

Robert Fisher-Hughes Statement to US House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
in support of H.R. 2317 “The Peter J. McGuire Labor Day Landmark Act”

Peter J. McGuire, known to friend and adversary alike during his lifetime as PJ McGuire, has been called a “forgotten giant.” His great achievements in a life of only 53 years read are astonishing and inspiring, particularly as P.J. McGuire entered work at the age of 10 to support his family. He became a carpenter and developed a concern for working people that guided his life and career through constant struggle, aided for most of his time only by his own intellect and eloquence, amazing personal energy and a single-minded determination. This career and mission to agitate, educate and organize to better the lives of working people in America came at great personal cost to McGuire, but his accomplishments are today taken for granted only because he was willing to pay those personal costs.

Peter J. McGuire’s genius for organizing first appeared during a time of depression and wide unemployment. When his early efforts to obtain relief for the suffering ended in tragic failure in 1874. McGuire did not yield but instead sought other means and other places to carry on.

In 1881 in St. Louis, Missouri, working as a carpenter and organizing carpenters, P.J. McGuire rose to leadership and called for the formation of a national carpenters’ organization.

The Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America was formed later in that year at a convention in Chicago in answer to his call. McGuire was elected the first General Secretary of the organization and was its only full-time staff for a number of years. Under his leadership the Brotherhood grew into one of the largest and most powerful unions in American history.

In his position, P.J. McGuire united disparate carpenters’ unions across the country, negotiated settlements of strikes and labor actions, conciliated disputes among organizations, facilitated improved standards for the carpentry trade, went on speaking tours in dozens of cities at a time drawing crowds of hundreds and thousands and inspiring increased solidarity, and all the while operated the executive offices of the Brotherhood, carrying on extensive correspondence and editing and publishing the organ of the Brotherhood, The Carpenter.

P.J. McGuire also played a key role in the formation of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions as a founding officer and in its subsequent reinvention as the American Federation of Labor along with his friend and colleague Samuel Gompers.

P.J. McGuire was a champion of the eight-hour work day movement from his earliest involvement in the labor movement. He made the adoption of the eight-hour day standard a principal objective of his Brotherhood and the Federation. The Federation led national campaigns for the adoption of the eight-hour standard in 1886, and, with greater success, in 1890, under more direct leadership of McGuire’s Brotherhood of Carpenters. These efforts led to many thousands of workers receiving the benefit of the 8 hour standard and set the precedent for it later ubiquity.

Peter J. McGuire’s most famous achievement was his role in the creation of a new holiday to honor the working people, Labor Day. McGuire called for setting aside a day to celebrate the working people at a leadership meeting of the Central Labor Union of New York on May 8, 1882. The first official observance of Labor Day occurred later that year with a massive parade, speeches and a picnic centering

on Union Square in New York. Among the speakers at the parade was Peter J. McGuire. McGuire subsequently advocated regularly in *The Carpenter* for the new holiday and its celebration by working people. The holiday spread through observance by working families across the nation, then by adoption by individual states and was finally designated nationally by act of Congress signed by President Cleveland in 1894. McGuire's role has earned him the title "Father of Labor Day."

It is acknowledged that a competing claim has been asserted that a labor leader affiliated with the more politically radical Knights of Labor, Matthew Maguire, was the "father of Labor Day." This claim never surfaced before the national recognition of the holiday in 1894, many years after the role of P.J. McGuire had been publicly acknowledged without dispute. Matthew Maguire never appears to have made the claim on his own behalf, but the claim was made by his hometown newspaper in Paterson, NJ, without much support and with much ambiguity. Matthew Maguire's claim remains historically unproven at best, possibly based more on the role he did play in the organizing of the first Labor Day parade and picnic rather than in its conception.

P.J. McGuire's own career in the labor movement ended in 1902 as his health failed and as a new generation of leadership with very different ideas pushed its way into leadership amid charges of irregularity.

McGuire died in February 1906, his dying words an expression of concern for his union members. He was interred, finally, at Arlington Park Cemetery in Pennsauken Township, outside of Camden, NJ, where he had lived the latter part of his life. The ceremonies attendant on his interment, affected by the shadows cast by his ouster from the labor movement, were shamefully scanty. However, it soon became clear that the labor movement as a whole and the rank and file particularly, would not forget P.J. McGuire.

Later in the year of his death, Peter J. McGuire was honored by a massive granite memorial stone provided for by the Central Labor Union and the members of his own former local of the Carpenters.

The stone includes inscriptions depicting the seal of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America and noting his role as founder as well as "also Father of Labor Day."

For 113 years since Peter J. McGuire's burial, each and every year ceremonies of varying scale are held to mark the coming of another Labor Day. The grave has been the site of Labor Day visits by labor leaders without fail, but also by Mayors, Governors, Congressmen, Senators, candidates for office, and Secretaries of Labor, as well as clergy and countless union members and the public.

In 1952, two ceremonial gatherings were held, the first in August to dedicate a new memorial to Peter J. McGuire, featuring a statue of the labor leader and with a broad colonnade behind it inscribed with his accomplishments as founder of the UBC and Father of Labor Day. The second gathering for Labor Day began the new tradition of holding the public ceremonies not at the nearby gravesite now crowded by neighboring graves but at the new memorial where speeches and wreath layings have continued without fail.

Other honors marking the achievements of Peter J. McGuire and his importance to working men and women have included the 1942 christening of a Liberty Ship in the name of Peter J. McGuire upon its launch at the Kaiser shipyards in California to serve in carrying war material during World War II.

In 1952 Camden NJ saw the dedication of the Peter J. McGuire Gardens, a Federal housing project of 368 units for low income families of East Camden.

A stamp honoring the important role of labor and Labor Day itself was issued by the Postal Service in 1956 first from the Camden, NJ Post Office. Descendants of Peter J. McGuire were received prior to the official release at the White House by President Dwight Eisenhower.

In 2004, Peter J. McGuire was admitted to the national Labor Hall of Fame of the US Dept of Labor, since renamed the Hall of Honor.

In 2018, the Peter J. McGuire Gravesite and Memorial were entered in the National Register of Historic Places as well as the NJ Register. This is an unusual honor for a memorial and gravesite and resulted from extensive historical research and a conclusion that no other surviving site closely identified with his life and career marks the transcendent historic significance of the life and career of P.J. McGuire.

The accomplishments of P.J. McGuire as an organizer and founder of early labor organizations, his work through them to achieve labor standards we observe to this day, and his documented role as the Father of Labor Day all call for the recognition of the Gravesite and Memorial contained in H.R. 2317 and I trust our representatives will give appropriate consideration and support to it.