Labor Day looks a little different this year

• By Julie Lind

This year, Labor Day will look very different for most of us. The usual activities — barbecues, parades, gatherings with family and friends — will be muted, postponed or canceled altogether. But Labor Day has always meant more than that — it is a day to honor the contributions and achievements of American workers.

In the late 1800s, many Americans, including children, worked 12-hour days, seven days a week, doing backbreaking work for little pay in often unsafe conditions. The drive to change those circumstances is what led to the first Labor Day parade, held in New York City on Sept. 5, 1882. Nearly 10,000 workers participated in the march with the demand for an eight-hour workday as their rallying cry. Over the next 12 years, similar demonstrations took place across the nation, with various municipalities recognizing Labor Day as a holiday until Congress finally declared it a national holiday in 1894. Though we wouldn’t get the eight-hour workday until 1938 with President Roosevelt’s signing of the Fair Labor Standards Act (which also created the right to a minimum wage and outlawed child labor), labor unions have been united in the fight for fair wages, decent hours and safe working conditions since the 1886 founding of the American Federation of Labor by Samuel Gompers.

Labor Day is also often viewed as the de facto kickoff to campaign season, which too will look very different. The pandemic means there will be fewer people canvassing your neighborhood and more campaign ads following you throughout the internet, amongst other changes. As we face the challenges that come with this new type of campaigning, we recognize that this election is unique in its urgency. From our local races to our state ballot measures on up to the presidency, your vote this year is crucial. That is why accessible, safe and seamless voting is more important than ever.

Just last month, we celebrated the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, but as we know many Black women and other women of color were unable to exercise their constitutional right to vote for decades more. We must continue their fight to ensure no one faces barriers at the ballot box, because some still exist even today. While we have made many important advancements in access to voting in California, including online voter registration, same-day voter registration and motor voter to name a few, there is still work to be done.
Some recent advancements include Assembly Bill 860, by Assemblyman Marc Berman, D-Palo Alto, which has enabled us to conduct all-mail ballot elections statewide, extends the deadline for the Elections office to receive ballots to 17 days after the election from three, and guarantees that voters can track their own ballots throughout the process. State Constitutional Amendment 4, by Assemblyman Kevin Mullin, D-South San Francisco, on the ballot this year as Proposition 18, would allow 17-year-olds to vote in a primary election if they’ll be 18 years old by the general election.

These new options are critical given the global pandemic that we’re in the midst of, but 17 days still may not be enough if we don’t fully fund the U.S. Postal Service. Ballots will begin hitting mailboxes Oct. 5, and must be postmarked by Tuesday, Nov. 3 to be counted.

Though all voters will receive a ballot in the mail, not all will choose to vote that way. There will still be vote centers throughout every county, staffed by local residents trained to help voters cast their ballots. But many more poll workers are needed to ensure our county never experiences the six, seven, or eight-hour lines we saw at some vote centers during the primary as that is also a form of voter suppression. We need to ensure that all in-person voting options are fully staffed, fully functional, fully secure and safe for both workers and voters.

We say during every election cycle that this is the “most important election we’ve ever faced,” but that is absolutely true this year. We must elect individuals to office that will stand with and stand up for working people, that will fight for a society and a government that is truly equal and equitable, and who will be true leaders for our communities as we work to rebuild after the pandemic. We must defeat ballot measures that seek to oppress us and support those that will truly effect positive change. The future of work, the future of our nation, and the lives and livelihoods of all Americans depend on it. People fought, bled and died to assure our right to vote, and are still fighting and bleeding and dying for that and other rights today.

To honor those sacrifices, let’s fulfill our civic duty by ensuring that we are registered to vote, encouraging our friends and family to register to vote, and by casting ballots in every election. As the famous quote often attributed to Thomas Jefferson goes, “We do not have government by the majority; we have government by the majority who participate.”

Vote for the change you want to see in the world and be part of ensuring that it happens. And remember — Election Day isn’t Nov. 3. It’s Oct. 5, 6, 7 and every day up until the 3rd. I’m ready; are you?

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