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A Free Market Conservative Celebrates Labor Day

by

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In addition to my annual messages honoring Memorial Day and Independence Day, I've often written one celebrating Labor Day. Not infrequently, I've been asked why the president of a think tank that proclaims its devotion to advancing free market, property rights, and limited government principles would do so. After all, there's no question that the celebration of Labor Day in the United States has its [origins in the late 1800s](#) in the organized labor union movement.

No matter.

For me, Labor Day is not about celebrating the organized labor union movement that played a key role in achieving the holiday's recognition, but rather about celebrating American workers and the role that *free* labor plays in creating prosperity in a *free* society grounded in a *free* enterprise system.

Viewed through that lens, Labor Day provides an opportunity to honor the dignity of work. And it also provides an opportunity to reflect on conservative principles and aspirations – economic freedom, individual responsibility, upward mobility, and national prosperity – that are intrinsically linked to the hard work of free labor.

Meaningful work is not merely a means of survival – which it often is! – but it is a pathway to self-improvement, independence, and personal fulfillment. On Labor Day, we should honor the

important role that the values of personal responsibility, individual initiative, and perseverance play in achieving success in our own laboring endeavors.

And we should acknowledge that these very same personal values are virtues that a free society must nurture and encourage if it wishes to remain vibrant and prosperous.

Crisply expressing the Lockean perspective that guided so many of our Founders, in 1847 Abraham Lincoln declared that “each person is naturally entitled to do as he pleases with himself and the fruits of his labor.” And here is Lincoln again, in his [1859 Address to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society](#), connecting his understanding of “free labor” to the opportunity for individual advancement in the American free enterprise system:

"The prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land, for himself; then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him. This, say its advocates, is free labor – the just and generous, and prosperous system, which opens the way for all – gives hope to all, and energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all."

Of course, the American economy in 2025 is much more complex than it was when Lincoln uttered those words, and in some ways certainly more challenging for American workers. No doubt the advent and proliferation of AI will present new challenges to labor just as the Industrial Revolution did. But as long as America retains its free enterprise system and protects property rights, contracts, and voluntary exchange in a rule of law regime that encourages entrepreneurial risk-taking and rewards individual achievement, there will be ample opportunities for American workers to advance, to innovate, and to enjoy rising standards of living. This was the Founders' vision, and Lincoln's too.

I have no qualms on Labor Day celebrating organized labor's contributions – at least those of private sector unions operating consistent with the law as opposed to public sector unions, oxymoronic self-contradictions pitting members of the public against the public the government is supposed to represent.

But, for me, a free market conservative, celebrating Labor Day means celebrating the millions of individual laborers – whether employees, entrepreneurs, independent contractors, or whatever – whose combined efforts as individual laborers contribute to making the American economy the most prosperous on the planet.

* Randolph J. May is President of the Free State Foundation, an independent, nonpartisan free market-oriented think tank located in Potomac, Maryland. The views expressed in this *Perspectives* do not necessarily reflect the views of others on the staff of the Free State Foundation or those affiliated with it. *A Free Market Conservative Celebrates Labor Day* was published in *Real Clear Markets* on September 1, 2025.