

THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FACTORY FIRE OF 1911: RESULTING LABOR SAFETY LAWS AND EXEMPLARY ACTION TO PREVENT THE PREVENTABLE

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As one of the most infamous incidents in the history of American industry, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 remains a momentous event for labor safety advocates. This fire that led to the fearful demise of 146 people is far from an isolated occurrence; it is just one example of the many preventable mass deaths at the hands of capitalism that were common in that era. More than that, however, it is also representative of the countless fatal conditions currently present at open or clandestine sweatshops all over the globe even today. The resulting legislation from the fire, a lasting legacy of an American industrial disaster, has contributed to positive changes in labor safety, but this leaves one begging the question: have the overall working conditions of garment laborers really changed, or are there people out there who, at this very moment, are at risk to suffer the same deadly fate as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory victims? While imperative American legislation regarding fire safety labor law has been created over the past century in response to the fire, today dangerous sweatshop conditions remain in violation of the laws developed to protect garment workers or are located outside jurisdiction of such legislation.

At the start of the twentieth century New York's fashion economy was booming; garment workers were over-worked and underpaid in an industry that had not yet protected the interests of laborers by law. Thousands of people, often women and children, worked in overcrowded factories, some of which had exits that were locked to prevent employees from stealing. Men, women, and children worked twelve hours a day, often six days a week, for little pay. After years of operating on this schedule, clothing laborers grew more than tired of their circumstances but felt helpless as a working class since they needed the money to support themselves and their families. The laborers feared complaining would leave them unemployed in a city full of immigrants willing to work longer hours for less money.

At that time, middle and upper-class women began to notice the working women of New York. They united with working women to form the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in 1900 to help fight for improved conditions of the over-worked and underpaid of the garment industry. In 1909, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union held a citywide strike with thousands of workers for higher pay and more reasonable hours.¹³⁶ Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, as owners of several factories, were known to have been openly against the strike. They were not only unwilling to hire women who had participated in the strike but were also owners of one of the companies that had resisted the strike the longest. They supposedly hired strikebreakers, men to beat the women that were openly protesting.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, the ILGWU was successful in their protesting, and striking garment workers went back to work with a compromise of raised pay and more reasonable work hours.

In 1911, the streets of Manhattan bustled with hundreds of immigrants ready to report to work in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, which was located on the top three floors of the Asch building by Washington Square. Drove of Jewish and Italian men and women shuffled into the ten-story building to work long hours six days a week in order to support themselves and their loved ones. As they were willing to be paid less and work longer hours, the business owners, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, primarily hired immigrant women who did not participate in the garment strikes to assemble the fashions in their factory. One former employee notes that Harris had a way of "sneaking into the dressing room and look[ing] through our pockets to see if he could find union receipts."¹³⁸ The owners of Triangle Company seem to have had issues with strikers who were fighting for their rights to higher pay and fairer work.

On March 25, 1911, shortly before 8:00 AM, approximately 500 garment workers filed into the Asch building to report for work on a Saturday. Mary

¹³⁶ John Holmes, "Sweated Work, Weak Bodies: Anti-Sweatshop Campaigns and Languages of Labor." *Labour / Le Travail* 56, 328-332. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 12, 2013).

¹³⁷ Charles Phillips, March 25, 1911 Triangle Fire." *American History* 41, no. 1: 16-70. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 12, 2013).

¹³⁸ Joseph Granick, interview by Leon Stein, *Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire*, (June 6, 1958).

Domskey-Abrams, a former Triangle employee, described a conversation she had witnessed just before starting time between a fellow employee and their manager:

One girl asked him, 'Mr. Bonstein, why is there no water in the buckets? In case of a fire, there would be nothing with which to fight it,' He became enraged at our group of price committee members, and with inhuman anger replied: 'If you'll burn, there'll be something to put out the fire.'¹³⁹

The women dispersed, shrugging off his comment as typically snide and reported to their sewing machines for the starting bell.

At 4:40 PM, just before the closing bell rang, a small fire ignited in a rag bin filled with scrap fabric, the start of which, some have speculated, may have been linked to cigarette remnants.¹⁴⁰ Scraps lined the floor between the narrow aisles of sewing machines at the factory. The wood floors and piles of fabric ignited rapidly. Women and men ran for their lives to the small elevators and narrow stairwells. One exit door was locked. The rusting fire escape collapsed under the weight of people frantic to escape, killing those who fell from it. The elevator made four trips before collapsing under the weight of the workers who jumped to their death in the elevator shaft. Women and men burned alive; others died of smoke inhalation, and many horrifically jumped to their death out of the windows and down the elevator shaft. Blanck and Harris had escaped via the roof onto a neighboring building, and others escaped from a ladder extended from the neighboring New York University Law School building, until that too collapsed. The ladders of responding firefighters could only reach the lower floors, and their hoses could not reach the burning top three floors.¹⁴¹ Fruitless in their attempts to fight the fire out of reach of their ladders and hoses, firefighters held out nets to catch the garment workers who leapt off the burning building. Three people had jumped at once, breaking the net leaving only concrete to catch the remaining victims who fell from factory.¹⁴² The violent fire claimed a total of 146 of the approximately 500 workers who arrived to work that morning in about 18 minutes time.

