

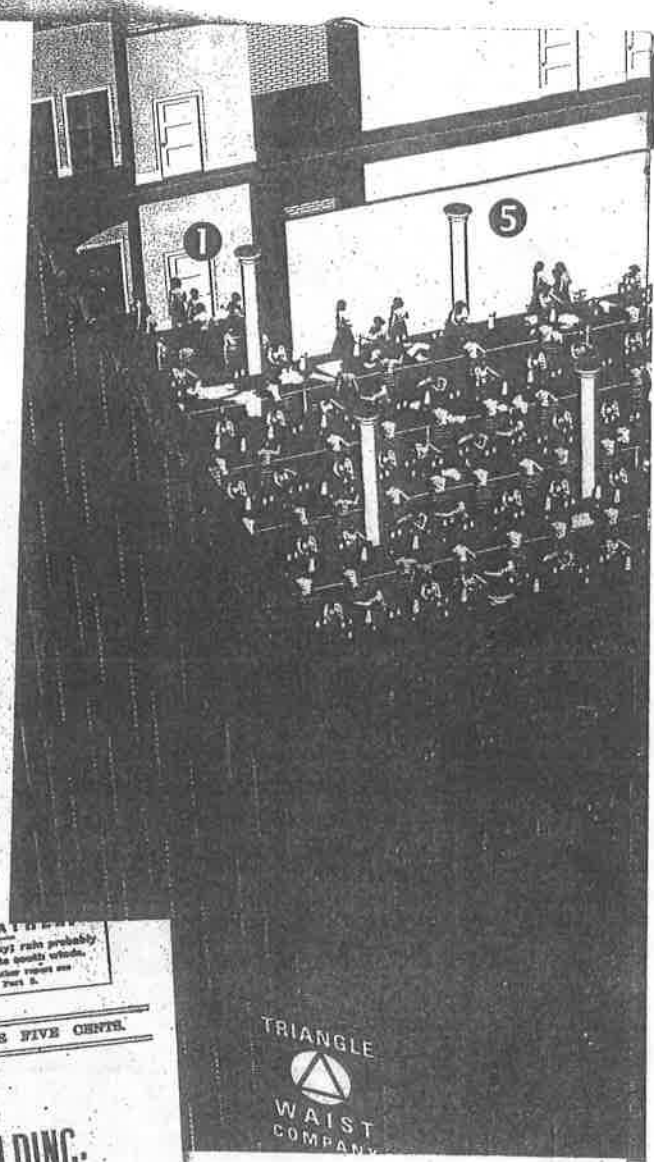
TIMES PAST

1911

The Triangle Factory Fire

One hundred years ago, a deadly blaze in New York helped spur reform of the nation's labor laws

BY JOSEPH BERGER



It was one of the deadliest workplace disasters in American history, killing 146 people, most of them young immigrant women and children, in a New York City clothing factory.

The victims of the fire at the Triangle Waist Company died in agony. More than 50 had no alternative but to jump from a ninth-floor window as an afternoon crowd of onlookers gasped below. Others burned to death or suffocated behind locked exit doors. Still others plunged to the ground when a flimsy fire escape collapsed.

The horror made the nation more conscious than ever that girls as young as 14 were

working for meager wages and that many workplaces lacked even common-sense safety measures, like sufficient exits and sprinkler systems. The fire also led to numerous local and state labor reforms that served as a model for the nation and invigorated the national movement for workers' rights.

"It was an incredibly galvanizing event for the nation's labor movement and the rights of workers," says Bruce Raynor, president of Workers United, which represents garment workers today. "After Triangle, people were so shocked, not only by the terrible disaster, but by the drama of these young immigrant women who were treated as less than human by their boss."

