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Labor Day 2026: A Philosophical Perspective

by

Randolph J. May *

Labor Day is intended to celebrate the American worker, and rightly so.

But here's a question worthy of consideration on Labor Day 2026. What, exactly, does a worker have a right to after he has performed his labor?

The place to begin is with John Locke, the English philosopher widely regarded as one of the most influential Enlightenment thinkers. In his [*Second Treatise of Government*](#), first published in 1689, Locke famously declared: "Every man has a property in his own person; this no body has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say are properly his." Elsewhere in the *Second Treatise*, Locke defined property broadly: "Lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name property." He contended that when a person mixes his labor with something in the natural world, he makes it his own property.

This is one of the foundational ideas behind the protection of private property rights that is embedded in key provisions of the U.S. Constitution. The Founders understood that "Property" is not simply about land, buildings, financial instruments or bank accounts. More fundamentally, it's about an individual's right to enjoy – and to benefit from – the lawful fruits of his own labor.

Or as the Declaration of Independence puts it most memorably, it's about the self-evident Truth that each of us possesses the unalienable Right to "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." As I have explained [elsewhere](#), Thomas Jefferson understood, following Locke

and his fellow Virginian, George Mason, that the Declaration's "Pursuit of Happiness" phraseology encompassed protecting the means of acquiring and possessing private property.

Whether it is a tradesman selling his time, strength, and skill to build a new home, a farmer cultivating his soil for planting summer corn, or an artist or author transforming an idea into new painting, book, movie, or song, in each instance it is human labor that creates something of value. A free society does not merely permit these activities, but it protects an individual's right to engage in them and reap the rewards of his labor. If labor is a principal source of wealth, then the ability to own, save, invest and exchange the fruits of labor is indispensable to securing economic freedom.

As the [Socialism Conference 2026](#) is underway this weekend in Chicago, it's not helpful to deny the surging appeal of socialist ideology, especially among the young and among self-identified members of the Democratic party. This disturbing surge in attraction should prompt serious reflection regarding a proper understanding of why we celebrate Labor Day.

The default Socialist position is to view private property as an obstacle to equality, an obstacle to be overcome by granting the government ever-greater authority to redistribute property more "fairly." In contrast, the Classical Liberal (now today's Conservative) position is concerned about excessive government control interfering with what people may freely choose to do with the products of their labor.

In other words, by definition and deliberate design, Socialism – whether by increasing authority over wages, investments, or the outright ownership and the disposition of private property – or all the above – necessarily aims to concentrate more power in the hands of government politicians. Under the banner of "equality" or "fairness" or similar slogans, the power of Adam Smith's "invisible hand," which underpins free markets and the voluntary exchange upon which free markets depend, is supplanted by increasing government coercion.

This is why protecting private property rights from the Socialist imperative of increasing government's control over them, and over all aspects of our lives, is ultimately about more than mere "economics." It's about facilitating human flourishing and fostering human dignity by allowing individuals to reap the rewards of their own labor in a free society that respects free markets.

So, as we pay tribute to workers on Labor Day – everyday toilers of all kinds in all manner of everyday endeavors – we should not only honor their labor, which we certainly should. At the same time, we should recall Locke's fundamental insight: a person's labor is his own property and the fruits of his labor cannot be treated by government, however casually, as belonging to everyone else.

* Randolph J. May is President of the Free State Foundation, a free market-oriented think tank in Potomac, MD. 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.