

(Tuesday, Aug. 30, 1960)

ANOTHER LABOR DAY

(by Richard Spong)

The nation on Monday (Sept. 5) celebrates its 79th Labor Day.

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SEN. JOHN F. KENNEDY, with the official indorsement of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations in his pocket, kicks off his Presidential campaign, as have Democratic standard-bearers Adlai E. Stevenson and Harry S. Truman before him, at the traditional Labor Day rally in Detroit's Cadillac Square, but the political significance of the event could easily be exaggerated. Despite the usual preference of labor's top leaders -- particularly those of the C.I.O. -- for Democratic candidates, labor's 18 million union members no more make up a cohesive political action force than is Labor Day a holiday limited to the special celebrations of organized labor.

See Daily Service of Aug. 22, 1960: "Labor in Politics."

See Daily Service of Sept. 1, 1953: "Labor on Labor Day, 1953"

Labor Day is traditionally observed by rallies such as that in Detroit, by special church services and masses, and by union picnics from Texas to beyond the Canadian border. But the chances are that Mr. Union Member and his family will spend the day much as do their neighbors -- at the ball game or the races, picnicking, fishing, swimming, or on the highways.

By the same token, A.F.L.-C.I.O. President George Meany, who makes no bones of his personal advocacy of the Kennedy candidacy, denies that there is any such thing as the "labor vote." In mid-August he asserted that it is "bunk" for any unionist to pretend that he controls "even one vote besides his own." And most certainly many union members and more of their wives voted for Eisenhower in 1952 and 1956 even though Stevenson was labor's darling. All the same, Republicans this year take quite seriously organized labor's plans to spend \$500,000 of union funds to get the 13½ million A.F.L.-C.I.O. members and their families registered.

See Report of Sept. 3, 1952: Labor and Politics (Vol. II 1952) P. 583).

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LABOR DAY was first celebrated 78 years ago by a parade and labor holiday in New York City instituted by the Central Labor Union. The situation of union labor in 1882 was still weak and tentative. Even the most optimistic labor leader of those days could hardly have anticipated that in less than four score years unions would have acquired the power they wield today.

See Daily Service of Aug. 23, 1947: "On the First Labor Day."

The chief economic goal of those early unions was the eight-hour day. Total union membership was probably around half a million, as against the 18 million of today. There was, of course, no C.I.O., and the birth of the A.F.L. was still four years in the future.

By 1882 the Knights of Labor, the first truly national labor organization, was failing to satisfy those labor leaders who represented skilled workers and wanted to concentrate on wages, hours, and working conditions. Membership was individual, not by unions, and many members were intellectuals rather than manual workers.

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SAMUEL GOMPERS' organization of craft unions, the A.F.L., founded in December 1886 at Columbus Ohio, soon eclipsed the Knights. Gompers as part of his general credo insisted that labor should keep clear of strict affiliation with any political party. And it is to Gompers and his associates that America owes its essentially middle-class concept of organized labor -- and, of course, its celebration of Labor Day as a holiday for all the people, with extremely few political overtones.

Oregon, a non-industrial state, made Labor Day a legal holiday in 1887. It is now celebrated in every state of the Union and in Canada, and its character is far removed from the May 1 Labor Day of Socialist-oriented unions abroad.