



Labor Day is a Celebration of Our Workforce, Past and Present

By Senator Jay Rockefeller

August 29, 2014

In West Virginia, Labor Day is a celebration of the economic backbone of our country, the men and women who make up our workforce, and the labor union members who came before us and fought for the rights workers enjoy today. So many of those victories like safe working conditions, a living wage, and the 40-hour work week were hard-fought here in West Virginia and will continue to benefit Americans for generations to come.

During my time in public service, I've strived to honor the dedication, sacrifices and accomplishments of our nation's workforce through fair policies. A few to mention include legislation that protects coal miners' pensions and health care; Buy America legislation that keeps keep our steel mills running; and, legislation that makes sure women are provided equal pay for equal work.

The actions I've taken in the Senate, and before that as Governor of West Virginia, are rooted in my time as a VISTA worker in the small coal mining community of Emmons. That's where I first met coal miners who, like so many of the men and women who make up West Virginia's workforce, are hardworking, honest, and caring people. They took me in, fed me, and shared their personal stories with me. From then on, I promised West Virginians and our coal miners that I would always fight for them.

One of the most important steps we've taken in recent years, on behalf of the nation's coal miners, has been the establishment of new rules to prevent Black Lung disease. Unfortunately, this debilitating and deadly disease, which some have considered a thing of the past, is again on the rise in coal mining communities, including those in West Virginia. The new rules, which I was proud to announce alongside Secretary of Labor Thomas Perez in Morgantown in April, will help save lives and improve the quality of life for current and future generations of miners.

Protecting our miners from Black Lung disease is a significant achievement that I have been fighting for, for several years. But, like so many of the workplace rights and protections that we enjoy today, it would not have been possible without the sacrifices of those who came before us. Well before I was elected to the Senate, West Virginia was ground zero in the battle to protect miners from Black Lung disease. Strikes by coal miners in West Virginia, along with their

demands for safer, healthier conditions, were instrumental in pushing Congress to pass major legislation in 1969 that combats the disease and compensates miners who are suffering.

Such important milestones are what Labor Day is meant to celebrate – rights that were fought for, and won, by employees who joined together and said “enough is enough”. Labor Day is also a reminder that we still have so much more to accomplish for our workers. We can’t take for granted the rights they have, and we must always work together to strengthen and expand them for current and future generations of workers. That’s one of the reasons I’m continuing to work on legislation to make sure that miners are treated fairly in the Black Lung claims process and they’re awarded the benefits they need and deserve.

During Labor Day weekend, I hope all West Virginians will join me in honoring the achievements and contributions of our workforce. One of the best ways to do this is to stand up for our workers and make sure we are giving them the protections they need and deserve.

Just as I promised the people of Emmons more than 50 years ago I would be a champion for them, I promise that I will continue to be a champion for all of West Virginia’s workers. Our world-class workforce deserves nothing less.

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