

“Prologue: Labor Day Observed”
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Meriden, CT

Labor Day Sunday
September 6, 2015

Look closely at the illustration you’ll find at the top of today’s order of service. It’s caption reads: Labor Day, New York, 1882. Specifically, it was September 5, 1882, almost 133 years ago to the day. New York City’s Central Labor Union was the prime mover of this celebration—as you can see a grand procession of primarily working *men*, though women and children were surely on the sidelines. The U.S. Department of Labor reports that:

“The holiday was organized ... to exhibit ‘the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations’ of the community, and to host a festival for the workers and their families.”

This festival model spread to other cities and states, and workers began to push for a national holiday. In response, Senator James Henderson Kyle of South Dakota proposed legislation to make Labor Day a national holiday on the first Monday of September. Congress passed it on June 28, 1894, which meant that the first National Labor Day was observed just 121 years ago

However, unrest is a gentle word to describe the events leading up to the passage of this bill and the events that make up the history of the labor movement in this nation.

When I was a little girl, maybe four years old, I remember vividly the excitement I felt that my Mom and my brother, Jeff, and I were going to take the train from the small Iowa farming town of Carroll all the way to Clear Lake, Iowa to visit my aunt and uncle. It would be my first ride on a train. Dad had to stay behind for his job. Then a strike was declared. We couldn’t go, because the trains weren’t running. “Who did this?” I was angry. “John L. Lewis,” was my parents’ response. “Big Bad John L. Lewis!” I fumed. Then I saw what he looked like. Of course, huge bushy eyebrows fiercely furrowed, jowly cheeks glaring as if directly at me. Who was he? The powerful and savvy President of the United Mine Workers. Hundreds of thousands of mine workers went on strike for better pay and better working conditions, and the railroad workers soon joined them. The trains stopped. MY trip was off.

My worldview was a tad narrow at the age of four. My parents were basically anti-Union, since my Dad was a loyal—VERY loyal—employee of Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company. It would be years before I began to understand the horrific conditions in which so many of my fellow Americans worked day in and day out, night in and night out, and to empathize and act out of solidarity for their/our plight. My childhood story illumines for me how easy it is to get caught up in anti-union sentiment.

Labor Day itself took root in circumstances no less rife with conflict than the so-called Labor Movement of the 1930s or the 1940s or the Occupy Movement of the 2010s.

Back to railroad workers. Who knows what a Pullman car is? [Responses]

The Pullman car is the namesake of George Pullman, who organized the town of Pullman, Illinois as a company structured not so differently from the unjust wage system considered by our children earlier this morning. Assembly and craft workers lived in small row houses. Managers lived in small Victorian houses. Pullman and his family lived in a luxury hotel, where visiting clients and suppliers stayed when they were in town. George Pullman pulled the strings of just about everything his workers and their families did. Pullman, Illinois was like a feudal village.

In 1893 a massive depression swept the country. Pullman laid off hundreds of workers, yet demanded that they pay their rent and their company store bills. The veritable serfs of Pullman, Illinois went on strike. In solidarity, the American Railway Union, led by a young Eugene Debs, joined them. Railway workers nationally boycotted any railroad with Pullman cars. Pent-up rage erupted in rioting and violence.

President Grover Cleveland was besieged by moneyed railway executives and the national reality of trains not running. He declared the strike a federal crime. In the violence that followed, two workers were killed. By August of 1894 the strike was over, and Debs was in prison. Cleveland was in a hot spot—a fiery spot—with American workers. What to do?

It was a few months before then that Senator Kyle had submitted legislation for Labor Day as a national holiday. The time was ripe and the proposed legislation, a prime political opportunity for President Cleveland and Congress. Thus the first Labor Day was born of labor strife and apparent compromise in the aftermath of major union busting.

A holiday indeed! Labor Day, like Armistice Day, like Memorial Day, like the 4th of July, is rooted in discord and violence and an attempt to appease and to some degree gloss over the core injustices that are still pervasive in this land not quite of the free. Struggle is core to justice movements. Justice that is compassionate is still too commonly an oxymoron. On this Labor Day Sunday, may we pay close attention to the power plays afoot in our own time to quash the rights of those who would organize to demand a living wage, humane living conditions, and basic dignity for workers and their families.

