

Remembering

The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire



Adapted from <http://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/index.html>

INTRODUCTION

The fire at the Triangle Waist Company in New York City, which claimed the lives of 146 young immigrant workers, is one of the worst disasters since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Near closing time on March 25, 1911, a fire engulfed the 8th, 9th, and 10th floors of the Asch Building, occupied by the Triangle Waist Company in New York City, causing the death of 146 workers within 18 minutes. The call to fire stations went out at 4:45 P.M. Firemen rushed to the scene but were unable to save workers trapped by locked doors or unable to negotiate doors opening inward. Many jumped to their deaths or perished inside the burning building. The firemen's ladders did not reach above the 6th floor, nor did the water hoses. The nets were insufficient to blunt the workers' falls. Others perished in the collapse of the fire escape ladder, which did not reach the ground. The public outcry over the tragedy mounted, fueled by rumors that the doors were locked and by a sense that the owners' greed prevented the adoption of basic fire and safety measures.

This incident has had great significance to this day because it highlights the inhumane working conditions to which industrial workers can be subjected. To many, its horrors epitomize the extremes of industrialism. The tragedy still dwells in the collective memory of the nation and of the international labor movement. The victims of the tragedy are still celebrated as martyrs at the hands of industrial greed.

SWEATSHOPS & STRIKES BEFORE 1911

The Triangle Waist Company was in many ways a typical sweated factory in the heart of Manhattan, at 23-29 Washington Place, at the northern corner of Washington Square East. Low wages, excessively long hours, and unsanitary and dangerous working conditions were the hallmarks of sweatshops. Even though many workers toiled under one roof in the Asch building, owned by Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, the owners subcontracted much work to individuals who hired the hands and pocketed a portion of the profits. Subcontractors could pay the workers whatever rates they wanted, often extremely low. The owners supposedly never knew the rates paid to the workers, nor did they know exactly how many workers were employed at their factory at any given point. Such a system led to exploitation.

Many of the Triangle factory workers were women, some as young as 14 years old. They were, for the most part, recent Italian and European Jewish immigrants who had come to the United States with their families to seek a better life. Instead, they faced lives of grinding poverty and horrifying working conditions. As recent immigrants struggling with a new language and culture, the working poor were ready victims for the factory owners. For these workers, speaking out could end with the loss of desperately needed jobs, a prospect that forced them to endure personal indignities and severe exploitation. Some turned to labor unions to speak for them; many more struggled alone. The Triangle Factory was a non-union shop, although some of its workers had joined the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union.

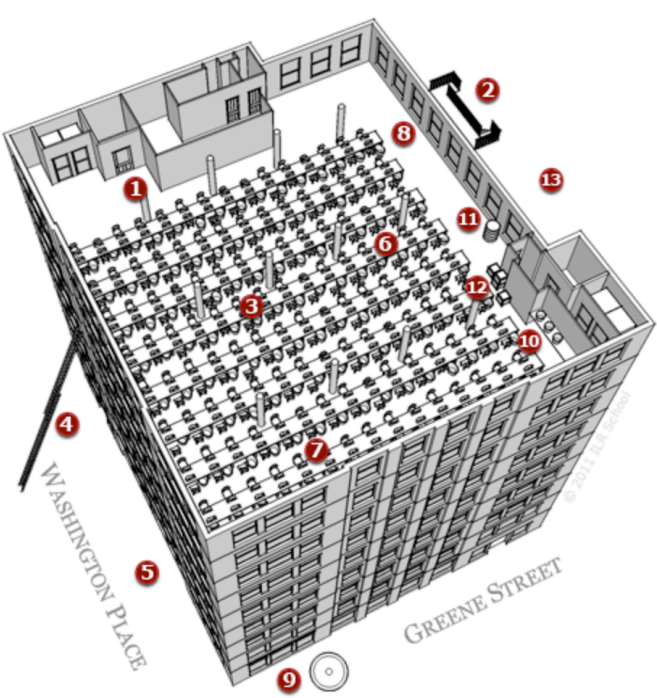
New York City, with its tenements and loft factories, had witnessed a growing concern for issues of health and safety in the early years of the 20th century. Groups such as the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) and the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) fought for better working conditions and protective legislation. The International Ladies' Garment Workers Union organized workers in the women's clothing trade. Many of the garment workers before 1911 were unorganized, partly because they were young immigrant women intimidated by the alien surroundings. Others were more daring, though. All were ripe for action against the poor working conditions. In 1909, an incident at the Triangle Factory sparked a spontaneous

walkout of its 400 employees. The Women's Trade Union League, a progressive association of middle class white women, helped the young women workers picket and fence off thugs and police provocation. At a historic meeting at Cooper Union, thousands of garment workers from all over the city followed young Clara Lemlich's call for a general strike. With the cloakmakers' strike of 1910, a historic agreement was reached, that established a grievance system in the garment industry. Unfortunately for the workers, though, many shops were still in the hands of unscrupulous owners, who disregarded basic workers' rights and imposed unsafe working conditions on their employees.