¹³⁹ Mary Domskey-Abrams, interview by Leon Stein, *My Reminiscences of the Triangle Fire*, (1950).

¹⁴⁰ Phillips, 16-70.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

One survivor, Joseph Granick, a cutter who worked on the eighth floor, was seventeen years old on that traumatizing day. When asked about the fire, he said, “I have been through wars but I never saw anything as terrible as what I saw at the morgue.”¹⁴³ Further testimony of the day’s horror came from survivor Celia Walker Friedman, an examiner that worked on the eighth floor. She recalled that:

the aisles were narrow and blocked by the chairs and baskets. They began to fall in the fire. I know now that there was a fire escape in back of me but I ran to the elevator because that was the only place to run to. The door to the stairway was completely blocked by the big crates of blouses and goods. The fire crept closer to us and we were crowded at the elevator door banging and hollering for the elevator. I ran to the freight elevator on the Greene St. side first but... the cable broke.¹⁴⁴

Friedman’s clear mentions of what many people today would consider to be, “fire hazards,” were likely not generally associated with this term in 1911. It is noted that Friedman did not know that the fire escape collapsed, killing many who were on it, until this interview was conducted over 30 years later.¹⁴⁵ The fear in her memory of the fire is echoed by the memories of survivor Ethel Monick Feigan, who was a lace cutter on the ninth floor of the Asch Building. Feigan told of a frightening scene and also expressed confusion about knowledge of exits, saying:

One day I was working and got lost in the shop near the Washington Place side. That was when I saw that there was a door there. In the fire, when I saw the freight elevator was down, then I thought of the Washington Place door. I ran to that door and tried to open it. All around me people were hollering, “I am dying, I am dying.” I ran from the door into the dressing room looking for something to use on the door. In the dressing room there were men and women laughing. I did not know at the time that they were hysterical.¹⁴⁶

Granick, Friedman, and Feigan are just three of the survivors, but themes arise from their specific recollections that can be seen in other interviews conducted

¹⁴³ Joseph Granick, interview by Leon Stein, *Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire*, (June 6, 1958).

¹⁴⁴ Celia Walker Friedman, interview by Leon Stein, *Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire*, (August 8, 1957).

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ethel Monick Feigan, interview by Leon Stein, *Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire*, (September 29, 1958).

by Leon Stein.¹⁴⁷ One common thread is the fear surrounding this eighteen minutes of their lives and the last-minute decisions made amidst that fear that can be attributed to their survival. Another similarity is the confusion or lack of knowledge regarding ways to exit, and the identification of various fire hazards throughout the factory. Since these survivors were recalling memories in an interview over thirty years after the tragic fire, it is likely that immediately after the fire, other survivors expressed a similar lack of knowledge. Had they had fire drills and the knowledge to correct fire hazards, perhaps those who died could have been saved.

New York mourned the loss of the promising young lives by taking political action in the days following the fire. Not even twenty-four hours after the flames started, the New York Times front-page headline read, "141 Men and Girls Die in Waist Factory Fire; Trapped High Up in Washington Place Building; Street Strewn with Bodies; Piles of Dead Inside."¹⁴⁸ One subtitle declared, "Only One Fire Escape: Coroner declares building laws were not enforced: building modern, classed fireproof." Another read, "Mob Storms the Morgue." A separate article in the following day's New York Times was titled, "Lack of Fire Drill Held Responsible: Company advised to train its workers, says industrial engineer, but ignored him. Danger in other factories, only a few, he asserts, have emergency drills and escape in many is cut off."¹⁴⁹ Just hours after the Triangle Company fire was put out, it seemed as though another fire was lit in the hearts of the public, and journalists promoted the voices of protesters lining the streets of Manhattan fighting for justice from the factory owners and for the implementation of labor safety laws.

Blank and Harris were tried for charges of manslaughter but acquitted. A separate civil settlement after their acquittal resulted in the agreement that they pay \$75.00 for every life lost. The public was outraged at the original acquittal, and continued to protest for justice. Though pointing the finger at the two owners was easy for the public to do, how were they going to keep such a monstrosity from

¹⁴⁷ Leon Stein, *Remembering the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire: Survivor Interviews*, 2011, <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/primary/survivorInterviews/leonSteinInterviews.html> (accessed December 1, 2013).

