

**Industrial Safety tragedies:
The 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Company Factory Fire**

Sophia Schifano

Senior Division

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One of America's most infamous industrial safety tragedies, the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Company factory fire, caused widespread fear and angst among citizens through the lack of regulations that resulted in the deaths of (145) workers in the burning factory.¹ Thus turning widespread attention to the development of new laws and regulations to expand safety conditions in the workplace. When the Manhattan, NY based factory was on fire, the doors had been chained shut to prevent employees from taking unauthorized breaks. Women immigrants and a few men lined the rooftop and windowsills of the ten story building, and jumped to their deaths in a “bloody, mangled pulp.”² The fire brought tragedy upon the employees and their families, which was primarily caused by the lack of safety regulations. This traumatic event exposed the need for new safety regulations and legislation to protect the employees.

Leading up to the fire in 1909, the Triangle factory workers had gone on strike as members of the International Ladies Garment Union. The union demanded higher wages, recognition of the Union, shorter work week, and improved safety regulations to enhance workplace conditions. The owners of the Shirtwaist Factory, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris decided that having access to a working fire escape, unlocked doors, and sprinkler system were to expensive. They also believed in having low wages and long

¹ History.com Editors. “Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2 Dec. 2009, www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/triangle-shirtwaist-fire. Accessed 17 Dec. 2018.

²Philip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Eve of World War I* (New York: Free Press, 1979.).

hours so that they could keep up the productivity and increase profit so that they could compete strongly against other companies. In addition, high levels of corruption were rampant in the garment industries and city governments, preventing the implementation of stronger safety regulations and laws. Employees had to work 12 hour shifts 7 days a week making a mere \$3.00 to \$15.00 per week, barely enough to sustain their daily lives and support their families.³ Max Blanck and Isaac Harris resisted the employee strike by hiring police to imprison women that went on strike, and bribing politicians to ignore the situation.

It was on March 25th that approximately 600 workers were trapped inside the factory when the fire started in a rag bin.⁴ The Manager tried to stop the fire by using a factory fire hose, but was unsuccessful because the hose was rotted and the valve was rusted shut. Some employees tried escaping by the elevator but only four trips could be made, before the fire disabled the only operational elevator. Panic set in and some of the women jumped down into the elevator shaft, plunging to their deaths. Even the door that led outside the building was locked, which caused many to be burned alive in the uncontrollable flames. Hysterical women left behind that were unable to escape the fire, started to jump out the windows and off the roof of the building landing on the fire hoses below, which made it difficult to fight the fire. Firemen attempted to use nets to save

³ History.com Editors. "Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2 Dec. 2009, www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/triangle-shirtwaist-fire. Accessed 17 Dec. 2018.

⁴ "Triangle Shirtwaist Fire." *AFL-CIO*, aflcio.org/about/history/labor-history-events/triangle-shirtwaist-fire. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

women that were jumping, however they ended up disabling the nets due to multiple women jumping at the same time. Ladders were also used but they were unable to reach the eighth floor. During an interview with survivor Bessy Cohen she stated, “She went out to the window. She fell. I could hear the thump. But somebody took me away”.⁵ Others died when a rickety fire escape buckled and collapsed. For the young Russian immigrant, whose parents were still in the old country, the days that followed were a jumble of funerals and visits to a temporary morgue in an effort to identify the charred bodies. Within 18 minutes of the start of the fire, forty-nine workers had been burned alive, 36 were dead in the elevator shaft, 58 died from plunging to the sidewalks, and two from injuries, resulting with 145 workers dead.⁶

Rose Cohen, one of the workers stated:

“It wasn’t heavy work”. “It was monotonous 'cause you did that from 7: 30 till nine o’clock at night. You had one half hour for lunch and nothing for supper or anything like that. Before I left I was promoted to the cutting department. You’d cut the embroidery, which was inserted in the front of the shirtwaist in those days, and that was... They were the kind of employers who didn’t recognize anyone working for them as a human being. You were not allowed to sing. Operators would like to have sung, because they, too, had the same thing to do, and weren’t allowed to sing. You were not allowed to talk to each other. Oh, no! They would sneak up behind you, and if you were found talking to your next colleague you were admonished. If you’d keep on, you’d be fired. If you went to the toilet, and you were there more than the forelady or foreman thought you should be, you were threatened to be laid off for a half a day, and sent home, and that meant, of course, no pay, you know? You were not allowed to use the

⁵ MATHIS CHAZANOV | Times Staff Writer, and Bessy Cohen. “Fire Haunts 93-Year-Old : Survivor of 1911 Triangle Factory Blaze Tries to Forget.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 17 Mar. 1985, [articles.latimes.com/1985-03-17/news/we-35678_1_triangle-fire](https://www.latimes.com/1985-03-17/news/we-35678_1_triangle-fire). Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

⁶ History.com Editors. “Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2 Dec. 2009, www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/triangle-shirtwaist-fire. Accessed 17 Dec. 2018.

passenger elevator, only a freight elevator. And ah, you were watched every minute of the day by the foreman, forelady. Employers would sneak behind your back. And you were not allowed to have your lunch on the fire escape in the summertime. And that door was locked.”⁷

It was proven that the only interests of Isaac Harris and Max Blanck was the amount of money they made each day through increased productivity. In order to sustain these increases, they reduced wages and made the employees work long hours. The working conditions resembled a true sweatshop, run by young immigrant women who all spoke different languages, while they worked tediously in cramped spaces with restrictive rules. The events of this tragedy caused the people to look for someone to blame. On April 5th the International Union protested the hazardous conditions of the burned factory, they had approximately 8,000 people in attendance.⁸ These protests resulted in New York City passing new fire, safety, and building code laws supported by stiff penalties for violators.

Prior to the new laws it was common to lock doors to prevent theft and unauthorized employee breaks. But all changed after this tragic fire due to the “54-hour bill”, stating that women and boys under the age of 18 could not work more than 54 hours a week. Furthermore, individuals under the age of 14 were not permitted to work in factories,

⁷ Morrisson, Joan, and Pauline Newman. “Working for the Triangle Shirtwaist Company.” *HISTORY MATTERS - The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1933, historymatters.gmu.edu/d/178/. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

⁸ History.com Editors. “Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2 Dec. 2009, www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/triangle-shirtwaist-fire. Accessed 17 Dec. 2018.

and pregnant women were given an automatic one month break after childbirth, before returning to work.⁹ This was to ensure fair and equal treatment of the workers.

Employee wages were not necessarily based on the number of hours they worked every week, but included other criteria that allowed a fairer wage.

Furthermore, according to Douglas O. Linder, "The public outrage over the horrific loss of life at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory led to the creation of a nine-member Factory Investigating Commission. The Commission undertook a thorough examination of safety and working conditions in New York City factories. The Commission's recommendations led to what is called 'the golden era in remedial factory legislation'".¹⁰ This became an important factor for workers employed in factories, for under this Commission many laws were enacted to protect employees. It helped the workers make a fair living wage so they could support their families and lifestyles. Other regulations that may of seemed small at the time, ultimately made a large impact on future companies. Regulations such as banning smoking, fire proof trash cans, and the law that required every factory in New York to register with the New York Department of Labor. The Factory Investigating Commissions goal was to prevent future tragedies like the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, through implementing new laws and regulations that restricted the ability of the factories to operate unchecked.

