



Why is the International Day of the Worker celebrated May 1st?

In the late nineteenth century, the working class was in constant struggle to gain the *8-hour workday*. Working conditions were severe and it was quite common to work 10-to-16-hour days in unsafe conditions. In 1884, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (which later became the American Federation of Labor), proclaimed that "eight hours shall constitute a legal day's labor from and after May 1, 1886. On May 1, 1886, more than 300,000 workers in 13,000 businesses across the United States walked off their jobs in the first May Day celebration in history.

Chicago was the epicenter of the movement. In Chicago nearly 100,000 workers walked off their jobs. On May 4, 1886, a peaceful rally at the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company, otherwise known as the Haymarket strike, escalated into a violent confrontation. An unknown person threw a dynamite bomb at the police as they acted to disperse the meeting, and the bomb blast and ensuing gunfire resulted in the deaths of seven police officers and at least four civilians; dozens of others were wounded. In 1889, May 1 was designated May Day, a day in support of workers, by an international federation of socialist groups and trade unions in commemoration of the Haymarket strike.

Who came up with the 8-hour workday?

In the early 19th century Welsh textile mill owner and social reformer Robert Owen was credited. He called for "eight hours labor, eight hours recreation, and eight hours rest.

What about the 40-hour work week?

In 1926 Henry Ford popularized the 40-hour work week after he discovered through his research that working more yielded only a small increase in productivity that lasted a short period of time. The 40-hour work was considered the most effective model for productivity and employee engagement.

The shorter work week movement in Canada:

The Toronto Printers union rallied behind the 9-hour workday movement in 1872. The movement created institutions and mobilized Canadian workers. It was this issue – the need for a shorter work week – that convinced more workers that joining unions would change their lives for the better. Parliament passed the Trade Unions Act on June 14, 1872, legalizing the formation of unions to advocate for workers' rights. Canada did not adopt the 40-hour work week until the 1960s, 20 years after it was made law in the United States.