The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire; Tragedy, Triumph and its Legacy of Labor Laws

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Oppression and corruption in the workplace were at their height during the early 1900s, leading to perilous conditions and setting factories on a path bound for disaster. On March 25, 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City caught fire, tragically killing one hundred forty-six workers and becoming the deadliest industrial disaster in New York City history.¹ The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire led to a triumph for American workers resulting in improvements to workers’ rights and fire safety and impacting the modern United States.²

The years preceding 1911 welcomed an influx of European immigrants to the United States. As many as 10,000 people passed through Ellis Island every day during the peak of immigration between 1900 and 1914.³ The majority of these immigrants traveled from Italy, Poland, and Russia; areas where persecution ran rampant, driving thousands of citizens out of their homelands.⁴ This sudden population influx caused an increased need for employment opportunities. However, many of the immigrants were unmarried women skilled only in sewing, thus creating high demand and fierce competition for the limited spots in the workplace.⁵

Simultaneously, a new vision of the modern woman was sweeping the nation: fashion being reimagined daily. Among the styles highest in demand was the shirtwaist: a long-sleeved, high-collared blouse.⁶ The shirtwaist represented women’s new independence and equality in society.⁷ Interest in the shirtwaist inspired over 450 shirtwaist factories in New York alone.⁸

⁵ ibid.
⁷ ibid.
The surge in immigrants and the high demand for the shirtwaist created the perfect storm for deplorable factory working conditions. The vast number of unemployed New Yorkers allowed employers to hire only those willing to work the hardest for the lowest pay: children, teenage girls, and women. In many factories, such as the Triangle Shirtwaist, workers’ weekly income - after laboring thirteen hours a day, seven days a week - stood as low as seven dollars. Factory owners concerned themselves only with their personal profit rather than the health and safety of their employees. The owners of shirtwaist factories across New York soon became among the wealthiest of their time by placing their employees in dangerous circumstances to gain the most profit.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory had conditions no different from countless other factories in New York. The Asch building, which the Triangle Factory occupied, was an old storage warehouse repurposed into a factory with limited modifications made. The few windows were shut, darkened with dust; the air difficult to breathe. Denied bathroom breaks, the workers were forced to urinate in their chairs, adding to the unsanitary conditions that spread disease. “...The shops are unsanitary - that's the word that is generally used, but there ought to

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8 De Angelis, “Chapter 1.”
be a worse one used.” describes Clara Lemlich, a Triangle Factory employee. The employees worked as fast as they were able; they were paid by piecework, meaning the workers’ wages depended upon their speed and the number of pieces made. The workers slaved away from seven thirty in the morning until nine o’clock at night, returning home with their meager pay. With few windows, the absence of fire sprinklers, and locked doors to prevent employees from leaving early, disaster was inevitable.

With harsh conditions and employers, workers turned to unions with hope for workplace improvements. Unfortunately, the early unions’ attempts were predominantly unsuccessful. The American Federation of Labor (AFL), founded in 1881, served as a “union of unions” to an array of industries. The AFL helped form numerous smaller unions, including the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) in 1900, the same year the Triangle Factory opened. Soon after employment at the Triangle Factory, many employees joined the ILGWU. The ILGWU led multiple strikes and picket lines fighting for safer conditions and fair pay. The first major women’s garment workers’ strike organized by the ILGWU was “The Uprising of the 20,000”, in which 500 of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory’s employees joined over twenty thousand striking women. However, many strikes, including “The Uprising of the 20,000”, left workers in an even deeper plight than before. Scabs robbed strikers of their jobs; union leaders

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
22 Marrin, p. 77.
were thrown into jail, and yet little workplace improvements were made. Few company owners or government officials acknowledged the workers’ pleas; those who did made minimal adjustments. However, the Triangle Shirtwaist owners ignored the workers’ protests; improvements to the factories would decrease profits. “A great majority of the people who occupy the various establishments would rather take a chance on loss of life than to spend five or ten dollars to prevent it…” explains a former New York City fire chief. The owners needed motivation to justify the cost of improvements, and no incentive for change had presented itself.

