NO PREP

Labor Day and Government

Policy, Rights, and Reform

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Labor Day and Government: Policy, Rights, and Reform

The Government's Role in Labor Conflicts

While Labor Day is celebrated with parades and barbecues, its origins lie in deep conflict between workers, employers, and the U.S. government. Throughout history, the federal and state governments have been caught between two forces: protecting economic growth for business and protecting the rights of workers. At times, the government supported corporations, using police or even the military to break strikes. At other times, lawmakers passed reforms that strengthened unions and workplace protections. The balance of power between labor and government has shaped the meaning of Labor Day. This holiday reminds us that workplace

Name: Period: Date:

Labor Day and Government: Policy, Rights, and Reform

The Government's Role in Labor Conflicts

While Labor Day is celebrated with parades and barbecues, its origins lie in deep conflict between workers, employers, and the U.S. government. Throughout history, the federal and state governments have been caught between two forces: protecting economic growth for business and protecting the rights of workers. At times, the government supported corporations, using police or even the military to break strikes. At other times, lawmakers passed reforms that strengthened unions and workplace protections. The balance of power between labor and government has shaped the meaning of Labor Day. This holiday reminds us that workplace rights are not automatic—they result from laws, policies, and enforcement created after years of struggle. Whether the issue is wages, hours, or safety, government decisions play a central role in how labor disputes are resolved.

Strikes, Troops, and Federal Power

One of the earliest examples of government involvement in labor disputes was the Pullman Strike of 1894. When railway workers walked out over wage cuts, the strike spread nationwide, halting mail delivery and rail traffic. President Grover Cleveland responded by sending federal troops to end the strike. Violence followed, with more than 20 workers killed. The government's decision to side with business revealed how federal power could be used against labor. At the same time, however, Cleveland moved quickly to soften tensions by making Labor Day a national holiday in 1894. This was a symbolic gesture—an attempt to calm workers without addressing the deeper issues of low wages and poor conditions. The Pullman Strike is a perfect example of how the U.S. government walked a fine line between maintaining order and responding to the demands of workers. Later strikes, such as the Memorial Day Massacre of 1937, also showed the violent side of government intervention. In

Chicago, police opened fire on steelworkers protesting outside a plant, killing ten and wounding dozens more. Incidents like these fueled public anger and pressured lawmakers to create more balanced labor policies.

Government Policies and the Labor Marketplace

Government policies continued to shape labor after the 1930s. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 established the federal minimum wage, banned most child labor, and created overtime pay rules. These reforms reflected a growing belief that government had a responsibility to protect workers. Still, the government has often shifted positions depending on political and economic pressures. During the mid-20th century, unions grew powerful, but by the 1980s, government policies often favored deregulation and weakening of labor organizations. Today, debates over minimum wage laws, workplace safety, healthcare benefits, and the rights of gig economy workers show that the government's role remains central. Labor Day highlights these ongoing questions: how should government balance business interests with workers' rights?

Key Information: Table: Key U.S. Government Actions in Labor History

Policy/Event	Year	Government Role	Impact on Workers
Pullman Strike	1894	Federal troops used to break strike	20+ deaths; Labor Day created
Wagner Act	1935	Protected union rights and collective bargaining	Union membership expanded
Memorial Day Massacre	1937	Police used deadly force on strikers	Public outrage pushed reform
Fair Labor Standards Act	1938	Established minimum wage and overtime rules	Improved worker protections
OSHA	1970	Created workplace safety standards	Reduced workplace injuries

Case Study Excerpt: The Wagner Act of 1935

The Great Depression of the 1930s left millions unemployed, and those who kept their jobs often faced wage cuts and harsh working conditions. Strikes increased as workers demanded fair treatment. In response, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act, better known as the Wagner Act, in 1935. This law guaranteed workers the right to organize unions and engage in collective bargaining. It also created the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to oversee labor disputes. Forensic-style evidence was often used in NLRB hearings: payroll records, time sheets, and written contracts were examined to determine if employers were violating workers' rights. For the first time in American history, the federal government firmly took the side of labor by protecting union activity. The Wagner Act transformed U.S. labor relations. Union membership soared, and workers gained more bargaining power. Still, business leaders fought back, and later "right-to-work" laws passed in many states weakened unions again. The Wagner Act shows how one piece of legislation can shift the balance between government, workers, and business.

1. How did the Wagner Act change the relationship between workers and the federal government?

_____

_____

2. Why was evidence such as payroll records and contracts important in enforcing the Wagner Act?

_____

_____

Multiple Choice

1. Why did President Cleveland declare Labor Day a national holiday in 1894?

    a) To honor veterans from Civil War conflicts

    b) To encourage tourism and boost retail spending

    c) To calm worker anger after the Pullman Strike

    d) To celebrate economic prosperity

2. Which law guaranteed workers the right to form unions and created the NLRB?

    a) Sherman Antitrust Act

    b) Fair Labor Standards Act

    c) Civil Rights Act

    d) Wagner Act

3. What was the significance of the Memorial Day Massacre of 1937?

    a) It revealed violent government suppression of workers

    b) It highlighted the dangers of unsafe factories

    c) It showed how peaceful strikes could succeed without violence

    d) It led directly to the creation of OSHA

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Pullman Strike	A) Created workplace safety standards
2. ___ Wagner Act	B) Police killed steel strikers in Chicago
3. ___ Memorial Day Massacre	C) Federal troops broke up a nationwide railway strike
4. ___ Fair Labor Standards Act	D) Guaranteed union rights and collective bargaining
5. ___ OSHA	E) Established minimum wage and overtime rules

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The _____ Strike of 1894 led to the creation of Labor Day as a national holiday.

2. The _____ Act of 1938 set the minimum wage and banned most child labor.

3. The _____ Board was created by the Wagner Act to oversee labor disputes.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why did the government often side with businesses during early labor conflicts like Pullman?

_____

_____

_____

2. How did laws like the Wagner Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act shift government policy toward protecting workers?

3. Why is the government's role still important today in issues like gig work and workplace safety?