FIRE!

Near closing time on Saturday afternoon, March 25, 1911, a fire broke out on the top floors of the Asch Building in the Triangle Waist Company. Within minutes, the quiet spring afternoon erupted into madness, a terrifying moment in time, disrupting forever the lives of young workers. By the time the fire was over, 146 of the 500 employees had died.

What Went Wrong?



How did a 'fireproof' building become a fire trap? This model represents problems that existed before and during the fire that caused so many people to lose their lives on the 9th floor.



FIRE HAZARDS

- 1 Locked door to the stair well
- 2 Rusty fire escape that collapsed
- 3 Cluttered work spaces
- 4 Short ladders only reached 6th floor
- 5 Not enough water pressure
- 6 Long wooden tables became obstacles
- 7 Wicker baskets full of scraps
- 8 Oily floors spread the fire quickly
- 9 Fire nets failed to catch jumpers
- 10 No sprinkler system, only pails of water
- 11 Flammable barrel of oil
- 12 Boxes crowding the exit
- 13 Lack of a required third staircase

The Triangle Fire tragically illustrated that fire inspections and precautions were woefully inadequate at the time. Workers recounted their helpless efforts to open the ninth floor doors to the Washington Place stairs. They and many others afterwards believed they were deliberately locked -- owners had frequently locked the exit doors in the past, claiming that workers stole materials. For all practical purposes, the ninth floor fire escape in the Asch Building led nowhere, certainly not to safety, and it bent under the weight of the factory workers trying to escape the inferno. Others waited at the windows for the rescue workers only to discover that the firefighters' ladders were several stories too short and the water from the hoses could not reach the top floors. Many chose to jump to their deaths rather than to burn alive.



An officer stands at the Asch Building's 9th floor window after the Triangle fire. Sewing machines, drive shafts, and other wreckage of the Triangle factory fire are piled in the center of the blaze-scoured room. Photographer: Brown Brothers, 1911
Kheel Center image identifier: 5780-087pb1f5j



The 240 employees sewing shirtwaists on the ninth floor had their escape blocked by paired sewing machines on 75-foot long tables, back-to-back chairs and work baskets in the aisles. Walking space was so inadequate that many had to waste precious time climbing over tables to get to the stairs, fire escape, elevators and windows that might lead to safety. Photographer: Brown Brothers, 1911
Kheel Center image identifier: 5780Pb39f15g



Fire fighters arrived at the Asch Building soon after the alarm was sounded but ladders only reached the sixth floor and the high pressure pumps of the day could not raise the water pressure needed to extinguish the flames on the highest floors of the ten-story building. In this fireproof factory, 146 young men, women, and children lost their lives, and many others were seriously injured.
Photographer: unknown, March 25, 1911
Kheel Center image identifier: 5780Pb39f15d



The flimsy fire escape ladder descended close to the building forcing those fleeing to struggle through flames and past warped iron window shutters stuck open across their path. Sections of ladder which ended two stories above the ground, twisted and collapsed under the weight of workers trying to escape the fire killing many who had chosen it as their lifeline.
Photographer: unknown, 1911
Kheel Center image identifier: 5780pb39f15a

MOURNING & PROTEST

In the weeks that followed, the grieving city identified the dead, sorted out their belongings, and reeled in numbed grief at the atrocity that could have been averted with a few precautions. The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union proposed an official day of mourning. The grief-stricken city gathered in churches, synagogues, and finally, in the streets.

Protesting voices arose, bewildered and angry at the lack of concern and the greed that had made this possible. The people demanded restitution, justice, and action that would safeguard the vulnerable and the oppressed. Outraged cries calling for action to improve the unsafe conditions in workshops could be heard from every quarter, from the mainstream conservative to the progressive and union press.

