

# OPINION



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*"Give light and the people will find their own way"*

## A debt to unions

It's a much-noted irony that on Labor Day nobody is supposed to work. Purists might decry this as further proof of the decadence of an affluent society; a holiday meant for reflection and expressions of gratitude to our forebears degenerates into another excuse for catching rays and grilling burgers.

The purists should know that it has always been so. The first American Labor Day, Sept. 2, 1882, was organized by one of the nation's early labor organizations, the Knights of Labor. Before the festivities, its leaders grandly predicted a turnout of more than 30,000 working men. Alas, only 10,000 showed up.

"It was said," reported The New York Times, "that the absence of many members of the organization was due to the fact that they preferred to enjoy the day in quiet excursions to Coney Island, Glen Head and elsewhere."

So much for the complaints of the purists. But it is fitting nevertheless to recall on this day our debts to the grand American tradition of organized labor and to the men and women who bravely insisted on rights we take for granted.

It's hard to believe nowadays, with participation in labor unions stagnant or declining, that once the mere idea of a workers' collective was considered subversive or un-American. The argument was furiously engaged by college professors and soapbox orators, in newspapers and pamphlets, and by the cruder means of nightsticks and blackjacks.

Organized labor carried the day because in the end its cause was understood to be just. The freedom of workers to organize, to negotiate collectively and even, under most circumstances, to withhold their labor without penalty has taken its place next to the other freedoms to worship and speak freely.

Though we take these rights for granted, we seldom invoke them any longer. But their effect is felt still in our daily lives, as one of the buffers humane people have placed around the sharper edges of capitalism. Few of the younger generation of Americans will ever carry a union card, much less walk a picket line. But they should know, on this day of all days, what they owe to those who did so in an earlier time.