

# Election Day ballot will let you celebrate Labor Day on Nov. 3

By Rick Casey-September 8, 2020

It has been eight years since Eric Cantor, then the Republican majority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives, sent out this Labor Day tweet: “Today, we celebrate those who have taken a risk, worked hard, built a business and earned their own success.”



*San Antonio has a long, sad history for workers. Two modest measures before voters in November can help change that. Credit: Scott Ball / San Antonio Report*

That may be whom Cantor and many of his colleagues celebrate on Labor Day, but not the majority of Americans.

Unfortunately, neither do the majority of Americans celebrate laborers on Labor Day.

There was a time when we did. In 1882 workers in New York City turned out more than 10,000 laborers from a wide variety of trades for the first Labor Day parade. By 1894, when Congress and President Grover Cleveland established the first Monday in September as a national holiday, 23 states had passed their own Labor Day laws and Labor Day parades drew large crowds around the country. In the first half of the 20th century, popular culture celebrated laborers with legends ranging from John Henry to Rosie the Riveter.

That had changed by the time Ralph Nader became a hero of America’s masses with his 1965 book, *Unsafe at Any Speed*. We were identifying ourselves as a nation of consumers, not of workers.

The industry in which I worked for 50 years, the news media, played a role in the transition. Its economic model was based on advertising. Advertising provided all the revenue for TV and radio and somewhere in the neighborhood of 70 percent for newspapers.

Advertising was all about selling us things. It rarely portrayed us as workers. We were defined by what we bought, not by what we made. (That model is falling apart as Facebook, Google, and other internet companies suck up a huge share of advertising revenue.)

This self-identity is only one of many factors that have led to the huge and growing income gap that has been shrinking America's middle class, many of whom have found themselves lining up at the San Antonio Food Bank because their incomes were barely matching their expenses before COVID-19 hit. Still, properly appreciating the role of workers – and valuing ourselves as workers – would be a great boost to addressing the challenge of rebuilding the middle class.

We are, at least, giving lip service to the “essential workers” during the pandemic. Our expressions of appreciation, however, do not go into the pockets of these people, who include many at the lower income levels. It's safe to say many of the men and women delivering our food not only don't make much money but also lack health insurance. This makes their work double scary.

San Antonio has a long history of depending on low-wage workers, a working class cohort that worked hard but didn't make much money. Its massive pecan industry in the mid-20th century relied on more than 10,000 workers, mostly Hispanic women who worked in substandard conditions for \$4 a week and less.

In my first daily newspaper job at the defunct San Antonio Light in 1967 I made the union wage of \$78 a week, just under \$2 an hour, during my senior year in college. Rookie reporters at the San Antonio Express and News made \$67 a week. For perspective, when I returned to St. Louis after graduation, I was paid the minimum \$135 a week at the weekly newspaper of the Catholic archdiocese.

In 1976, when a corporate relocation consulting firm was hired to prepare a report on San Antonio's strengths and weaknesses in attracting new businesses, it listed low wages as one of its assets.

In recent years there have been efforts to support workers at the bottom of the economy. Workers at some major hotels have earned wages as high as \$17 an hour, assisted both by their union and by a pre-pandemic shortage of applicants.

About five years ago, **COPS/Metro** sought and won “living wage” minimum pay for City workers, resulting in raises for about 20 percent of the civilian workforce. They won similar measures from Bexar County, and some school districts followed suit.

More recently City Council reluctantly passed an ordinance requiring city businesses to provide paid sick leave for workers after progressive groups MOVE Texas and the Texas Organizing Project collected a whopping 140,000 signatures to put the matter on the ballot if Council didn't pass such an ordinance. The measure, however, has already lost two rounds in court and is likely to be nixed by the state Supreme Court. The high court has overturned a similar Austin ordinance, saying it violates state law by amounting to a city-mandated increase in wages.

Now two measures on the Nov. 3 ballot offer San Antonians the opportunity to again help lower-rung workers. Both involve a one-eighth-cent sales tax that for 20 years has provided funding to buy development rights to protect sensitive lands over the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone.

The first ballot measure would transfer those funds to provide about \$154 million over the next four years for a job training program projected to boost the incomes of up to 40,000 workers. That's an aggressive goal, but what gives it credibility is that its approach is based on Project Quest, a jobs training program designed by COPS/Metro 28 years ago.

**Project Quest** has drawn national attention as one of the most successful of job training programs. This is partly because of its “wraparound services” that help participants overcome obstacles that can knock participants out of other programs. It provides rent and utility funding for those who need it and has reserves for emergencies such as car repairs. Another factor is that it works with community colleges to train participants in such fields as medicine and information technology that are established to be in demand.

The money generated from the Nov. 3 vote would put participants either in Project Quest or in programs modeled on it.

Interestingly, it was COPS/Metro and their sister organizations around the state that persuaded the Legislature back in 2001 to authorize local governments to spend money on job training and early childhood education. That same law, the Texas Better Jobs Act, permitted San Antonio voters to approve Pre-K 4 SA in November 2012. The highly successful preschool program is up for renewal on the ballot.

The other pro-worker measure on the ballot would assign the one-eighth-cent revenues to VIA after four years. In a way, that is making up for an earlier mistake when city leaders originally asked voters for only half a cent for VIA rather than the full 1 cent that state law allowed and most large cities took.

VIA transports thousands of low-income workers, with the commutes taking egregiously long for many of them. Supporting our essential worker heroes means giving them more reliable public transportation and more time with their families.

And what about the aquifer protection program that is losing its one-eighth-cent funding? It's a good program and deserves to be continued. But its supporters, mostly well-educated environmentalists, have much more political power than low-income workers, many of whom received lesser educations because of family histories and less affluent zip codes. I'm confident that environmental activists can garner the political support to keep the program going.