Workers flocked to union quarters to offer testimonies, support mobilization, and demand that Triangle owners Harris and Blanck be brought to trial. The role that strong unions could have in helping prevent such tragedies became clear. Workers organized in powerful unions would be more conscious of their rights and better able to obtain safe working conditions.

RELIEF WORK

Shortly after the fire, the Executive Board of the Ladies' Waist and Dress Makers' Union Local No. 25 of the ILGWU (the local to which some of the Triangle factory workers belonged) met to plan relief work for the survivors and the families of the victims. Soon several progressive organizations came forward to help with the relief effort. Representatives from the Women's Trade Union League, the Workmen's Circle (Arbeiter Ring), the Jewish Daily Forward, and the United Hebrew Trades formed the Joint Relief Committee, which, over the course of the next months, allotted lump sums, often to be remitted abroad, to Russia or Italy.

In addition, its Executive Committee distributed weekly pensions, supervised and cared for the young workers and children placed in institutions of various kinds, and secured work and proper living arrangements for the workers after they recuperated from their injuries. The Joint Relief Committee worked together with the American Red Cross, which also collected funds from the general public. Estimates indicate that the Joint Relief Committee alone administered about \$30,000.

INVESTIGATION & TRIAL

Immediately after the fire, Triangle owners Blanck and Harris declared in interviews that their building was fireproof, and that it had just been approved by the Department of Buildings. Yet the call for bringing those responsible to justice and reports that the doors of the factory were locked at the time of the fire prompted the District Attorney's office to seek an indictment against the owners. On April 11, a grand jury indicted Harris and Blanck on seven counts, charging them with manslaughter in the second degree under section 80 of the Labor Code, which mandated that doors should not be locked during working hours.

On December 27, twenty-three days after the trial had started, a jury acquitted Blanck and Harris of any wrong doing. The task of the jurors had been to determine whether the owners knew that the doors were locked at the time of the fire. Customarily, the only way out for workers at quitting time was through an opening on the Green Street side, where all pocketbooks were inspected to prevent stealing. Worker after worker testified to their inability to open the doors to their only viable escape route, the stairs to the Washington Place exit, because the Greene Street side stairs were completely engulfed by fire. More testimony supported this fact. Yet the brilliant defense attorney Max Steuer planted enough doubt in the jurors' minds to win a not-guilty verdict. Grieving families and much of the public felt that justice had not been done. "Justice!" they cried. "Where is justice?" Twenty-three individual civil suits were brought against the owners of the Asch building. On March 11, 1914, three years after the fire, Harris and Blanck settled. They paid 75 dollars per life lost.

Harris and Blanck were to continue their defiant attitude toward the authorities. Just a few days after the fire, the new premises of their factory had been found not to be fireproof, without fire escapes, and without adequate exits. In August of 1913, Max Blanck was charged with locking one of the doors of his factory during working hours. Brought to court, he was fined twenty dollars, and the judge apologized to him for the imposition. In December of 1913, the interior of his factory was found to be littered with rubbish piled six feet high, with scraps kept in non-regulation, flammable wicker baskets. This time, instead of a court appearance and a fine, he was served a stern warning. The Triangle Waist Company was to cease operations in 1918, but the owners

maintained throughout that their factory was a “model of cleanliness and sanitary conditions,” and that it was “second to none in the country.”

LEGACY OF THE TRIANGLE FIRE

The fire at Triangle Waist Company on March 25, 1911 is widely considered a pivotal moment in history, leading to the transformation of the labor code of New York State and to the adoption of fire safety measures that served as a model for the whole country. Instrumental in this transformation was the work of the New York Factory Investigative Commission, which wrote thirty-six of the new labor related bills that the state legislature eventually adopted. Also significant is the work of local governmental agencies and unions, which adopted fire safety measures and monitored conditions in factories. The legacy of the Triangle fire cannot be fully appreciated without also taking into account the great significance the tragedy acquired and continues to have for the labor movement, up to this day.

“Elegy to the Triangle Fire Victims” A Rough Translation from the Original Yiddish

It tears at your heart, this fire
The Jewish people from the fire are beside themselves
Wringing their hands from this terrible thing
The fire was burning in the light of day
Hundreds of workers were burning up
The ones that didn't burn jumped from the building
The morgue is full
Mothers are silently crying
She says to her child, “Woe is me!”
The mother tears her hair
Because she had to make a living to survive
She had to go through this horrible thing
Dead is my girl
She was going to be a bride
Woe is me

Joseph Rumshinsky, “The Triangle Victims” (in Yiddish), 1911. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)