The Triangle Fire and its Repercussions

A Microcosm of the 20th Century American Labor Movement

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Abstract

If you go there now, the Brown Building is a part of New York University. It was donated in 1929 by Frederick Brown who gave it the name we know it by today. If you went there on the 25th of March, 1911, you would have witnessed a fire erupt there in what proved to be one of the deadliest industrial disasters in American History. The public outcry and legislative fervor cemented New York as a exemplar for progressivism around the nation. It was an integral component of the American Labor Movement, and its ramifications can still be felt throughout all of working society today. In this paper, I will examine how the fire and the movement it ignited the Twentieth Century American Labor movement and where workers of the United States stand today because of their sacrifice.

March 25th, 1911

It was around 4:30 pm on Saturday, March 25th, 1911. This was decades before the Fair Labor Standards Act would guarantee that these workers had the weekends off for leisure. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory was just a few minutes from closing for the day. By 4:40, fire had broken out on the eighth floor of the ten floor factory building (McEvoy, 1995, p. 628). The first alarm was called in at 4:45 (McEvoy, 1995, p. 628).

To this point, the building was described as "fireproof" because of its steel and concrete construction. That description would prove dangerously inaccurate. Within 30 minutes, the fire had consumed three floors. 141 people died that day as reported by the New York Times the next day. Historians today agree on the figure 146 (McEvoy, 1995, p. 622). Some of the women had jumped out of the windows, filling the air with screaming on their way down (Stein, 2010, p. 14). Others had suffocated, trapped inside the building with locked doors that were opened too late. Others still were overcome by the flames and burned to death (Shepherd, 1911).

The victims consisted mostly of young, uneducated immigrant women (Martinez, 2011). These were a particularly vulnerable subset of workers because they had to face the language barrier and lacked the social capital of native born Americans.

Foreshadowing: Before the Fire

After hearing about this, a common reaction is "Why did no one anticipate this?" The answer is they did. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company had resisted implementing changes from trade unions and state legislation that would have improved worker safety. The Triangle Fire only happened the way it did because of the plethora of code violations committed by the Factory's administrators. Clear policy adherence would have saved lives. Among the enormous number of negligent acts, the owners' mismanagement of the number of stairways, the cramped layout of the factory floor, and the locked doors all cost 123 women and 23 men

to lose their lives that day (Von Drehle, 2004).

This wasn't even the first time that the word "fire" was on the table. The New York City Fire Commissioner had certified the building as a "fire trap" a mere 3 months prior (McEvoy, 1995, p. 627). City regulations already required that buildings that tall should have 3 staircases to the roof. The builders only included a single stairway that could be used for escape on its own, a single point of failure. To save costs, they counted the fire escape as a stairwell, and even then, it only went down to the second floor. The same fire escape was reported as "dangerously loose" by the City Fire Commissioner. It came as no surprise then, that it collapsed under the weight of so many trying to escape. The final stairway was partial and didn't connect the ground to the roof, but stopped at the 10th floor (McEvoy, 1995, p. 627).

The New York Labor Code required 250 cubic feet of air per worker so that workers could have enough space to breathe. The company circumvented this precaution by making ceilings high. The result? At face value, workers seemed to be getting their respective airspace. In practice, however, conditions were grim. Arthur F. McEvoy, doctor in US Economic History, notes that long lines of sewing machines stretched from wall to wall, separated by narrow aisles where workers say. Together, this made a formation that he describes as "maze" (McEvoy, 1995, p. 628).

Finally, according to the same document by Dr. McEvoy, the Labor Code also required that doors be unlocked during the day and that doors open outwards into the stairwell. Not only did the stairway doors open inward into the factory floor, but were they also locked (McEvoy, 1995, p. 628), yet another obstacle that contributed to so many deaths that day. Their excuse? They alleged that the company was only trying to prevent theft of company products by preventing discreet departures through an unsupervised exit. (McEvoy, 1995). In other words, company administrators jeopardized so many lives that day expressly to protect their own interests.

The atrocious working conditions didn't end there or start there. These same garment

factory workers had, in the past, faced working conditions that they fought ruthlessly. For example, before 1910, these and other garment workers had to work for 70 or more hours a week without overtime pay, earning a measly 6 dollars (Von Drehle, 2004). According to the Consumer Price Index, that would be the equivalent of approximately 167 dollars a week in 2018.

