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Labor Day labors for meaning
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, VA.—Labor Day on the farm is a work day.

I read the Sunday papers a day late. (I call this work, because it's arguably associated with writing a column.) I read Monday's online papers, which are not papers. (More bone-wearying effort.)

I walked three miles to prepare my heart for the heavy-lifting required in digging 1,000 words out of the mental muck. I then built this column single-handedly out of nothing but air, a task that would have stumped Hercules who never even managed to split an infinitive.

I carefully evaluated other needed farm chores, including cleaning out the hay barn and scraping paint off the house, both of which I've been planning for years. I decided both required more research.

Labor Day passed quietly. I did not bargain collectively with my wife. She did not picket my tax-deductible home office. All of our grievances remain unsettled, despite the availability of procedures for their resolution that typically involve compliments and candles.

The first Monday in September -- Labor Day -- is a federal and state holiday. It was ginned up in 1894 as a gesture of reconciliation toward unions after President Grover Cleveland broke a railroad strike with a federal injunction and 12,000 troops. Workers at the Pullman Palace Car Company near Chicago stopped work when wages were cut to reduce production costs in the face of falling orders from the Panic of 1893. One thing led to others—more strikes, a lockout, strikebreakers, arson. Strikers were killed; property was destroyed; union head Eugene V. Debs was jailed for six months; and the country was spooked.

Cleveland, a Democrat who favored limited government and clean elections, found himself fighting the little guys for whom he had some sympathy. After crushing their strike, he gave organized labor a day off with which to celebrate themselves...and their defeat.

I've had different experiences with unions over the years.

I wrote a book about labor-management relations in the coal industry and the effort of miners in the late 1960s and 1970s to bring fair play and democratic procedures into their union. Reformers, I found, are as touchy as the entrenched scoundrels, and they dislike gadflies with the same intensity. Fire

in the Hole could have been a best-seller if more people had bought it.

I did one thing for organized labor that may have been useful. An officer of the United Mine Workers slipped me two years of board minutes from the Union-owned National Bank of Washington in the early 1980s. The documents showed fishy insider loans to directors, some of which proved to be even worse than they first smelled. It appeared that the Mafia had their eyes on the bank and the Union's pension fund.

A D.C. detective looked at this material and said I was lucky to be still walking around. A local motorcycle gang did Washington-area Mafia hits, he said.

I started carrying my girlfriend's loaded .38 in my briefcase. (She, too, was a pistol.) In my best practice session, it took me 17 minutes to get it out.

I got this story to reporters at The Baltimore Sun and The Washington Post, both of which ran investigations that put things right.

I've arbitrated contract grievances between employers and local unions for 25 years. I've worked with many honorable individuals on both sides, along with a few who were not. Some grievances have merit, others don't. Whatever its failings, a grievance procedure gives both sides a day in an impartial court of their choosing...and a decision that settles the fuss.

Unions try to improve wages, benefits and job conditions. Their efforts increase employer costs. If these rise to the point where the employer is no longer competitive, companies respond by shutting down, or substituting technology for labor, or moving production facilities abroad, or reducing the workforce, or demanding give-backs or reconstituting themselves as union-free shops. This has happened in autos, steel, rail, shipping, coal and rubber, among others. Many unions understand the long-term consequences of "winning" too much.

Public-sector employers faced with taxpayer resistance and smaller appropriations may move toward using technology instead of expensive labor. Police departments may shift toward surveillance cameras in place of cops walking a beat. The familiar education model of gathering students into large buildings for classroom instruction may be substantially deconstructed and made cheaper by using television and computers to allow many fewer teachers to instruct students at home. Whether less-labor-intensive and cheaper alternatives will be as good, better or worse remains to be seen.

Unions may find their base narrowed to service sectors, such as health care, hotels and restaurants, and jobs, like construction, that have to be done here.

The conventional wisdom has been that unions are voted in when employers behave badly toward their employees. If that is true, white-collar employment may be a new arena for some form of unionization to the extent that “Dilbert” reflects reality.

Unions have not been much concerned with the quality of job content. Matthew B. Crawford’s critique of modern work -- [Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work](#) (2009, \$25.95) -- is an erudite philosophical grumble against the degradation and deskilling of most jobs. His alternative is the “cognitive richness of manual work,” self-employment on a small scale, repairing things for “good ends.”

Crawford runs an independent motorcycle shop. He is a kind of half-Marxist, half reactionary Ph.D. who finds value in pondering the content of his daily labors. He responded to his own “Dilbert” world of directing an oil-industry-funded think tank by seeking out a small crack in the system and turning it into a habitat that allows him to survive by doing what he likes. Most of us are not so lucky or skilled.

Farmers have occasionally formed unions to bargain with commodity purchasers or shippers. Most, however, see themselves as self-employed business owners, competing, in a sense, against other producers like themselves. Cooperatives, on the other hand, are a cousin to unions and are well-established in the countryside.

One reason, perhaps, that explains why farmers don’t form unions is that farm work has meaning in Crawford’s sense. It’s a lot of problem-solving, using both intellectual and manual skills. It requires experience. It has a good end.

Union organizing is the antecedent of community organizing. If you want to understand why President Obama let the Congressional “community” thrash and hash in search of a health-care plan, you simply need to look at how community organizers build a movement. It’s a different way of leading, and its roots go back to the Pullman strike.

Labor Day has come and gone. This frees me to start thinking once again about getting paid for writing. In turn, I will necessarily spend more time basking in the quality of my own excuses, which are cognitively rich and constantly in need of repair.

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