⁹ NYOUNG11. "What Laws or Law Came out of Both the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire and the Great Chicago Fire?" *Enotes.com*, Enotes.com,

¹⁰ Linder, Douglas O. "After The Triangle Fire: State And National Workplace Safety Reforms." *After The Triangle Fire: State And National Workplace Safety Reforms | Political Correction*, Political Correction- A Project of Media Matters Action Network, 25 Mar. 2011, politicalcorrection.org/factcheck/201103250003. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

This event, became known as a large stepping stone toward fair rights for factory workers. It was acknowledged by survivors of the fire, and how this event brought attention for the demand to implement new worker laws and safety regulations. For example, Bessy Cohen, a survivor of the fire referred to this statement, "The key thing is it made people aware of the conditions under which people worked in the factories", said Dwight Burton, editor of Justice, a magazine published by the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. "¹¹ It focused the attention of the state and the country on the plight of the workers". The legacy of the workers continued when a week after the fire, Anne Morgan and Alva Belmont held a meeting about fire action and safety. Their meeting helped galvanize about 350,000 people of all different backgrounds attend the funerals for the Shirtwaist factory workers, that tragically died in the fire. ¹²

Three months after the fire, the governor of New York signed a law known as the Factory Investigating Commission. This Commission investigated about 2,000 factories to help improve fire safety and sanitation through inspections. The following year, New York State Labor laws had been totally rewritten by adding 25 new labor laws.¹³ In

¹¹ MATHIS CHAZANOV | Times Staff Writer, and Bessy Cohen. "Fire Haunts 93-Year-Old : Survivor of 1911 Triangle Factory Blaze Tries to Forget." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 17 Mar. 1985, articles.latimes.com/1985-03-17/news/we-35678_1_triangle-fire. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

¹² "Triangle Shirtwaist Fire." *AFL-CIO*, aflcio.org/about/history/labor-history-events/triangle-shirtwaist-fire. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

¹³ "Triangle Shirtwaist Fire." *AFL-CIO*, aflcio.org/about/history/labor-history-events/triangle-shirtwaist-fire. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

addition they created a State Department of Labor to enforce the new laws, to ensure they were being followed. The consequences of the fire resulted in some of the greatest protections for workers through the New Deal by Frances Perkins and Robert Wagner, which included the National Labor Relations Act.

These new laws and regulations would help prevent future tragedies like this from happening again, and bring assurance that factory workers would have improved benefits. The tragedy of the fire resulted in building a better foundation for improved working conditions to preserve the health, safety, and protection of the workers. The new laws and regulations had a positive effect, and were emblematic of the triumph and tragedy that helped improved the overall conditions for factory workers. These improvements continue to take effect today, as employees now have the assurance of working in a safe environment as they contribute to help build America's economy.

Appendix A



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This Image represents the aftereffects of the fire. It is of one of the top floors of the building where sewing machines had been that the women worked at. Fire survivor, Sarah Dworetz, who worked on the 9th floor when the fire started stated, “I took one look into the shop as I ran and I saw the flames coming in from all sides. The elevators were going up and down. On the front side the door to the staircase was closed. I had to fight and push my way across the shop. There was screaming and shoving and many girls tried to climb over the machine tables.”¹⁵ The long tables and chairs became dangerous obstacles in the fire, thus hindering the workers ability to escape. These objects created unsafe working conditions in terms of safety.

¹⁴ OSHA. “The Factory Floor After the Fire.” *Occupational Safety and Health Administration*, 1911, www.osha.gov/oas/trianglefactoryfire.html. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

¹⁵ Dworetz, Sarah F. “Interviews: Survivors of the Triangle Factory Fire.” *Ludmila p*, 25 Mar. 2011, ludmilap.wordpress.com/2011/03/25/interviews-survivors-of-the-triangle-factory-fire/. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

Appendix B



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This image shows the supporters of the unions and other groups, both men and women, who mourned and knew that there needed to be changes for the improvement of working conditions. This was a gathering of supporting people ten days after the fire recognizing collective remembrance for the deaths of the workers.

¹⁶ OSHA. "Mourners From the Union That Represented the Triangle Employees." *Occupational Safety and Health Administration*, 1911, www.osha.gov/oas/trianglefactoryfire.html. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

Annotated Bibliography

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Dworetz, Sarah F. "Interviews: Survivors of the Triangle Factory Fire." *Ludmila p*, 25 Mar.