¹⁴⁸ *New York Times*, "141 Men and Girls Die in Waist Factory Fire; Trapped High Up in Washington Place Building; Street Strewn with Bodies; Piles of Dead Inside," March 26, 1911.

¹⁴⁹ *New York Times*, "Lack of Fire Drill Held Responsible," March 26, 1911.

happening again? What would hold factory owners who were locking doors and keeping unsafe conditions in their factories out of greed responsible? How could the public ensure that factories and workers are safe? By August 1911, just months after the fire, the Sullivan-Hoey Law was passed, which later became the same law that allowed for the establishment of the New York Bureau of Fire Prevention.¹⁵⁰ This law allowed the New York Fire Department and the New York Police Department authority over fire prevention activities. Immediately following the establishment of the Sullivan-Hoey Law, the Factory Investigating Commission (FIC) was established by the New York State legislature, lead by the elected chairman Senator Robert F. Wagner, to address these now widespread, fire prevention concerns.¹⁵¹

Preliminary investigations were conducted by the FIC in the months following the commission's establishment. The FIC investigated sanitary conditions of first and second class factories, fire hazards, women's trades, bakery conditions and bakers health examines, lead and arsenic poisoning, conducted industrial survey of parts of New York, and started investigations of child labor in tenement housing.¹⁵² Following these investigations, the FIC compiled a report in which the commission described their findings, the results of which led to a collection of legislative recommendations for change. Among the FIC's recommendations were that factories should be registered with the state, children seeking employment certificates should undergo a physical examination, fire drills must be practiced, there should be automatic sprinklers in factories, and fire prevention practices to be enforced included removing unnecessary items or trash, fireproof waste receptacles, and the outlawing of smoking in factories.¹⁵³ Also recommended was the illegality of eating in rooms where toxic substances are dealt with in manufacturing and that there be adequate hot and cold washing facility in

¹⁵⁰ Katie Marsico, *The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire: Its Legacy of Labor Rights* (Marshall Cavendish, 2009).

¹⁵¹ Factory Investigating Commission: Reports, "Remembering the 1911 Triangle Factory Fire," *Cornell University*, August 1911, <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/primary/reports/fourthreportoffic.html>.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

manufacturing establishments.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, the commission recommended that employment of a woman within four weeks after childbirth be made illegal. Lastly, it was recommended that the Commissioner of Labor have authority over unsanitary factories.¹⁵⁵

The first FIC report was presented to the state of New York legislature on March 1, 1912, and all of the aforementioned recommendations passed and became law. Almost one year after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, the mass of preventable deaths from unsafe factory conditions could be avoided because of the efforts of concerned citizens. The fire drill and automatic sprinkler requirements of New York building codes today are reflections of a lasting legacy of one of the deadliest fires in New York City's history. One could never measure with precision the amount of deaths or injuries prevented directly or indirectly by fire prevention laws and the knowledge that comes from such legislation. However, it is clear that the 146 victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire did not die in vain, and their legacy lives on in New York State fire safety and labor law legislation and through the New York Bureau of Fire Prevention.

Several initial observations regarding the possible reason why so many perished in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire reveal that if the doors to the factory were not locked, as New York State Labor Law Article 6, Section 80 had required of factories in 1911, perhaps more employees could have escaped.¹⁵⁶ If the doors were locked, as many survivors vehemently testify, it would have been because the owners were concerned that their merchandise could possibly be stolen.¹⁵⁷ The greed of keeping fabric from potentially being taken may have contributed to the demise of 146 people. Also, if fire hazards, like heaping piles of blouses blocking exits and the emergency water pails being empty, were corrected sooner, perhaps many victims would not have suffered that terrible fate. If there

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ "People v Harris, New York State Labor Law of 1911, Article 6 Section 80." In *New York Supplement: National Reporter System New York State Superior*. West Publishing Company, 1912.

¹⁵⁷ Leon Stein, *Remembering the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire: Survivor Interviews*, 2011, <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/primary/survivorInterviews/leonSteinInterviews.html> (accessed December, 1, 2013).

were no spaces for the fabric other than the floor and in front of stairwells, it seems that more space for storage was needed at the Triangle factory. Moreover, if the fire escape was replaced before it had rusted to the point that it collapsed when people needed to use it, more people may have survived.¹⁵⁸ However, more space for the fabric piles and a newly replaced fire escape would have cost money, the same way that keeping the door open and risking the potential of stolen merchandise would have cost Blanck and Harris money. It can be concluded that greed ultimately led to the death of multiple victims.