On Saturday, March 25, 1911, at the Triangle Factory, the inevitable disaster unions had been lobbying to avoid occurred. Fortunately, many of the workers were Jewish and held the Sabbath holy, meaning they did not work on Saturdays. Consequently, on that day, roughly 250 workers occupied the Asch building, as opposed to the typical 500. The Triangle workers were getting ready to leave in the final minutes of the work day. Suddenly, screams rang through the Asch building. A cigarette deposited in a scrap bin sparked a fire on the eighth floor that quickly spread. Firemen and citizens came to the street corner watching in horror as the fire ladder reached only to the seventh floor, useless to the workers trapped on the higher levels. The plight of the Triangle workers had just begun.

News of the spreading fire traveled quickly throughout the workplace and soon the entire company dissolved into hysteria. Inside, the factory was in a panicked frenzy as women crowded

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23 Mohr, Lillian Holmen. “Chapter 5, She Retained Her Maiden Name.” Francis Perkins, "That Woman in FDR's Cabinet!", p. 48
24 Mohr, p. 48.
25 DeAngelis, “Chapter 1.”
the elevator meant to hold ten but carrying more than twenty with each trip.29 Pushed beyond capacity, the elevators made only four journeys before breaking down.30 Once the elevators broke down, workers were pushed into the still open shafts by the terrified crowd. Those unable to escape the chaos by the elevators hurried down the narrow staircase getting pushed by those behind them only to find the doors locked, sealing their chance of escape.

The most prevalent cause of death was the inescapable staircases blocked by locked doors. The Triangle Factory owners had adopted this hazardous practice following a series of thefts and protests by employees.31 “I turned the knob this way and that… I couldn’t open it… I seen the flames were too strong…” recalls Katie Weiner, a survivor of the fire.32 The trapped employees trampled each other desperately searching for survival.

With primary methods of escape blocked, the employees were forced back into the flames. Some found the fire escape, flimsy and only reaching as low as the second floor, forcing the women to jump. Many survived the jump with only broken limbs; others were not so lucky. It was not long before the fire escape was rendered useless and the only option was to jump from the top floors of the building. Roughly sixty deaths were a result of jumping from eight, nine, or ten stories high.33 In less than twenty minutes, the top floors of the Asch building had been destroyed with damage totaling one hundred fifty thousand dollars, equivalent to almost four million dollars today34 and leaving one hundred forty-six men and women dead.35

29 De Angelis;“Chapter 2.”
30 ibid.
31 COURT OF GENERAL SESSION OF THE PEACE,. Criminal Trial Against Triangle Owners. 1 Sept. 1911, 14 March, 2019 <digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=triangletrans>.
32 Seifert,. p. 129.
As a result of their criminal negligence co-owners of the Triangle Factory, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, were accused of manslaughter of the first and second degree. \[36\] The trial began on December 30, 1911 and spanned eighteen working days. \[37\] After less than two hours of deliberation, the jurors reached a not-guilty verdict. \[38\] However, more than twenty-three families of the victims later sued Harris and Blanck for the death of their family members. After a three-year battle, \[39\] the two men eventually paid each plaintiff seventy-five dollars, equivalent to less than one thousand dollars today. \[40\] In comparison, Harris and Blanck received an insurance payout of four hundred dollars per deceased, demonstrating the advantage of the rich and powerful in society. \[41\] Nevertheless, the outrage following Harris and Blanck’s acquittal increased the public’s motivation for change in a way that would not have occurred had the verdict been guilty.

