

## Thank a Union Member

By: Patricia A. O'Malley

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On Monday, Americans will observe Labor Day for the one hundred and twenty seventh time. First celebrated by the Knights of Labor in 1882, Congress proclaimed it a national holiday in 1894. Unions created the day to honor the contributions of all workers – union and nonunion – to our economic and social life.

Pittsburgh's unions celebrated with a parade downtown from the beginning, except for a gap of several years in the 1970s. The Allegheny County Labor Council renewed the parade in 1982 – the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary – and it has continued ever since. Pittsburgh's parade has always been one of the largest Labor Day events in the United States, with nearly 200 groups and 80,000 people participating.

While labor unions have always celebrated Labor Day, many people are still confused about what unions do. The first unions arose in the middle ages, as artisans from the various skilled trades formed "guilds" to represent their common interests. They were stonemasons, carpenters, weavers, teamsters, and others. The old guilds gradually disbanded, but the idea didn't die. Unions resurfaced in the mid nineteenth century, after the American Civil War.

They continued to grow, especially during the 1930s. By 1960, one-third of all American workers belonged to a union. Union membership declined from the late 1970s through the 1980s due to national economic and social conditions. Now, only about 13% of working Americans belong to a union.

Labor unions brought benefits to every working person in America, whether they belonged to a union or not. They are primarily responsible for establishing the middle class. We take these things for granted, but none of them existed before the rise of the unions.

### **IF YOU HAVE:**

- An eight hour workday
- A five day work week
- Paid sick days, vacation days, and holidays
- Family and medical leave
- Health, life, and disability insurance
- A pension
- Safe and healthy working conditions
- Proper job training

**THEN THANK A UNION MEMBER.**

Unions have campaigned for the minimum wage, wage and hour laws, ending child labor, and workers' rights and privacy on the job. Wages for union workers in all types of occupations are higher than for non-union workers. If you benefit from any of these things, **THEN THANK A UNION MEMBER.**

Today, organized labor is still fighting to keep these benefits while organized business is trying to destroy them – and working families. Unions made our lifestyle possible. If you want to keep it, then support our unions.

A national or international union, such as the steelworkers, teachers, health care workers, public employees, or bus drivers, is made up of many local chapters. A worker belongs to the local chapter of the national union, such as Local 23 of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union. Fifty-six individual unions, representing 10.5 million workers, belong to the AFL-CIO – the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations. The AFL-CIO is one of the most influential organizations in the US, and has a very interesting history. The Allegheny County Labor Council is the local chapter of the AFL-CIO.

No one questions the right and wisdom of business owners to stick together but there is still debate about the value of unions. There are chambers of commerce, business owners' associations, trade associations, and all sorts of groups actively promoting business interests to the government and the public. Why should we treat workers differently? Unions represent the common interests of their members – and all workers – to the business owners, the government, and the public. As President John F. Kennedy once said: "The American labor movement has consistently demonstrated its devotion to the public interest. It is, and has been, good for all America. Those who would destroy or further limit the rights of organized labor—those who cripple collective bargaining or prevent organization of the unorganized—do a disservice to the cause of democracy."

I've marched with the Iron Workers in every Labor Day parade since 1982, and I've always had a wonderful time. So join us at the parade on Monday, and bring your family. It begins at 10:00 am and travels from the Mellon Arena to the United Steelworkers building on the Boulevard of the Allies. Participating groups begin to assemble at about 8:30. If you belong to a union, find out where to meet your group. If not, then come to watch. Wave to your friends and neighbors from every occupation. See your teachers, your mail carrier, your bus driver, and the construction workers who erect our buildings, and say "thank you".

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**For more information, go to:**

- Online encyclopedia: [www.infoplease.com](http://www.infoplease.com)
- AFL-CIO: [www.aflcio.org](http://www.aflcio.org) – This site has links to all of its member unions
- Allegheny County Labor Council: [www.pittsburghaflcio.org](http://www.pittsburghaflcio.org)
- Your own union Web site

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