

While many Marylanders enjoy a long Labor Day weekend, and mourn the end of summer with perhaps one more visit to the beach, it is also appropriate that we take time this weekend to recognize the intended significance of this important holiday.

In 1882, the first Labor Day festivities celebrated the creation of the labor movement and the social and economic achievements of the American worker. We have since taken this day to pay national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country.

When this holiday was first proposed, people celebrated with a street parade to exhibit to the public “the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations” of the community, followed by a festival for the recreation and amusement of the workers and their families. This became the pattern for the celebrations of Labor Day, and this is certainly true throughout Maryland this holiday weekend.

In the first parade held in New York City, between 10,000 and 20,000 people marched, celebrated, and sought to bring greater awareness and change to the sad conditions that existed for far too many American workers. For the following few years - as the growth of labor organizations spread - the unofficial holiday continued and took root across the country. Finally, on June 28, 1894, Congress passed legislation to honor the contributions and achievements of America’s workers and make the first Monday of every September, Labor Day, a federal holiday.

Today, Labor Day continues to serve as a day to celebrate the hard labor that has made this country the most productive and prosperous nation in the world. Our observance of this holiday also reminds us that the struggles of

working Americans are far from over. Despite our nation's leadership in the global economy, millions of Americans worry that the American Dream is no longer within reach. They are working harder, but living paycheck to paycheck, struggling to make ends meet and going deeper into debt because of the high cost of health care, energy, housing, and education.

Just last week, the Census Bureau released data confirming that these worries are all too real for millions of Americans and underscore the need for a new direction on the kitchen table issues that face American families. In 2006, people working full-time saw their earnings drop again for the third year in a row, and real household income of working-age families declined by \$2,500.

The Census report also showed that despite modest improvements in the poverty rate, the number of Americans without health insurance nationwide rose by nearly 2 million in 2006 rising to a record high 47 million. The number of children without health insurance grew 600,000 to nearly 8.7 million children. Since 2001, the number of uninsured Americans has increased by nearly 7 million.

Increasingly, working families are losing insurance coverage through their employers, leaving Americans who are already struggling with weak wage growth and decreasing income to pay for the shortfall. Furthermore, the Census Bureau reports that the percentage of people in Maryland without health insurance coverage increased from 13.4 percent in 2005 to 13.8 percent in 2006.

Already, the new majority in Congress has succeeded in moving America in a new direction, to help create greater opportunity and a chance for prosperity for all Americans, not just the privileged few. This year, we have worked to make the economy more fair, passing the first federal minimum wage increase in a decade; to spur American innovation to ensure our

nation's global economic competitiveness with the America COMPETES Act; and to restore fiscal responsibility by reinstating 'pay as you go' spending for the first time in six years in Washington, and balancing the budget by 2012. Additionally, both the House and Senate have passed legislation to provide health coverage for more low-income children and to make college more affordable by providing the largest expansion in college aid since the GI Bill.

America's workers are the lifeblood of our nation, and their hard work, innovation, creativity, energy, and determination has made our country as strong as it is today. It is our responsibility to provide the necessary resources to empower the American worker so that they have the highest quality of life and standard of living. In my opinion, that is how we can best observe the Labor Day holiday.