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“\$15 x 2,000 – That’s all?”
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How vividly I recall the faces of New Yorkers who arrived at the Family Assistance Center on Carmine Street in the West Village. Under the aegis of the Red Cross and as an extension of my ministry at the Unitarian Church of All Souls, I was volunteering as chaplain in the aftermath of the events of that blue-sky Tuesday almost 14 years ago. New Yorkers of all ages and ethnicities crowded into the Carmine Street Y, one of the several sites transformed by the city into family assistance centers to provide support to the thousands who had been rendered homeless, penniless, jobless, grief-stricken, and traumatized.

“Where did you work?” I eventually got around to asking one young man, who came with a number of his friends whom I soon learned were co-workers. “Windows on the World,” he replied. He and his companions had come to this country from Bangladesh seeking a better life. They had found employment and a work culture they described as family at this magical restaurant atop the North Tower, the first to be hit. Now they were mourning 73 members of that family. I just listened. He and every single person I met needed to tell their story.

Eventually I ushered him toward one of the resource volunteers, who guided him through the steps that would secure assistance in buying groceries and paying the rent. The immediate future mattered most.

The opening pages of Saru Jayaraman’s *Behind the Kitchen Door*, published 12 years later, brought back instantly my interchange with this young man from Bangladesh and other workers whose windows on the world had been horrifically shattered.

Ms. Jayaraman, a young but experienced organizer of immigrant workers, had received a call shortly after 9/11 from a union leader representing Windows on the World workers. He asked her help in organizing the 250 displaced Windows workers AND 13,000 other restaurant workers in the city who had lost their jobs in the aftermath of the attacks. She learned that the owner of Windows had attended a memorial service for his employees who had perished. At that time he promised to re-hire the surviving workers once he opened a new restaurant. When his restaurant opened a few months later in mid-town, he made excuses for why he couldn’t hire them. Thanks to their union at Windows, these men and women had known some of the best wages for restaurant workers in the city; they were enraged and ready to mobilize.

Thus began a partnership between Saru Jayaraman and Fekkak Mamdouh, a young man from Morocco who had been a headwaiter at Windows and who was hired by the union that contacted Saru. What evolved over the next few months and on into today is ROC—Restaurant Opportunities Centers—a powerful grassroots organization representing restaurant workers from “behind the kitchen door” into the spaces in which Americans sit at formica counters, vinyl booths, and elegant table settings for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

What constitutes workers' rights? What constitutes fair and livable wages—most especially those of restaurant workers, who the Pew Research Center reports as comprising the largest sector of near-minimum wage workers of any industry in the country? We're talking close to 4 million people! The second largest sector of near minimum wage employees comes from grocery stores, with just under a million workers. The difference is not just in numbers but also in the structure of the minimum wage itself.

The US Department of Labor reports that:

“The federal minimum wage for covered nonexempt employees is \$7.25 per hour effective July 24, 2009... Many states also have minimum wage laws. In cases where an employee is subject to both the state and federal minimum wage laws, the employee is entitled to the higher of the two minimum wages.”

For waiters and rarely for bussers and kitchen workers who receive customer tips, the federal minimum wage is \$2.13 an hour. However, “If an employee's tips combined with the employer's direct wages of at least \$2.13 an hour do not equal the Federal minimum hourly wage, the employer must make up the difference.”

Employers heed the law often in the breach and are commonly aided and abetted by state standards in providing minimal pay to their workers. Pew Research, for example, reports that 17 states require employers to pay as low as the federal minimum wage! Only seven states require employers to pay workers the full state minimum wage *before tips*. Twenty-six states require employers to pay workers above the federal tipped minimum wage. For tipped workers in Connecticut, the minimum wage is \$9.15 an hour *including tips*. In other words, a worker who gets the federal minimum wage for tipped workers of \$2.13 an hour must make \$7.02 an hour in tips or the employer must pay the difference.

Is \$9.15 an hour a livable wage? If a person works 2,000 hours a year—that is 50 weeks a year, 40 hours a week—and presumably get paid sick days (a rarity), that's a gross income of \$18,300. This is \$6,000 below the federal poverty level for a family of four and \$1,800 below the federal poverty level for a family of three.

\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America, co-authored by Kathryn Edin and H. Luke Shaefer, was published recently. It's the subject of William Julius Wilson's piece in today's *New York Times Book Review*. Yes, in the restaurant industry and in a number of other sectors, there are thousands of individuals in this country making *less than \$3.00 an hour* given the current structure of the minimum wage. How is it that we hear politician after politician speak of the “middle class,” but there's rare, though occasional mention, of the down-and-out poor? The structure of the so-called welfare reform bill known as TANF, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, placed the real emphasis on “temporary.” It assumes that a person can get a job, that a mother or father can get and afford childcare, that the prospective worker can afford transportation to and from work, and that an employer provides paid sick days. Thousands have been relegated to the outer margins of well-being in the aftermath of this bill that served the self-righteous myopia of the haves.

