

JAMAICAN LABOR DAY



The national holiday, officially recognized since 1960, is celebrated on May 23 annually to commemorate the 1938 labor rebellion, where workplace disturbances highlighting wealth inequities broke out across the British West Indies.

The year 1938 brought with it significant unrest. Protests, strikes, riots, and industrial action were the order of the day islandwide. Workers wanted better working and living conditions, but for that to happen, they needed better wages. Eventually, things came to a head at the Kingston Waterfront when the United Fruit Company workers left the job. They needed a spokesperson and called on St. William Grant, who enlisted Sir Alexander Bustamante's help. Both were advocates of workers' rights and hammered away at bringing their plight to national attention. In 1961, Premier Norman Washington Manley replaced Empire Day (May 24), which celebrated Queen Victoria's birthday, with Labour Day (May 23). Empire Day was replaced with Labor Day because the island became an independent nation, and it was more relevant to mark the events leading to the genesis of the country's labor movement.

A typical Labour Day in Jamaica sees citizens sprucing up a national monument, their community center, a school, or a church in the area, refreshing a pedestrian crossing; or even landscaping their yards. Labor Day themes were introduced in 1989 and are geared towards promoting national involvement in the holiday observance. The purpose of the themes is to assist groups and individuals in coordinating Labour Day activities. The themes cover various issues, such as health and the environment, youth and the community, respect for the elderly, road safety, and tree planting. The overarching theme for Workers' Week and Labour Day 2023 is: "Plant a Tree... For Life", with the mission to "Promoting Climate Change Mitigation, Food Security & Road Safety."