Between 1860 and 1900, 14 million immi-

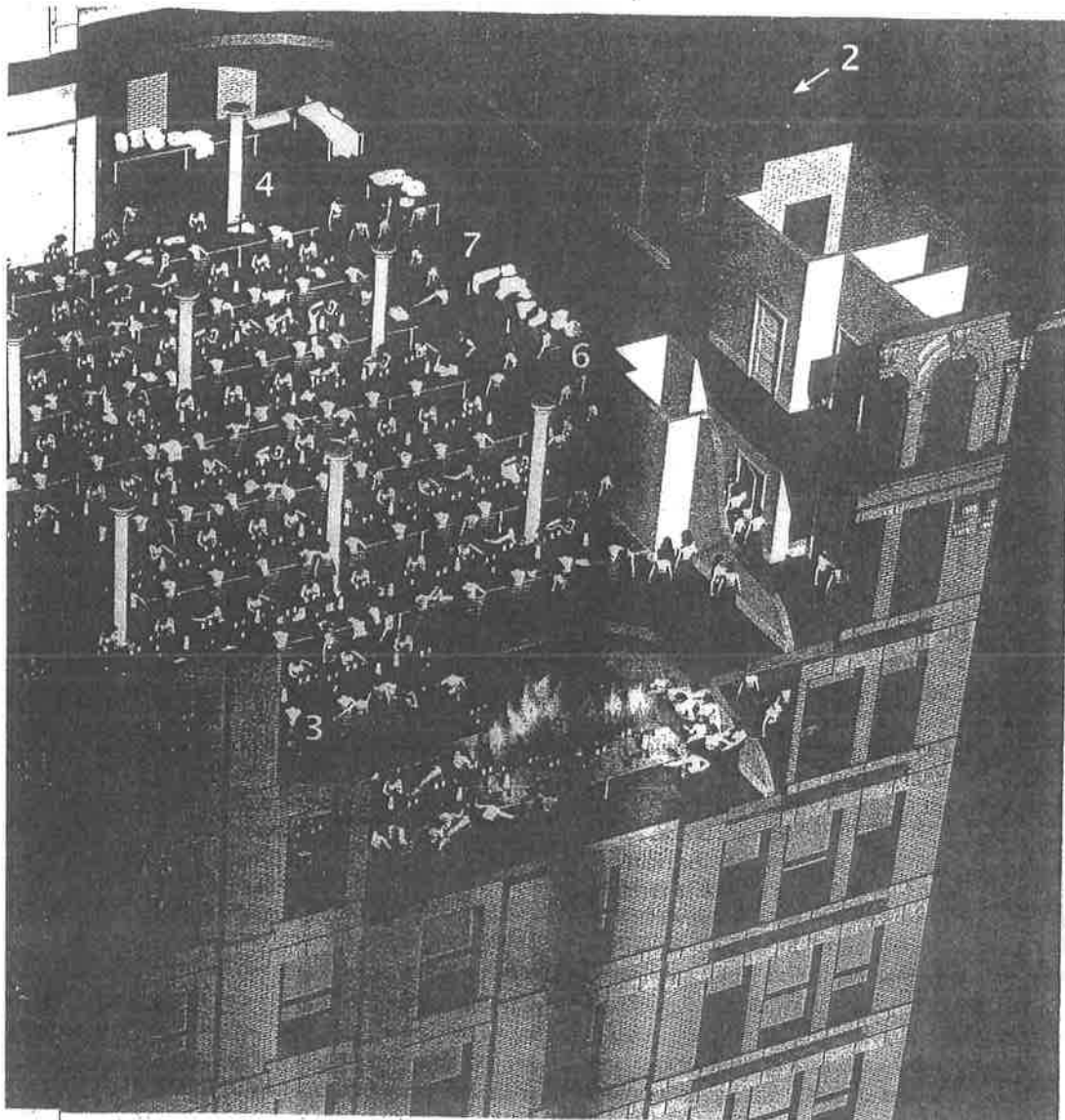
grants poured into the U.S. searching for jobs. They (and many American-born workers) worked in grimy, treacherous factories as manufacturers rushed to turn out products faster and more cheaply. Injury and death were common. Just four months before the Triangle fire, a garment factory blaze in Newark, New Jersey, killed 25 women.

