

## The People Who Brought You the Weekend

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Labor Day isn't a big [day] on my calendar. Mondays are always my days off, and I have no kids returning to school on Tuesday. This weekend is another working weekend for me. And Labor Day is just sort of there, on the edges of my consciousness, meaning mostly that on Tuesday I will get three newspapers, since my papers arrive in the mail and there will be no delivery today or tomorrow.

My sense of distance from the holiday is not surprising, given my background. Dad was a state employee at management level, not eligible for union membership. And though she joined the teachers' union years later, when she returned to full time teaching, during my formative years Mom was a part time substitute teacher, also not unionized. In my family, labor unions were not credited for protecting jobs or providing safe working conditions or negotiating living wages--not first hand, anyway.

Here's the part that is curious: in my family unions were highly regarded. Whatever I learned in school about the history of the labor movement in our country was supplemented at home by an attitude of respect for the real and positive impact unions have had on the lives of American workers. Recognition and appreciation for the people who do the work that gives me the unbelievably high quality of life I have enjoyed since the day I was born was instilled in me early and often by my parents. And the political air of 1960s, 1970s and 1980s Minnesota, in which I was raised, only reinforced that message.

This was the land of Humphrey and Mondale and Eugene McCarthy. It seemed quite natural when I became eligible to join the teachers' union, during my brief year and a half as a paraprofessional with the St. Paul Public Schools, that I would do so without hesitation. And that my brother would be assistant shop steward during his time with the United States Postal Service--until he too migrated to the management side of the line. I was taken aback, dumbfounded actually, during my time with the schools, when a teacher new to the district, new to the state in fact, asked me *why* I belonged to the union. I dismissed her inquiry as evidence of the backwardness of Southerners, confident that in time Minnesota would enlighten her.

Then I moved away from the state, for grad school and internship and eventually my first full time ministry in Indiana. And Minnesota elected Jesse Ventura and then Tim Pawlenty governor. Still, I clung to my belief that Minnesota was a safe haven of progressive politics, that the upper midwest was a place where governments and

institutions looked out for workers and the poor and those on the outskirts of society. Willfully myopic, perhaps, reading the wrong news reports, failing to give sufficient consideration to news sources I consider unduly slanted, I was caught unprepared for last winter/spring's vitriolic attack on public sector labor unions in Wisconsin and a handful of other states.

My unthinking reaction to the governors' and legislatures' actions stripping public employee unions of collective bargaining rights and other protections and to those who so vocally supported those actions, was along these lines:

*what! teachers and nurses and firefighters are among the privileged elite who don't need protection? really? since when did unions become the enemy of the working class? and, most cynically, class warfare begins just this way, with the ruling class splitting the working classes and pitting them against each other!*

I didn't want to leave any room for discussion. Frankly, like many Americans, I'm afraid, often I'm not all that interested in the shades of gray, politically speaking, at least. I know what I believe. I know what's right. End of discussion. But voices break through my self created soundproof booth. The voice of the novelist whose detective hero despairs over the politics of the police union. The voices of parents whose children pay the price of inept teachers protected by rules of tenure. The voices of civil servants overworked by the shortcomings of colleagues who are likewise protected by unions. The voices of friends and thoughtful commentators (meaning the ones who don't shout) who suggest that at the very least contemporary labor unions could use some reform. The voices of economists who themselves can't agree whether or not public unions are a boon or a burden to states and municipalities. The voices of family childcare providers across the state of Minnesota who hotly debate both the need and the logistics of possible unionization. The voice of my sister in ministry, Anna Garlin Spencer, warning nearly one hundred twenty years ago against the danger of believing that organizing relieves individuals of personal responsibility and moral obligation.

The voices break through and I am forced to engage Labor Day, unions, and the changing landscape of the American work world at a deeper, broad level.

My reluctance to let go my childhood reverence for unions and their role in American society doesn't stem solely from nostalgia or refusal to acknowledge the shades of gray. I'm also acutely aware that in many places around the world still today men and women and children die in industrial accidents, are locked into factories, are paid wages woefully inadequate to meet their needs, work long dangerous hours with few breaks and limited access to fresh air, toilet facilities or potable water, and are hired and fired according to nepotism or bribery or the whims of employers. The truly life-saving

changes labor unions wrought in the lives of American workers in the nineteenth and twentieth century are desperately needed still in countries around the globe.

Labor Day, which in this country, at least for most of us with a voice in the public sphere, has become an end of the summer day off, a time for picnics and last trips to the State Fair and final hurrahs before the first day of school, and the signal for resort prices to drop to off-season rates, Labor Day could be something else altogether.

*Marketplace Money* on public radio yesterday devoted much of the hour to the topic of work. And one of the guests, I don't remember which, said, "there is dignity in all work." I've heard the phrase often enough to at first dismiss it as meaningless platitude. But I quickly reconsidered. I'm not sure but maybe, just maybe, that is what's missing most from almost all current discussions and debates and consideration of work and labor unions and the dismal job market.

The Huffington Post recently ran a piece by Lawrence Mishel, President of the Economic Policy Institute, subtitled, *Labor Day by the Numbers*. The numbers involved are staggering beyond my ability to truly comprehend but the heartbreak and sense of urgent despair comes through with piercing clarity. Here is just a small sample of those numbers:

Jobs created in August 2011: 0

Jobs created in 2011 so far: 872,000

Jobs needed to return to pre-recession unemployment rate of 5.0%: 11.2 million

Number of unemployed workers for every job opening: 4.5

A discussion of the dignity of labor will not put food in the mouths of the hungry, will not purchase health insurance, will not stop foreclosures, will not buy school supplies, will not turn on utilities shut off for lack of payment. But under the fear, under the anger, under the accusations leveled on the one hand against public sector unions and on the other hand against big business and yet another hand against big government, under the vitriol and the despair, there is pain. And I believe much of the pain springs from a sense that the jobs and the lives of the unnamed multitudes don't matter, don't really matter despite the stump speeches and the politicking and the sound bites.

If we are very fortunate, our jobs are our gift to the world. Our offering of our skill and our time and the very days of our lives, to create and serve and transform lives. And if we are but a bit less fortunate, our jobs, while perhaps not cherished manifestations of our deepest sense of self, nevertheless allow us to provide for ourselves and our family, sources of pride and accomplishment allow us to feel productive. And if we are less

fortunate still, our jobs may be nothing more than that which keeps us from becoming a statistic--one of the unemployed. But, always, at every level of employment, our jobs consume huge chunks of our lives. And if we hold, as Unitarian Universalists do, that every human being has dignity and worth, then every job has dignity and worth.

Do you remember Willy Loman's cry in *Death of a Salesman*? "Attention must be paid!" It is one of the tasks of religious community to pay attention, to *call* attention. Perhaps, for churches and temples and mosques, for thoughtful men and women of all faiths, Labor Day should be a day of calling attention to the dignity of labor and calling to account all systems and individuals who fail to honor that dignity with living wages, with job security, with advancement opportunities, with safe working condition and fair employment practices.

The end of summer must have its rituals. Picnics almost always make life a bit more enjoyable for a time. And days of rest and Sabbath renew us for days of labor. But rest loses much of its meaning, much of its restorative power, without work from which to rest. The labor movement calls itself *The People Who Brought You the Weekend*. Perhaps now it is time for labor and government and religion to bring us all a transformed work week. One characterized by fuller, more equitable employment and a reverence for the dignity of all those who labor. Amen.