2011,

ludmilap.wordpress.com/2011/03/25/interviews-survivors-of-the-triangle-factory-fire/.

Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

This was a primary source based off of an interview of Sarah Friedman Dworetz. She described her first hand experience as one of the fires survivors. This source was used to show the tragedy experienced by the workers in the Triangle Shirtwaist factory. This interview helped to develop my thesis because she tells of the awful conditions, that if attended to, could have saved many lives. This source was important to making my paper because it truly represented the fear and angst of the employees. Knowing what she experienced, brings to life just how bad the event really was.

Linder, Douglas O. "After The Triangle Fire: State And National Workplace Safety Reforms."

After The Triangle Fire: State And National Workplace Safety Reforms | Political

Correction, Political Correction- A Project of Media Matters Action Network, 25 Mar. 2011, politicalcorrection.org/factcheck/201103250003. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

This was a primary source of Douglas O. Linder, a Missouri-Kansas City Professor, describing the new Investigation Commission that was created. This source was used to represent the triumph of the new regulations that resulted from the fire. It described how the Commission examined safety and working conditions, to which the factories had to meet specific standards. This source helped me to understand the project because it represented how the tragedy pushed for the development of new laws and regulations. I was able to understand how this commission created impacted the workers of that time period and how it still continues to make an impact today.

MATHIS CHAZANOV | Times Staff Writer, and Bessy Cohen. "Fire Haunts 93-Year-Old : Survivor of 1911 Triangle Factory Blaze Tries to Forget." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 17 Mar. 1985, articles.latimes.com/1985-03-17/news/we-35678_1_triangle-fire. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

This primary source was an article about a survivor of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire, Bessie Cohen. This Source was used to develop the idea that the tragedy created triumph. This was shown through her quote stating that she believed the fire brought attention to the need for new fire safety regulations, fair wages and a safe work environment. This source helped in the creation of my project because I was able to

show how her personal feelings as a survivor, showed the impact of the fire. She helped me to understand how some of the surviving workers may have felt.

Morrisson, Joan, and Pauline Newman. "Working for the Triangle Shirtwaist Company."

HISTORY MATTERS - The U.S. Survey Course on the Web, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1933, historymatters.gmu.edu/d/178/. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

This primary source was an article between Joan Morrison and fire survivor Pauline Newman. Joan describes how she was treated as an employee under owner's Max Blanck and Isaac Harris. I used this source because a quote made by Pauline Newman helped to identify background information leading to the fire. She spoke of the negatively impactful conditions that were very unfair to workers and affected their health and daily lives. These conditions helped support the theme of tragedy. This source helped me to understand the topic through her explanation of how she was treated, and how the conditions affected her as well as others. I was able to see how this affected the feelings and thoughts of the workers and caused them to join into unions and break out in a strike.

OSHA. "The Factory Floor After the Fire." *Occupational Safety and Health Administration*, 1911, www.osha.gov/oas/trianglefactoryfire.html. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

This primary source was an image found of the 1911 factory fire. It showed one of the top levels of the factory after the fire. I used this picture to show the lack in safety conditions. This was represented through the long tables, sewing machines, and chairs

that in the event of a fire, effected the ability of workers to escape. This helped me to understand my topic because if not for the unsafe conditions of the room and other areas of the building, there would not have been as many deaths from the fire. This picture was a good representation as to why safety standards were created in order to keep workers safe in an emergency.

OSHA. "Mourners From the Union That Represented the Triangle Employees." *Occupational Safety and Health Administration*, 1911, www.osha.gov/oas/trianglefactoryfire.html. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

This primary source was an image taken ten days after the Shirtwaist Factory fire. This image was of the unions that represented the Triangle employees in the remembrance of their deaths. This source was used to support how the event of the fire, resulted in the creation of better regulations. This could be represented through the picture because the unions were protesting for workplace safety reforms. This was an important source to help me create the project because it helped me to understand the views of the union and made me aware of why they wanted certain changes, as well as how they wanted to make the changes.

