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Reflections on our holiday and the 1963 March on Washington

As we savor the last moments of summer, with our children returning back to school, the end of August and first Monday in September causes us to reflect on labor and human rights.

Labor Day is a holiday created for the worker. And this August, we reflected back on the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

What progress have we made and where do we stand?

Labor Day

While there is debate about who should be credited as the founder of Labor Day, what is not in dispute is that the first Labor Day celebration took place in New York City on Sept. 5, 1882.

The Central Labor Union approved the proposal, an effort to honor the workers for their labors.

Urged on by the Central Labor Union, other cities adopted Labor Day.

With the strong uprising of unions in the late 1800s, the movement for a National Labor Day strengthened and, on June 28, 1894, Congress passed an act making the first Monday in September of each year Labor Day.

While the form Labor Day originally took of parades followed by picnics where speeches were given is no longer the norm, the day is still set aside to reflect upon the achievements of our country's workers and the

labors they perform.

A march on Washington

On August 28, 1963, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom took place. The organizers of this political rally focused on civil and economic rights for African Americans.

The march preceded the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but the march is credited with being the spark that led to both of those historic civil rights acts.

The theme of the march was "jobs and freedom."

The purpose of the march was to address the economic and political difficulties experienced by the African-American community. Estimates vary on the number of attendees to the march, but the crowd was believed to be 250,000 or more in attendance.

The march took place in the backdrop and as part of the civil rights movement. In June 1963, President John F. Kennedy gave his famous speech on civil rights and made his promise to pass civil rights legislation.

Unfortunately, he would not live to see the Civil Rights Act of 1964 pass. The same night that Kennedy gave his speech, Medgar Evers was killed in Mississippi.

The planning committee for the march had a number of goals they eventually agreed on for the march, including a minimum wage, civil rights legislation and other economic initiatives such as a public works program for



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the unemployed. The emphasis was on economic progress and civil rights.

A number of labor leaders spoke as well as civil rights movement leaders, including John Lewis, who represented the Students Nonviolent Coordinate Committee. Lewis gave a speech that was "watered down" from the original speech that the SNCC had distributed and intended to give.

Last up on the program schedule was Martin Luther King Jr.

King's speech became known as the "I Have a Dream" speech. Considered one of the greatest speeches in our nation's history, King envisioned a future in which we would be able to live together, work together and live as one nation, concluding:

"[W]e will be able to speed up that day when all of God's

children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'"

What would King think?

As we reflect on these events that end our summer and the 50th anniversary of the march, we can say that much progress has been made on civil rights and equality.

Yet there is more work to be done.

And our state faces very high unemployment rates, with seasonally adjusted rates in the Chicago-Joliet-Naperville area being higher than 9 percent.

In Illinois as a whole, the unemployment rate in June 2013 was 9.2 percent, the second-worst state in the nation.

For African-Americans, the unemployment rate in Illinois was 16 percent last year and for Latinos, it was 10.2 percent.

These numbers are consistent with national numbers, where minorities face much greater unemployment than non-minorities.

While King might reflect favorably on many of the developments of the last 50 years, and the Labor Day founders might do the same over the 130-year period, much work remains ahead of us as a nation, to reach that day when all are working and the "dream" has been fulfilled.