagrin of labour leaders, the most important recommendations were ignored. The only recommendation that was implemented was the declaration of Labour Day as a statutory holiday in 1894.

The granting of a workers' holiday was not universally embraced. The *Globe* of the day stated: "The establishment of this holiday...is recognition of a working class as a distinct element of the community. Recognition as a distinct and separate working class, having a legal holiday on their own, is certainly opposed to the democratic spirit in Canada".

Originally, Labour Day was celebrated as a day off and as a workers festival. Craft unions of the day would mount an elaborate celebration ranging from a parade down the main street to organized sporting events in the park.

The day was designed to give organized Labour an occasion to celebrate its own strength and dignity. It was also supposed to be a day for the public to recognize the importance of the workers' contributions to society. Finally, it was to be a day of family recreation.

From the very first Labour Day celebration, when local leaders made long speeches on Labour's achievements and aspirations, working class audiences became restless. They wanted a day of sports, fun, and recreation. Labour leaders face the same dilemma today.

"Devoted as the name suggests to a recognition of the rights of the toilers of world," a Peterborough paper lamented as far back as 1925, "Labour Day, like most other holidays is merely a day off work and a great opportunity to get out of town".

This book carefully explores the ups and downs of the workers' festival. In the first decade of the last century, Labour Day parades were an important spectacle in many Canadian cities and towns. Between 1910 and the beginning years of World War 2 Labour was very much weakened by powerful attacks by employers and governments. The parades all but disappeared from the scene.

There was a massive increase in union membership and activity during WW2 and the immediate post-war years. A wave of strike activity followed in 1946 when workers and returning veterans demanded wage increases that had been denied during the war years. Labour Day parades with strong political messages reappeared and became the norm.

In the 1950's and '60's the political messages were more muted. Parade floats had to be eye-catching. Young women were used as sexual attractions. Professionally designed floats became rolling commercials for the companies that the marchers worked for. However, from the 1970's until the present, the message of the parades has again become distinctly political.

Although the Toronto parade today still draws from 25,000 to 35,000 marchers, the post-war revival has turned out to be partial, uneven and generally unsuccessful. More and more, Canadian workers have chosen cottages, sporting events, television, and barbeques over parades of serious content.

The authors illustrate how the holiday was largely taken away from workers. Over a century, politicians, clergy, editorial writers and commercial interests have appropriated the holiday for their own purposes. Retail stores promoted Labour Day as a shopping day before the start of school. The authors cite one outrageous example of how the staunchly anti-union T. Eaton Company placed a float in the 1933 Toronto Labour Day parade.

The book explains why Labour Day is a uniquely North American holiday while workers in the rest of the world celebrate May Day. Workers in the United States originated the celebration of May 1st. It was taken up by European socialists and became a day of international solidarity. In order to divert American workers away from radical activity on May 1st, the US government and

employers declared the first Monday in September as Labour Day. Canada soon followed.

The irony is that May 1st has become the international day of labour solidarity in almost every country in the world except in the US, where it originated. As the authors state: May Day was a day of protest, Labour Day one of celebration.

At the time that Labour Day and other holidays were proclaimed as statutory holidays, they were without pay. Missing from this book is the story of Labour's struggles to gain holidays with pay. It was only through collective bargaining in the 1940's and onward that labour unions fought for and gained holidays with pay. It would take 72 years from the time Labour Day was declared a statutory holiday until the Canadian Government in 1966 legislated holidays with pay.

This book is richly illustrated with 250 photographs with detailed captions. It is a welcome addition to the limited supply of good new books on Canadian labour history.

Today there is still much for Labour to protest and celebrate. So having read the book, I shall attend this year's Ottawa Labour Day parade with a better understanding of its history.

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