In response, the 400 workers of Local 25 of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) decided to go on strike. While recovering from a beating from hired arms, union activist Clara Lemlich convinced garment workers across the city to participate in a general strike. In late September, 20,000 workers walked off their jobs. By the 8th of February, the employers at the Triangle Factory finally ran out of scab labor and gave in to most of the demands of the strikers. They won a 20 percent raise, a reduced workweek of 52 hours, and overtime pay (Von Drehle, 2004). They also called on city leaders to institute and enforce better worker health and safety standards, but these provisions wouldn't come in time to lessen casualties on the day of the fire.

The Fallout: Public Solidarity

In its wake, the Triangle Fire left the public astonished, and the worker safety movement caught the national eye, but no amount of attention could prevent the factory owners from escaping unscathed. They were never found guilty. On December 27th, they were neither found to have ordered the doors to be locked nor found to have had any idea that managers were doing it. In the end, the families of the workers were compensated a mere 75 dollars each, roughly 1900 dollars in 2018, equivalent to five weeks' pay at the new hard-won wage rate (Robinson & Robinson, 2018, p. 9). The public outcry could still be felt as angry crowds yelled "Murderers!" as they left the courthouse (Robinson & Robinson, 2018, p. 9).

On April 5th, however, the public showed its unity. Vast stretches of the sidewalk were covered as a total of 300,000 people lined the streets to watch 120,000 in a funeral march to honor the victims (McEvoy, 1995, p. 644).

The Legacy: Legislative Reform

Garment workers in New York had already undertaken two major strikes. First there was the "Uprising of 20,000" mentioned before. Then, there was another strike in New York of 60,000 workers. In Chicago, there was a 1910 – 1911 strike 40,000 workers strong (Helgeson, 2016). By the time the Factory Fire happened, the labor movement was already in full swing. The fire intensified their efforts. Garment workers from the ILGWU and other various unions formed the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), and together, the tens of thousands of members went on strike. They earned higher wages, shorter hours, and better working conditions for themselves. But more than that, the public momentum led to the creation of a bill which went on to establish the New York State Factory Investigating Commission on June 30th of the same year (McEvoy, 1995).

The number 146 pales in comparison to the astronomical 35,000 workers who died in work accidents annually at the start of the 1900s (Helgeson, 2016). It was clear any true progress would have to adress the general problem of workplace safety. The Committee was made up of union activists, as well as experts in fire engineering and architecture (Martinez, 2011, p. 5). As McEvoy notes,

> By 1915 the Factory Commission had engineered the passage of 36 new statuses on safety regulation, hours limitation, child labor, and so on . . . In 1912 New York amended its constitution so as to permit enforcement of a workers' compensation statute and instituted the new scheme the following year . . . Spurred by public outrage, the nation's leading industrial state revolutionized its political economy in the space of three years. The Triangle fire, then, marked a historical discontinuity of some significance. It suddenly made palpable a new social order, awareness of which had been gathering for decades (McEvoy, 1995, p. 646).

The change didn't stop there. 1913 saw the creation of the Bureau of Fire Prevention, which created legislation such as the Line Safety Code (1913). This "Focused on providing people a path for 'prompt escape' in case of fire by identifying and creating standards to counter fire hazards" (Martinez, 2011, p. 7). All things considered, Labor's response to the Triangle Fire had effects that panned the entire US. It set the stage for the Progressive Era

and spawned New York styled labor reform on a national scale (McEvoy, 1995).

The Building Today

According to its website, in 1929, philanthropist Frederick Brown, who had purchased the building prior, donated it to New York University, which still owns it today. When I visited the Brown Building, I was expecting a bit more commemoration. When I got there, there was little more than a few plaques noting its historical significance.

As for unions, their membership declined after the 1920s. Strikes became less frequent, and "welfare capitalism" took its footing. Here, employers offered certain benefits along with the traditional wage or salary system (Helgeson, 2016). Such offerings included home loans, group insurance policies, and stock options. Together with Progressive era reforms, and a transition into the service economy we know today, this reduced workers' reliance on unions to maintain a healthy standard of living.

Despite spiking again to 26 percent in the 1930s (Helgeson, 2016), union membership slowly slumped again to its modern figure of 10 percent ("Union Members – 2017," 2018). Even though labor unions and public solidarity have seemingly fallen to all time lows, workers in the US are generally better off today due to the progressive labor reform spearheaded by workers in the 20th century. Whether unions are relevant in the US today is up for contention, but it wouldn't be a stretch to say we won't soon forget the tragedy that sparked such an influential movement.

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