CELEBRATING THE IMMIGRANT CONTRIBUTION TO LABOR DAY

ON THE 126TH ANNIVERSARY OF LABOR DAY,
ELLIS ISLAND HONORS SOCIETY CHAIRMAN NASSER KAZEMINY
CELEBRATES ITS IMMIGRANT HISTORY

New York City, NY, June 5, 2020: Nothing dims the light of summer like back-to-school sales and the start of Labor Day weekend. While many parents will welcome the new school year, few will pay much attention to this federal holiday other than attending socially-distanced barbecues or taking last-minute get-a-ways. What few Americans remember, however, is that Labor Day is not solely meant as a day of fun and recreation, but rather as a day of commemoration for the contributions of workers who for hundreds of years have helped America succeed.

The modern American labor movement began at the turn of the 19th century, just as immigration to the New World was reaching its peak. In the 1880s, the Pullman Company actively sought out immigrant and African-American workers to run its namesake railroad cars. In 1893, after years of poor working conditions and a severe pay-cut, Pullman workers organized the first workers union, and soon after, America’s first workers strike. Over 30 Union men lost their lives fighting on behalf of their fellow laborers. This cycle would be repeated in the Coal Strike of 1900, where dozens more were killed fighting for a fair wage and their shot at the American Dream.

Ultimately, their efforts caught the attention of the American public who soundly backed the workers in their fight. Since the 1900s, dozens of workers’ rights we enjoy today were fought for and arbitrated through workers unions. These include laws against child labor, 8-hour workdays, overtime pay, minimum wages, safer working conditions, and sick leave. Prior to labor reforms, workers, both immigrant and native, suffered 70-hour work weeks under dangerous conditions, while scions of industry-built empires of wealth. These immigrants built our national parks and highway systems, the Transcontinental Railroad, New York City Subway System, and many of our homes, schools, and places of worship.

Unfortunately, today, many immigrants still suffer from workplace exploitation and institutionalized racism. This is why celebrating and highlighting the achievements of immigrants remains crucial. Even in the face of adversity, immigrants and their children continue to add to the economic prowess and social and cultural diversity of the United States, a fact commemorated each year at the Ellis Island Medals of Honor ceremony on Ellis Island.

In addition to honoring immigrants and their descendants who have built successful careers and philanthropic endeavors, the Ellis Island Medals of Honor remind us all of the importance of continued pathways for legal immigration. A Brookings Institute report found 45% of all new businesses are started by immigrants or their children, including 55% of America’s billion-dollar startups, and 15% percent of the American economy is contributed by immigrants.