Teenage Immigrant Workers

"By one estimate, one hundred or more Americans died on the job every day in the booming industrial years around 1911," writes David von Drehle in his book, *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*. "Mines collapsed on them, ships sank under them, pots of molten steel spilled over their heads, locomotives smashed into them, exposed machinery grabbed them by the arm or leg or hair and pulled them in."

But earlier calamities were dwarfed by what happened in March 1911 at the

PHOTO CREDITS THE NEW YORK TIMES NEWSPAPER; ILLUSTRATION BY NICK ROYD; KEYSTONE/GETTY



Hazards at Triangle

Considered "fireproof" because of its brick exterior, the Triangle building was actually a fire trap. Here were some of the problems:

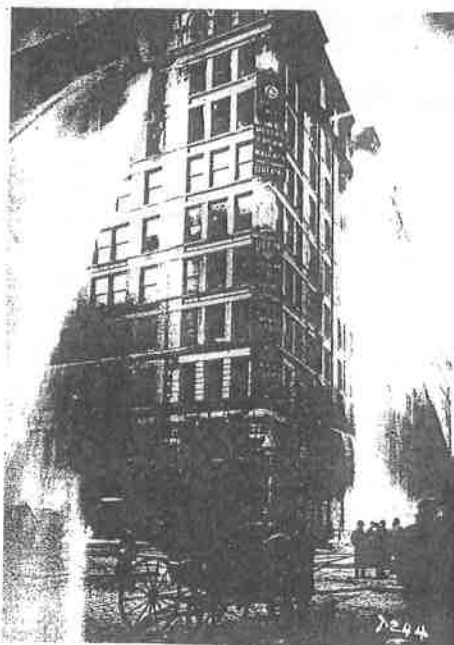
- ① Locked door to the stairwell
- ② Rusty fire escape that collapsed
- ③ Wicker baskets full of scraps
- ④ Oily floors spread the fire quickly
- ⑤ No sprinkler systems, only pails of water
- ⑥ Flammable barrel of oil
- ⑦ Lack of a required third staircase

SOURCE: KHEEL CENTER, CORNELL UNIVERSITY

Triangle Waist Company, located on the top three floors of a 10-story building in downtown Manhattan now owned by New York University. Triangle was one of the nation's largest manufacturers of shirtwaists, known today as blouses. More than 500 workers cut fabric for, sewed, and boxed 2,000 shirtwaists per day. Retailing for about \$3 each, shirtwaists were all the rage because they freed women from uncomfortable corsets.

Most Triangle workers were between 16 and 23, with some as young as 14. They were immigrants or children of immigrants from the Jewish ghettos of Eastern Europe or the peasant villages of southern Italy. Many barely spoke English.

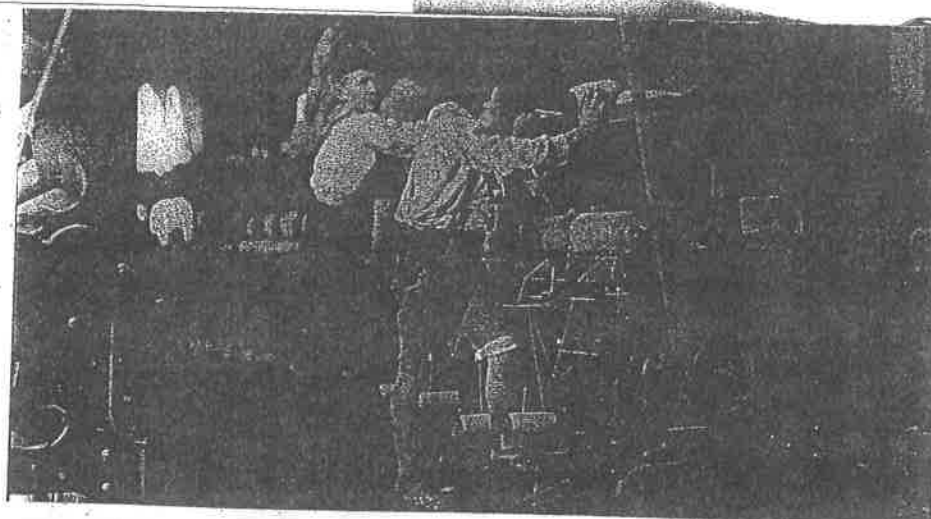
Becky Reivers was an 18-year-old orphan just off the boat from Russia and working for \$7 per week, the equivalent of about \$160 today. Esther Harris, 21, earned \$22 a week as a skilled sample maker, but that had to



