

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire

In 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory was less than a block from Washington Square Park in New York and had nearly 500 employees. You could say that this company was considered a sweatshop based on the 12-hour days, unsafe working conditions and getting paid at most, \$2 per day. Most of the people that worked there were young women and girls as young as 10 years old, which was not illegal or uncommon at the time. They were immigrants with Italian and Jewish backgrounds who wanted a more promising life in America. A lot of them were there to make money for their family and send earnings back home each month. The Triangle Factory was in a building called the Asch Building. The Factory was located on floors 8 and 9 and floor 10 was for the owners and management. It was a very desired modern factory job at the time because of the demand of these women shirtwaists. It wasn't a good paying nor a safe job, but working in fashion and making clothes is what a lot of women wanted to pursue and were good at! Women's shirtwaists were a very popular style in the 1900's and there were many different facotires that were sweing those shirts. They made the women feel elegant and weathly to own a shirtwaist. Before the workers could leave the factory each day their belongings were searched of material or thread theft. They would lock all doors and only have one exit to control the workers while they searched bags. At the time, the working conditions at this factory were not favored by the workers because they received poor pay, 12-14 hour shifts and the extreme expectations from management wouldn't even let them use the bathroom. They were soon ripe for action against the poor working conditions and basic rights.

The workers not only at Triangle Shirtwaist Factory but other garment factories wanted to organize a group to fight for shorter hours, better pay and safer conditions. They began to use their voices and form unions. The owners feared unions in their factories because it would diminish their authority, and they wanted control over everything that happened in their factory. On October 4th, 1909, workers went on strike and started the single largest work stoppage in New York History with nearly 15,000 garment workers. They got the attention of the press when the daughter of J.P Morgan, Ann Morgan took up the cause and joined the fight. She believed the city needed to be reformed. The Manufacturing Association tried to get the strikers to stop by telling them that they could receive higher wages and short hours, if they went back to work. But they disagreed because they still couldn't unionize. Shortly after, Ann Morgan left the strikers because she didn't want to turn it into a socialist cause. The busy season started to come into view at these factories and they needed to do something to get their workers back into the building. That's when almost every shirtwaist factory accepted their workers demands to have a union, except Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. They accepted the higher wages and short hours but wouldn't budge the union request.

Then, on March 25th, 1911, smoke was spotted coming out of a larger building in downtown New York. And it just so happened to be the Asch Building where Triangle Shirtwaist Company was located. The fire started from a cigarette being dropped on the 8th floor. The workers began screaming and running around in panic trying to get out of the building. The owners on

the 10th floor were alerted of the fire and were able to make it to the roof and escape onto another building next door. But the 200 workers on the 9th were never notified of the fire. The Asch building was not prepared for a fire emergency with no sprinklers (which was common) and a dozen water buckets in the corner that were unused. There were 4 elevators with only 1 workingn that day, a fire escape that would soon fail, and finally a secondary exit door that was locked everyday from management searching workers bags for theft. The workers had very limited exit paths and that is when they had to start making life or death choices. The single elevator could only fit 12 people on it at a time, only taking 4 trips before breaking down. Workers were shouting at the congregation of people down on the street to call for help. When the fire department arrived, they could only raise the ladder to the 6th floor, not capable of helping them escape. People began to jump out of windows and down the elevator shaft as their only option instead of burning. If management hadn't locked the stairway right before doing searches on the workers, that would have been the exit. The fire escape collapsed allowing only 20 workers to escape from it. 146 people died in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory that day. The owners were charged with manslaughter, only later to be acquitted from all charges because there was no proof they intentionally locked the exit door.

The fire was a key moment in labor unions, especially the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). That begun the reformation of safer, sanitized, and comfortable workplaces with better wages and respect for the workers. It represented over thousands of immigrant women and changed how things were being run. The Sullivan-Hoey Fire Prevention Law began the requirement of sprinkler systems in factories which was overlooked by the New York City Fire Prevention Bureau and expanded powers of the fire commissioner. The fire also began the inspection of factories not only for fire protection but also to make sure they were following all other laws and union regulations. This tragedy began to serve as a model to state and national workplace safety regulations, opening the eyes of many.

Resources

- <https://www.osha.gov/aboutosha/40-years/trianglefactoryfire>
- <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/uncovering-the-history-of-the-triangle-shirtwaist-fire-124701842/>
- <https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/triangle-shirtwaist-fire>
- https://www.census.gov/history/www/homepage_archive/2016/march_2016.html

Video

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTpUZ3ui8iM>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FguWSsW21CQ&t=120s>



Carrying a body to the Morgue for identification