Philip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Eve of World War I* (New York: Free Press, 1979.).

This primary source was part of an article written by Philip Foner about the "Women and the American Labor Movement". I used a quote from this article to represent the

devastation made by the tragedy. It represented the outcomes of the fire through which many of the workers died trying to escape because there were no safety conditions provided in order to help them escape. The article helped me to understand my topic because it showed the result of the Shirtwaist Factory fire. The result of the dead people who had jumped out of the building, brought devastation to many people, thus becoming a reason for fighting for better conditions for factory workers.

Secondary Sources

Adams, Cydney. "March 25, 1911: Triangle Fire Tragedy Kills 146 Factory Workers." *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 25 Mar. 2016, www.cbsnews.com/news/on-this-day-march-25-1911-triangle-fire-tragedy-kills-146-factory-workers-in-nyc/. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

This secondary source was a CBS news program that discussed the Triangle Shirtwaist fire. I used this source to help support my thesis by using information about the fire and how it caused the deaths of many workers. This source represented the cause and effects of the fire. This source was very important to my paper because I was able to use the information to show the background of why the fire happened the way that it did. The program also represented the feelings of the people affected.

Baker, Andrew C. "The Progressive Era." Edited by Mary A. Henderson, *The American Yawp Reader*, Stanford University Press,

www.americanyawp.com/text/20-the-progressive-era/#footnote_1_105. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

This secondary source of a website gave information about the progressive era of industries and how the people and workers were affected. It was this article that discussed the impact of the factory fire. I used the information from the website to help show the bias of the topic by discussing the opinions of the owners Max Blanck and Isaac Harris. I was able to show why they did not want to put in some of the safety regulations and how their decisions impacted the event of the fire. By being able to see why certain decisions were made helped me to understand my topic because I was able to see the overall effect on the fire and the people.

History.com Editors. "Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2 Dec. 2009, www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/triangle-shirtwaist-fire. Accessed 17 Dec. 2018.

This secondary source of a website provided valuable information about the cause and effects of the fire. As well as how the people handled certain situations. I used the information from the website to show the after effects of the fire that took place. I was able to represent how the unions made an impact both before and after the fire by fighting for better working conditions and safety standards. This website was very important to my paper because it helped me understand how the unions took part in the event. In which it had different impact before and after the event. I was able to see how

the unions wanted to make the impact for better working regulations through the use of strikes.

NYOUNG11. "What Laws or Law Came out of Both the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire and the Great Chicago Fire?" *Enotes.com*, Enotes.com, www.enotes.com/homework-help/what-laws-law-came-out-both-triangle-shirtwaist-675233. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

This secondary source of a website written by certified educator, NYOUNG11, provided examples and information about the new regulations created after the factory fire. I was able to use this source through its providence of new laws and regulation examples, such as the "54-hour Bill". I used these new regulations and laws to support the triumph idea of my claim through which they created better working conditions for employees.

This website was very important to my topic because it helped me to better understand the effects after the fire took place. I was able to understand how the new standards impacted the workers through which they got higher wages and lower working hours.

"Triangle Shirtwaist Fire." *AFL-CIO*, aflcio.org/about/history/labor-history-events/triangle-shirtwaist-fire. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

This secondary source of a website provides important information about the unions and strikes that occurred both before and after the event, as well as about the working conditions. This source was used to help me show the triumph represented through the

event by telling about how unions and many citizens impacted by the event made a difference in order to improve working conditions. Such as through meetings demanding for fire safety. This website helped me to create my project by developing my understanding of how the unions organized in order to promote better working and safety standards. It helped me put together a paper by making me aware of the many people that were involved and impacted.

