

by Wendy Despins, President

Monday September 4, 2006 just another day, the long weekend signifying the close of summer, a day to spend time with friends and family. What is the story behind the September long weekend?

The origin of Labour Day as a Canadian statutory holiday goes back one hundred and thirty five years. It goes back to 1871 a time when it was a criminal act to be a member of a union in Canada. *Twenty four union activists were imprisoned in Toronto. The crime they had committed; belonging to a union – then a criminal conspiracy in restraint of trade, and striking for a “nine” hour work day.*

On Thanksgiving Day April 15, 1872, the Toronto Trades Assembly organized what is believed to be the first North American labour demonstration. This “workingman’s” demonstration began as a parade complete with four bands and was followed up with speeches. The speakers were calling for the immediate release of the incarcerated workers and demanding the abolition of the anti-union legislation, this same legislation had already been repealed by parliament in England. The workers were applauded by their fellow Torontonians who came out in droves and numbered approximately 10,000 citizens.

This event sparked a similar event in Ottawa several months later. The Garrison Artillery band led a mile long parade of members from seven different unions, with the city firemen bringing up the rear with flaming torches. The parade wended its way through Ottawa’s streets stopping at the home of Prime Minister Sir John A. MacDonald. The Prime Minister was taken to City Hall where acknowledging the workers discontent he promised that such outrageous laws would be revoked. True to his word, the offensive legislation was repealed by the Canadian government before the end of the year.

Having begun as a public protest against unjust legislation the Toronto parade was an annual event well into the 1880’s. Ten years after the first parade the Toronto Trades and Labour Council extended an invitation to Peter J. McGuire the general secretary of the

Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and co-founder of the American Federation of Labour to participate as a guest speaker. Upon his return to his home in New York, Peter organized a parade which was held September 5, 1882.

In 1894 a two mile long parade marked the beginning of Winnipeg’s first Labour Day parade. Twenty two years later the Canadian and American governments enacted legislation making Labour Day a national holiday that would annually occur on the first Monday of September. July 23, 1894 the Canadian Parliament led by Prime Minister John Thompson declared Labour Day a legal holiday.

There is a day celebrating labour world wide; however it is celebrated at different times and under different names. It is also known as “International Workers’ Day” or as “May Day”

So . . . *one hundred and thirty five years later what has been accomplished? We have made significant strides in Canada, but looking around the world there are many countries that still do not allow trade unionism, that still do not have workers rights, that still do not have any health and safety legislation and that have aggressive anti-union activities.* The following list is just a very small sampling of examples of headlines from around the globe:

1. Yelena Starostina, jailed member of the Siberian Labour Confederation (SKT) accused of “illegal possession of documents” July 12, 2006.
2. Mansoor Ossanolou, jailed President of Tehran’s bus worker’ union. Mansoor Ossanolou released after spending seven and one half months in prison. Jailed for organizing the bus workers.
3. Free - Iran’s 800 Jailed Union Activists February 6, 2006.
4. Four youths activists arrested from Pegu College Burma for writing and distributing a poem, March 29 2006 – sentences ranged between seven and nineteen years.
5. Three Columbian trade union leaders were assassinated recently by government soldiers; Jorge Eduardo Prieto, Leonel Goyeneche, and

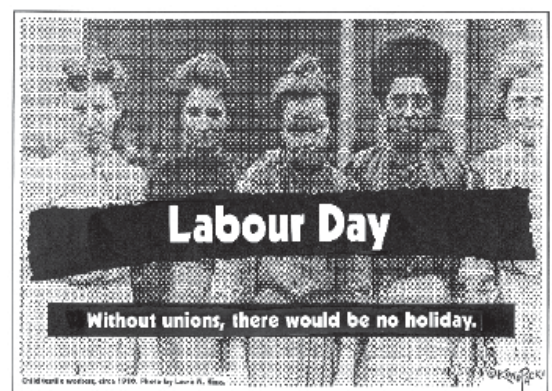
Hector Alirio Martinez October 14, 2004.

6. 94 Trade Unionists were murdered in Columbia last year.
7. Jonquiere Quebec – Wal-Mart Stores inc., the retail chain symbolizing anti-unionism around the world, has announced it will close a Quebec store that was on the verge of becoming its first fully unionized outlet. February 2005 NUPGE

The struggle for “labour” rights and thus the struggle for “human” rights is ongoing, and is worl-wide. It is won and measured in major actions and events and in small day-to-day actions. Both are important. *Our struggle to maintain and improve our collective agreements, our working conditions and our public Health Care system is achievable. It is achievable by the actions we take as an organization and by the actions we take each day as union members in the workplace.*

Please enjoy your “Labour Day” Weekend. Take a moment to reflect on its origins and to celebrate all that the first Monday of September represents. In closing I, would like to share a quote from the speech that Larry Brown gave at our 2005 AGM:

“Freedom, freedom, is a hard won thing, you’ve got to work for it, fight for it, day and night for it, and every generation has to win it again.”