Though inspiring in many ways, the triumphs of the outraged New York public consisting of garment workers, victims' loved ones, concerned citizens, and others, raises several questions regarding the state of affairs in the same industry over a century later. If the greed of businesspeople led to a terrible fire in New York prior to the proper safety laws being put into place, than how many men and women willing to work for less, for longer hours, in unsafe conditions to make a living for their family are currently doing so in places that have not yet taken the same political action? More importantly, how can the same legislative action towards fire prevention, labor rights, and labor safety be implemented in locations that do not yet have such laws *before* a tragedy takes the lives of workers?

Unfortunately, a similar situation comparable to the Triangle factory fire took the lives of seven garment workers. On November 24, 2013, a factory fire claimed the lives of seven Chinese immigrants in a garment factory makeshift dormitory in Prato, Italy. At the Teresa Moda garment outlet, the immigrants created a makeshift kitchen with small electric stoves, which are currently attributed to the cause of the fire.¹⁵⁹ The windows are covered with bars, and there are no emergency exits. Among the people living in the factory was a little boy who reporters estimate was only a few years old. The Teresa Moda brand is associated with creating merchandise for major global retailers at a low cost. In a New York Times article describing the tragedy in Italy, Franciscan friar Francesco Brasa, who

¹⁵⁸ "What Went Wrong?", *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*, <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/supplemental/3dmodel.html> (accessed April 20, 2014).

¹⁵⁹ *Florence Daily News*, "Fire at Chinese-owned clothing factory killed 7 workers," December 3, 2013.

helps the large Chinese immigrant population in Prato, Italy, was quoted regarding the factories: "They're slaves without knowing it."¹⁶⁰ Similar to the immigrant workers of the Triangle Company, the Teresa Moda factory employs hundreds of Chinese immigrants in Prato who are willing to work in less than desirable conditions for what little pay they can get.

As evidenced by the legislative action following the Triangle Company Fire, working conditions and fire safety laws can change; such changes do not have to be in response to major tragedies that take the lives of employees in order to be made a priority by politicians. The same simple construction of the American labor and fire prevention laws implemented in 1912 can be applied to almost any geographic location today. However, as long as there is a place that is willing to house or turn a blind eye to such sweatshops, and a market to buy the garments, cheap merchandise assembled in life-threatening conditions will continue to jump place to place, either settling in a country without said legislation or opening and closing before health and fire inspectors can arrive. According to Italian officials discussing such factories, "...many businesses here open and close before health or fire inspectors, and even the tax police, can check them. Often they reopen with new tax code numbers."¹⁶¹ If that is the case, perhaps inspectors should be expected to arrive prior to tax codes being issued.

Manufacturers of sweatshop-assembled garments are simply making what sells. Ultimately, consumers are buying these products assembled under these slave-like conditions of long hours, little pay, and dangerous work conditions. Consequently, a market is created for the product. In order to satiate the demand, the supply is provided by such sweatshops. Like the consumers of Triangle Shirtwaists, present-day consumers of these cheap goods do not concern themselves with the origin of the merchandise and the conditions under which the products were made. If consumers demanded to know the origin of their product, and perhaps have a certificate or seal of approval for the brand or the particular item, then owners of the companies, like Blanck and Harris and Teresa Moda, would

¹⁶⁰ Elisabeth Povoledo, "Deadly Factory Fire Bares Racial Tensions in Italy," *New York Times*, December 6, 2013.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

follow the demand and adjust the supply to safe, fair factory conditions. A more personal connection with one's clothing or proof of some sort that it was made at a safe and fair place will bring consumers to care where all their garments are created. If consumers cared more about the origins of their clothing, and refused to buy goods are not proven to have been made under safe and fair conditions, then factory owners would respond to this demand and improve their factories.

Unfortunately, in early twentieth century America, the greed of consumer-driven garment industry grew more rapidly than labor rights, labor safety regulation, and fire prevention legislation. The result of such circumstances lead to the death of 146 garment workers on March 25, 1911 at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in Manhattan. Fire safety and labor rights legislation quickly followed in response to the public concern and outrage over the fact that this mass death was preventable. Today, eerily similar conditions continue to be the norm for thousands of garment factory workers all over the world. A mass death of these people simply trying to work for a living does not have to happen in order for these conditions to change. Consumers need to demand to know the origin of their product, and garment factory owners need to concern themselves with the quality and safety of their factories. The casualties resulting from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire were not in vain; legislation including fire prevention and labor safety laws serve as protection to American labor, and the casualties serve as 146 examples to consumers and factory owners that no garment is worth risking someone's life.