

The 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist 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. The survivors were left to live and relive those agonizing moments. The victims and their families, the people passing by who witnessed the desperate leaps from ninth floor windows, and the City of New York would never be the same.

Survivors recounted the horrors they had to endure, and passers-by and reporters also told stories of pain and terror they had witnessed. The images of death were seared deeply in their mind's eye.

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 Womens' Trade Union League (WTUL) fought for better working conditions and protective legislation. 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.

<https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/story/fire.html>

Company greed caused this avoidable disaster. Yet Triangle owners were acquitted in court for responsibility in the deaths of these precious young people. The value of each human life was assessed at only \$75, paid to the grieving families who sued the company.

This fire and terrible loss of life shocked workers and other progressives. Protests followed. Hundreds of thousands of people joined a funeral procession organized by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union on April 5, 1911. The Women's Trade Union League demanded fire safety legislation. Due to pressure by labor activists, New York state investigated factory conditions and implemented workplace safety rules.

<https://www.workers.org/2019/03/41551/>