

Workers United's Edgar Romney to Lead New York's Labor Day Parade as Grand Marshal

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EVERY DAY IS LABOR DAY: When [New York's](#) Labor Day Parade gets under way on Sept. 9 — five days after the actual holiday — Workers United secretary treasurer Edgar Romney will act as this year's grand marshal.

"I've been in the labor movement for more than 50 years and there are probably not too many things that I haven't done. But I've never been a grand marshal before," he said.

Romney has, though, been in nearly every one of the city's Labor Day parades since 1968. "The problem with marching in a parade is you don't get to see much of it," he said. "The thing that has been moving to me over the years is the enthusiasm of the people who come, not only union members, but their family members as well. People understand the purpose of it — to demonstrate that this is a worker's day. Workers need to celebrate that, come together and deal with a lot of the issues that we deal with."

From the mid-Seventies until the late Eighties, there were typically 2,500 garment workers in the parade. "We represented 30,000 workers in Chinatown alone," Romney said. [New York](#) apparel [manufacturing](#) declined further after 9/11 when the closing of 14th Street gave many firms added incentive to shift production offshore, he added. "We lost 4,000 members in Chinatown because of that. A lot of companies had a reason to go overseas, particularly those who were [manufacturing](#) here in New York City. They just stayed there for the most part."

His parade ensemble — shirt, jacket, pants, shoes and "Grand Marshal" sash will be union made. The 300-person Workers' UNITED SEIU garment workers will join him on the march up Fifth Avenue. Members of the Workmen's Circle will also be part of the Labor Day Parade coalition. New York was the first to honor Labor Day in 1882 — 14 years before it became a national holiday.

This year's garment workers' contingency will carry posters and banners to highlight the plan to secure a Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire memorial. One hundred forty-six workers died in the 1911 blaze, which was the deadliest industrial disaster in the city's history. Gov. Andrew Cuomo's office has vowed \$1.5 million for the effort, Romney said. "We want to thank him and also promote the idea so that more people know what we are doing and why, because that fire changed the nature of the city. Our hope is to have the permanent memorial ready by the commemoration in March," Romney said. "We will also need some money to maintain it."

As one of the leaders who approached former Mayor Ed Koch about the need for garment center zoning that was later enacted in 1987, Romney said, "The problem is that none of the administrations ever enforced it."

From his standpoint, city officials — including Mayor Bill de Blasio — didn't fully understand what the entire garment center ecosystem was all about. As a member of the Garment District Steering Committee, which Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer organized, Romney said the mayor had not done "very much due diligence" before recommending the move to Sunset Park. While some think securing 300,000 square feet in the garment center for apparel production would suffice and others are lobbying for one million square feet, Romney suggested 750,000 square feet.

“For the past 10 years, maybe more, the real estate industry has been pushing the mayor very hard to lift the zoning. The real estate industry understood the ecosystem, but they didn’t really care. They wanted to lift the zoning so then they would be able to re-rent those properties for significantly more money,” Romney said. “It’s on hold. I think the city will review it again. We hope to have another discussion and hopefully come up with a viable solution for all of the stakeholders.”