

## **1. Before the uprising – the factory, labor, and community**

In the late nineteenth century New York City emerged as the nation's center for garment-making, producing well over 60% of all the clothes manufactured in the country. One in every three wage workers in the city worked in garment manufacture and the industry played a major role in the economic life of the city. Millions of immigrants, mostly Italians and Jews from eastern Europe, came to the city to find work in this field. Young women predominated in the more than 6000 small sweatshops and growing number of what were thought to be "modern" factories. But in this ruthlessly competitive industry, workers endured low wages, long hours, unhealthy conditions, and speed-ups across the industry, including at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, one of the newer modern factories that produced dresses for women.

## **2. The Uprising of the 20,000 and the WTUL**

Two years before the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, Triangle had been in the news and in the minds of New York's garment workers. In November, 1909, 20,000 mostly young women who sewed shirtwaists went out on strike, in protest against the demands of their bosses to work longer hours, at lower pay. They also pointed out the rampant policy of the owners of locking the doors from the outside, to prevent workers from slipping out early. Members of Local 25 of the recently created International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, they faced fierce opposition, particularly from the owners of the Triangle factory, which even after other employers eventually settled with the workers, refused to do so. The striking women, however, did win over a group of well-off New York women

who constituted themselves as the Women's Trade Union League and provided support, moral, financial, and legal to the strikers.

### **3. The Fire**

The fire, one of the largest industrial tragedies in American history, broke out on March 25, 1911. It claimed the lives of 146 workers, most of them women, who either succumbed to the fire or jumped to their deaths. Working on the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of the Asch Building, the women who sewed ladies' blouses, the workers found themselves trapped in the locked building, which became engulfed in flames after a bin of scraps ignited under the table of one of the cutters on the eighth floor. With no alarm system, no orderly system of leaving the building, and no safe and open exits, the building became a death trap for these young women who had come either by themselves or with their families to America to make a better living.

### **4. The Rescue**

At least eight fire wagons responded to the blaze. When the first arrived the firemen saw what they assumed were piles of fabric on the Greene Street pavement. They soon realized that these piles were bodies of young women garment workers who had jumped to their deaths. With the factory consumed by flames and the ladders unable to reach the upper floors workers continued to jump to their deaths, tearing the nets that the firemen had put in place as a crowd estimated at 10,000 watched in horror. More than 50 New York University law students in a lecture class on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor of the adjacent American Book Building ran a ladder to the Triangle building's roof and saved scores of workers. In all 146 workers died, 56 were burned beyond recognition, and seven were never positively identified.

## **5. Funeral and Mass Demonstration**

Outrage and grief swept New York City. The Women's Trade Union League organized a memorial at the Metropolitan Opera House on April 2, 1911. Rose Schneiderman trembled as she told the audience "the only way the [garment workers] can save themselves is by a strong working-class movement."

On April 15, The International Ladies Garment Workers called for a citywide day of mourning for the day of the funeral. More than 120,000 marched in the funeral procession, with another 250,000 lining the route.

## **6. The Trial**

A month after the fire the District Attorney determined the door to Asch Building's ninth floor stairway had been locked so that workers could not escape the blaze. Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, co-owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, were indicted for manslaughter. Defense attorney Timothy Sullivan challenged this finding. He questioned the credibility of the surviving workers asserting that they had been rehearsed by the prosecutor and the ILGWU to say that their escape route had been blocked. Judge Thomas Crane instructed the jury that conviction required clear and convincing evidence that the defendants knew that the door was locked. Blank and Harris were acquitted after less than two hours of jury deliberation. When they were released outraged workers blocked the courthouse hallway. Blanck and Harris had to be escorted through the adjacent prison to the street as a angry crowd shouted "murderers." As New York did not have a workers compensation law many of the survivors filed civil lawsuits. Each plaintiff was eventually awarded \$75.

## **7. State Response**

Three months after the fire Governor John A. Dix signed a law creating the Factory Investigating Commission. Headed by state and future United States Senator Robert F. Wagner, the commission interviewed 222 witnesses and inspected 1,836 factories. Most of its recommendations were promptly enacted into law by the New York State Legislature. The result was 36 statutes that regulated workplace fire safety and ventilation. During this reform moment, the state passed its first laws regulating workplace sanitary conditions, the length of the workweek for women and children, and the minimum wage.

## **8. Aftermath: the ILGWU and the Labor Movement**

The ILGWU built on the public outrage over the Triangle fire to organize all workers in the industry. Within two years of the strikes and mass protest, the union had organized nearly all New York City garment workers, winning higher wages, health benefits, vacations and path-breaking unemployment benefits. In the face of enhanced public sympathy for the workers following the tragedy, manufacturers and the union found ways to work together in forging a moderate alternative. At a time when the Left also made more radical demands, the ILGWU contract, which stabilized the industry, provided a basis for modern labor management relations.

## **9. The New Deal**

Secretary of labor Francis Perkins, the first woman appointed to a cabinet position, described the Triangle Fire as “the day the New Deal began.”

Profoundly affected by the sight of workers’ bodies hurtling to the ground,

Perkins served alongside Robert Wagner on the Factory Investigating Committee. The two subsequently collaborated to develop the pioneering labor legislation of the new Deal: the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 that advanced workers' rights to organize and bargain collectively and the National Labor Relations Board established by the Wagner Act of 1935 which provided legal protection and guaranteed workers the right to organize in the union of their choice.

## **10. A Century Later**

A century later the workforce in garment manufacturing remains mostly immigrant, but workers now come from South and East Asia, Mexico and other parts of Latin America. They face both new and old conditions. Federal agencies such as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and state and federal provisions for workmen's compensation testify to the legacy of labor reform set in motion by responses to the Triangle Fire. Nonetheless, many of the conditions of the early 20th century continue into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century fewer than ten percent of American workers belong to unions, and sweatshop conditions with inadequate safety provisions much like those which Triangle workers endured persist.