“This essential book,” writes Wilson, “is a call to action, and one hopes it will accomplish what Michael Harrington’s ‘The Other America’ achieved in the 1960s—arousing both the nation’s consciousness and conscience about the plight of a growing number of invisible citizens.”

The minimum wage matters mightily, but it is only one factor in the escalating inequality that describes our nation on this Labor Day Sunday of 2015. “Escalating Inequality” describes the Congressional Study/Action Issue adopted by the General Assembly of our Unitarian Universalist Association in 2014. It’s an issue brought to the forefront of our larger UU world for a timespan of at least four years—not that it’s assumed the matter will be resolved in this time period, but time enough to mobilize congregations around this issue through access to resources for education, action, reflection, and worship. Challenging the extreme inequality in our midst is a moral imperative, grounded in our Unitarian Universalist principles of the worth and dignity of every person and justice, equity and compassion in human relationships.

Consider the words of the hymn that we frequently sing on Sunday mornings:

“Wake, now, my conscience,
with justice they guide,
join with all people
whose rights are denied,
take not for granted a privileged place...”

Letting go of privilege and sharing power in a mode of solidarity over charity are embodied in the effort to raise the minimum wage. On this Labor Day Sunday, we affirm that there are multiple factors bearing on workers’ rights: wages, health benefits, paid sick days, childcare, hiring and firing practices, consistent work schedules, and worker organizing in the form of unions. Across the board, however, an increase in the federal minimum wage would go far in reducing the escalating inequality of residents and citizens of this nation whose structures of power fall painfully short of the principles to which we presumably aspire as Americans and those principles and purposes to which we aspire as Unitarian Universalists.

\$7.25 an hour is shameful for a country priding itself on opportunity for all. \$15 seems to be the new stretch—well beyond the \$10 plus change of more recent years. Yesterday’s *New York Times* featured an editorial on the matter. Liberal and conservative candidates for president are sharply divided, with one of the liberal candidates pushing for a minimum wage of \$12 an hour by 2020—five years from now. Two other liberal candidates advocate a minimum wage of \$15 an hour by 2020. On the conservative end of the scale are those who propose an increase to \$8.75 over three years, one who advocates “market forces” as the decider, and one who supports abolishing the federal minimum wage altogether and leaving the matter in the hands of states.

The Times advocates \$15 an hour! If one works 40 hours a week for 50 weeks, without consideration for paid sick days or other benefits that would be \$15 x 2,000 hours or \$30,000 gross. The federal poverty level for a family of four is \$24,250. This sounds reasonable until we consider fair market rents for a two-bedroom apartment. The National Low Income Housing Coalition reports that figure as \$959 (obviously not in the metropolitan Northeast or anywhere on the West Coast). Specifically,

“A full-time restaurant worker, working 40 hours per week, would have to earn \$18.25 an hour to afford the two-bedroom unit.8 out of 10 restaurant workers nationwide earn less than this.”

My sentiments lie with an interfaith coalition known as the Micah Faith Table NYC. In just a few weeks they will launch the “Real Living Wage NYC Campaign.” The goal is “to ensure that *all* New York City workers receive at least \$20/hour – the wage required to meet basic needs without government subsidies.”

Some might say, “It’s just not realistic!” On the contrary, \$20 is realistic to ensure that workers in this country will not simply survive but will share in the bounty that we are culturally conditioned to hold as the promise and possibility that led so many to give up everything to come here in the first place—like the young Windows on the World worker from Bangladesh whose story I first heard at the Family Assistance Center on Carmine Street, and Fekkek Mamdouh, the Windows on the World headwaiter from Morocco who allied with Saru Jayaraman to form the Restaurant Opportunities Centers, transforming the lives of restaurant workers across the country.

What can you do? What can I do to affect an increase in the minimum wage and reverse the escalating inequality wreaking havoc in this country that should know better? In the October newsletter I promise a bulleted list of what we can do—not a five pints of blood time commitment, not a contribution to X organization, but behaviors that we can build into what we’re already doing, approaches that we can incorporate in the justice ministries already underway in this congregation, awareness that we can pass on to others by asking simple questions of waiters and those to whom they report, and practices that we can model in a moral movement toward the dignity of each and every worker.

Paraphrasing a passage from the Old Testament prophet, Micah:

“What does Love require of us, but to do justice, to love compassion, and to walk humbly with that which we deem as sacred.”

So may it be and Amen.

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