The events of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire opened the public’s eyes to the conditions and neglect in factories throughout the country. The lingering horror, as well as new understanding obtained from survivors’ testimonies, motivated the working class to protest for their rights. Frances Perkins, a crucial player in the reformation following the fire, explains:

There was a stricken conscience of public guilt, and we all felt that we had been wrong, that something was wrong with that building, which we had accepted or the tragedy never would have happened...Moved by this sense of stricken guilt, we banded ourselves together to find a way by law to prevent this kind of disaster... \[42\]

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35 Seifert, p. 35.
37 ibid
40 www.in2013dollars.com
41 ibid.
On March 26, 1911, the day following the fire, the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) assembled seeking justice not only for those who died in the fire but for all employees. During the meeting, a group of twenty-five individuals, including Perkins, was formed to “improve conditions of safety in working places.” Soon after the formation of the WTUL group, ILGWU’s Local 25 organized a protest and funeral procession to occur on April 5, 1911. Over 120,000 reformists and grievers flooded New York City’s streets in protest and mourning. Organized by the WTUL’s group of twenty-five and spurred on by the April 5 protest, a large collection of citizens and immigrants gathered in the Metropolitan Opera House on May 2. The motive for the meeting being to establish a group to investigate factories and convince the legislature to force change.

The reformists discussed how their efforts could create lasting impact. As Alfred E. Smith, a member of Tammany Hall and an attendee of the gathering explains, “If the legislature does it, the legislature will be proud of it, the legislature will listen to their report, and the legislature will do something about it.” Smith encouraged Perkins and the other members to involve the government. The leaders turned to Tammany Hall, a prominent, if often corrupt, political organization to gain government support. The team was wary of approaching Tammany Hall as recruitment attempts prior to the Triangle Fire had failed. However, because of

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43 Mohr, pp. 44–45.
44 Ibid.
45 Marrin, p. 129.
46 Mohr, 44-45
47 Marrin, p. 136.
Tammany Hall’s reliance on Irish immigrants, whom were most affected by the fire, Tammany Hall’s supreme boss, Charles F. Murphy, complied.\(^49\)

With the powerful Tammany Hall on their side, the team’s reformation efforts continued. The group petitioned the New York State government to create the Factory Investigating Commission (FIC). Its purpose being to explore factory conditions regarding workplace safety.\(^50\)

The New York State Governor, John Alden Dix, signed the bill into law and created the commission on June 30, 1911.\(^51\) The team immediately launched their investigation, beginning in New York.

The commissioners reported treacherous conditions: useless and non-functioning fire escapes, open flames, contamination of products by ill workers, and children forced to labor until they passed out from overwork and exhaustion.\(^52\) Additionally, the investigator concluded that the deplorable conditions were not always a result of corrupt and malicious factory owners. “In many cases the manufacturers themselves were unaware of the conditions under which they required their employees to work, or ...did not realize their evil effects... They took these conditions as a matter of course.” explained the investigators in their preliminary report.\(^53\)

However, the commission repeatedly viewed disastrous conditions during their missions. The FIC investigated a total of 3,385 factories from 1911 until its closing in 1915.\(^54\)

\(^{49}\) Marrin, p. 136.


\(^{51}\) Von Drehle, 212–213.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.


\(^{54}\) Marrin, pp. 143.
Motivated by the horrors seen in New York factories, the team lobbied the legislature for change. They pushed twenty-five bills addressing each of the points found lacking in the Asch building. The bills focused on the deficiencies of factories by requiring precautions that are now common in modern day American workplaces: fire drills, unlocked doors, and automatic sprinklers. Along with fire precautions, laws demanding appropriate lighting, safety switches on machinery, improved sanitary conditions and ventilation were also created. Not stopping there, a series of bills protecting women including work hour restrictions, night shift options, and proper maternity leave followed. Children under fourteen were banned from slaving in sweatshops. Driven by the tragedy of the Triangle fire, a total of thirty-six laws were passed, a clear triumph for workers’ rights.