Labour Day Quiz

Test your Canadian labour history savvy

1. The “workingman’s holiday” was first celebrated by trade unions in 1882. When did the Canadian government make Labour Day a national holiday: 1884? 1894? 1924?
2. In 1872, the prime minister passed the *Trade Unions Act* making it legal to form unions. In part, his motivation was to undermine liberals such as George Brown, who had opposed strikes calling for a nine-hour workday. Who was this prime minister?
3. In 1881, children as young as nine worked a 12-hour day for 20 cents in Toronto. How much of the city’s workforce did children comprise: 3%? 11%? 17%?
4. Between 1800 and 1882, 17,000 labourers were brought from China to build the Canadian Pacific Railway’s passage through the Rockies. How many workers died during the building of this section: 500? 2,000? 4,000?
5. In 1898, Canada’s Trades and Labour Congress called for radical social change with a platform that included which of the following: Free compulsory education for all? A minimum wage? Public ownership of railways, telegraphs, waterworks and hydro? Abolition of the Senate?
6. A 1912 strike by 20,000 women textile workers in Lawrence, Mass., gave rise to a song that has become the anthem of women in Canada’s labour movement. What is the name of that song?
7. In the early 1900s, all provinces except Prince Edward Island required employers to compensate workers who were injured on the job. Ontario introduced the first *Workmen’s Compensation Act* to provide government compensation for injured workers in what year: 1914? 1934? 1954?
8. What was the daily pay of Canadian soldiers in the First World War battlefields: \$1.10? \$2.30? \$3.20?
9. In 1909, Sir Wilfrid Laurier created a separate department of labour, saying that it was “rendered necessary by the ever-growing dignity and importance of labour questions and labour prob-

lems.” Whom did he appoint as the first deputy minister of labour: Sir Oliver Mowat? Clifford Sifton? William Lyon Mackenzie King?

10. In 1919, prices were rising much faster than wages. Workers in one of Canada’s largest cities went on strike demanding higher wages, fewer working hours and union recognition. The city was shut down for six weeks and two strikers were killed during demonstrations. What was the strike’s name?
11. The *Old Age Pensions Act* introduced by the federal government offered a maximum yearly pension of \$240. It was restricted to seniors whose income, including pension benefits, was less than \$365 per year. When were the first old age pensions introduced: 1927? 1937? 1944?



12. During the Great Depression, 28% of Canadians were unemployed. While US president Franklin D. Roosevelt established massive job-creating public-works programs, Canada set up work camps, primarily in British Columbia. Faced with deteriorating conditions and scandalous misuse of funds by administrators, camp workers organized an “On to Ottawa Trek.” They were met in Regina by the prime minister but when talks broke down, organizers were arrested during demonstrations. Who was the prime minister?
13. For black men in Canada, it was one of the only occupations that offered steady employment. For 50 years, the job was entirely filled by black men. It was not until *Canada’s Fair Employment Practices Act* was passed in 1953 that they won the right to be promoted to other jobs and supervisory positions. Who were they?
14. Canada was the last Western industrialized nation to introduce unemployment insurance. When was it introduced?

1930? 1940? 1960?

15. In 1944, prime minister Mackenzie King passed a law giving workers the right to form a union and requiring employers to bargain with that union. That year, Saskatchewan’s newly elected government gave its own employees the same right. What was the name of the provincial party?
16. From 1948 through 1952, efforts to form a union at one of Canada’s department stores ended with the union losing by a handful of votes. In 1952, employees of Dupuis Freres department store in Montreal won a union vote. What was the name of the department store that defeated the union?
17. Saskatchewan premier Tommy Douglas introduced Canada’s first public health care program. Following a royal commission headed by Emmett Hall, the federal government faced down opposition from businesses, insurance companies and doctors to introduce a national medicare program in what year: 1958? 1962? 1966?
18. In 1951, the International Labour Federation called on governments to provide equal remuneration to men and women for work of equal value. Prior to the introduction of the *Canadian Human Rights Act* and its Equal Wages Guidelines (1977-78), what province had already adopted the principle of pay equity in its Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms in 1975?
19. On October 14, 1976, the Canadian Labour Congress led a national protest over an act introduced by prime minister Pierre Trudeau. More than a million workers stayed off the job because the measure imposed limits on the ability of unions to negotiate wages. What was the measure?
20. In 1988, the labour movement opposed a specific plan proposed by prime minister Brian Mulroney, saying that it would open the door to lower labour standards in wages and working conditions and reduce the rights to unionize and bargain collectively. The ensuing public debate went to the very core of Canadians’ rights to decide their future. What was the government’s proposal?

Quiz answers on next page

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1. 1894
2. John A. Macdonald
3. 11%
4. 4,000
5. All of them
6. Bread and Roses
7. 1914
8. \$1.10
9. William Lyon Mackenzie King
10. Winnipeg General Strike
11. 1927
12. R.B. Bennett
13. Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters
14. 1940
15. Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF)
16. Eatons
17. 1966
18. Quebec
19. Wage and price controls
20. Free trade agreement

*This quiz was prepared by the Toronto and York Region Labour Council.