The advocates realized the importance of creating lasting change, not just temporary policies. To enforce the new standards, the state hired over 120 full-time inspectors. To ensure continued lobbying for safe and healthy workplaces, a law was introduced to form the Department of Labor (DOL). Congress passed the bill creating the DOL on March 4, 1913. The Department of Labor’s purpose is "to foster, promote and develop the welfare of working people, to improve their working conditions, and to advance their opportunities for profitable employment." The tragedy of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire sparked the first step in American factory reform with the triumph of thirty-six fire and labor laws, along with the

55 Von Drehle, pp. 213.
56 Marrin, p. 136.
57 Marrin p. 136.
58 Mohr, p. 60
59 Von Drehle, pp. 216
60 ibid.
61 www.dol.gov
creation of reform organizations such as the Department of Labor, which still continue their work in modern America.\textsuperscript{62}

The new laws forced companies to adopt fire and health precautions and protected against child labor, long working hours, and unfair pay. These changes cost businesses fortunes and decreased their profit. Businessmen, enraged by the effect the new laws had on their businesses and profits, traveled to neighboring states searching for less strict legislation.\textsuperscript{63} However, news of the tragedy spread to other states within weeks. This, in conjunction with the triumphant reform in New York State, inspired states across the United States to enhance their fire and labor laws.\textsuperscript{64} The enactment of the laws influencing American workplaces extended to over twice as many states as prior to the fire (Appendix).\textsuperscript{65} From Washington to Texas to Illinois, the laws born out of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire reform soon forced themselves into legislatures across America.\textsuperscript{66}

Because of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, the first significant steps were taken for workers’ rights. Following the years of reform spurred by the Triangle Fire, laws were created that added precautions and improved hazardous conditions resulting in fewer factory fires and deaths.\textsuperscript{67} The battle for labor justice and safety in the workplace continues in the modern United States. Though sweatshops and oppressive factories remain today, many organizations, including

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{63} Marisco, pp.63
\textsuperscript{64} “Factory Bill Passes.” \textit{Democratic Banner}, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88078751/1911-05-05/ed-1/seq-1/.
\textsuperscript{65} \textit{SUMMARY OF THE REPORT ON CONDITION OF WOMAN AND CHILD WAGE EARNERS IN THE UNITED STATES}, 1915, p. 431, \textit{SUMMARY OF THE REPORT ON CONDITION OF WOMAN AND CHILD WAGE EARNERS IN THE UNITED STATES}.
\end{flushleft}
the Department of Labor, continue their work against unfair and dangerous conditions in the workplace.\(^{68}\)

Factory workers’ rights and safety were jeopardized by oppression and horrendous conditions in the early 1900s. The neglect of employees’ health and safety in factories created an inevitable disaster. On March 5, 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City went up in flames killing 146 workers.\(^{69}\) This tragedy sparked reform and led to the triumphant passage of thirty-six labor and safety laws in New York and eventually led to the passage of similar laws across the United States.\(^ {70}\) The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire opened the nation’s eyes to the injustices in factories. The resulting reform prevented countless deaths, protected workers’ rights, and set America on a path of progress.

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\(^{68}\) “Lessons We Are Still Learning.” *NYCOSH Journal*.

\(^{69}\) “After Three Years, They Get 75 Dollars Each.” *The Day Book*, 12 Mar. 1914.

### LABOR LAWS AND FACTORY CONDITIONS.

#### PROGRESS OF LEGISLATION AFFECTING THE EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN (WITHOUT REGARD TO AGE) AND CHILDREN, 1908 TO 1915.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject of labor legislation</th>
<th>States having laws Jan. 1, 1908</th>
<th>States first enacting laws in specified years</th>
<th>States having laws, 1915</th>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4, 3, 3, 2, 2</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
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<td>15</td>
<td>3, 4, 3, 3, 2</td>
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<td>16-hour day for women in factories</td>
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<td>3, 4, 3, 3, 2</td>
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<td>Mothers’ pensions</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>Factory inspection</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>1, 3, 10, 4, 7</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Also the District of Columbia; employment forbidden only during school time in 3 States.
2. Also District of Columbia.
3. Applies only to mercantile establishments and bakeries in 1 State.
5. Law of Arizona applies to bakeries, laundries, mercantile establishments, hotels, restaurants, and telephone and telegraph offices; factories are not mentioned.
6. United States law of May 30, 1908, covering Federal employees, was first compensation act.
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