Fighting the blaze on March 25, 1911 (left); several days later, a labor group mourns the dead in New York

Joseph Berger is a reporter for *The Times*.

TIMELINE 'Workers' Rights Before and After Triangle



Child labor:
Young boys at a
textile factory
in Macon,
Georgia, 1909

1800s- 1900s Immigration

Millions of immigrants flock to the U.S. Desperately poor, many work long hours in grimy factories for meager pay. States have few laws protecting workers.

1909 Labor Strikes

Workers strike at the Triangle Waist Company; soon, 20,000 other New York City garment workers join in. After 13 weeks and the arrests of 700 women, the factories agree to a 52-hour workweek and four paid vacation days a year.

1911-1915 Safety Laws

After the Triangle fire, New York enacts 36 new safety laws over the next four years. Other states follow suit.

1935 Unions

Congress passes the National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act), which prohibits employers from discriminating against union workers and assures workers the right to negotiate terms of employment.

1936 Child Labor Laws

Under the Walsh-Healey Act, the U.S. government agrees not to purchase goods made by children under 16.

1938 Minimum Wage

The Fair Labor Standards Act bans child labor, and sets minimum ages for various kinds of work, a national minimum wage of \$0.25/hour, and overtime beyond 40 hours a week.

support her father, mother, and sister. Rosie Freedman, 18, had survived a pogrom—an anti-Jewish riot—in Poland and was living with her uncle, sending money to her family back home. Typically, these women lived in tenements with windowless rooms and shared bathrooms.

Two years before the fire, Triangle workers—many of whom worked 12 hours a day, six days a week—had gone on strike against the Triangle factory and its owners, asking for a 52-hour workweek. Some of their demands were met (*see timeline*).

On Saturday, March 25, 1911, a little before 5 p.m., workers were getting ready to leave when someone on the eighth floor alerted the manager, Samuel Bernstein, that a fire had broken out in a fabric cutter's scrap bin. Investigators later concluded that someone—a person never identified conclusively—tossed a smoldering match or cigarette butt into a container filled with highly flammable cotton and tissue paper.

The floor filled with similarly stuffed bins. Bernstein, who lost a brother in the fire, ended up saving many lives. But his efforts

to douse the flames with pails of water failed, and the factory's hoses could not shoot water. Soon bins were exploding in flames under each sewing table, like a series of firebombs. Workers rushed for the two exit doors. Though one door had to be unlocked with a key, most of the 180 employees on the eighth floor managed to escape.

Workers on the 10th floor, including the factory's owners, were alerted by a phone call and fled to the safety of the building's brick roof or down the sole, single-passenger elevator.

'My God, I Am Lost'

But it took several minutes for word to reach the 250 workers on the ninth floor, and by then flames were ferociously climbing the air shaft, which acted like a chimney, and racing across the loft. Some workers crowded one exit and others jammed the elevator nearby, forcing the rest to try another door on the other side of the floor. But there was a problem.

One survivor, Kate Alterman, an upholsterer's daughter in her late teens or early 20s, later testified in a court that she saw Bernstein's

brother struggling unsuccessfully to open that exit door, then she tried and also failed.

"It is locked! It is locked!" she recalled someone shouting.

Alterman, her pocketbook burning in her hands, covered her head with her coat and ran "right through the flames." She made it to the other exit and up to the roof, but before she fled she saw a colleague, Margaret Schwartz, with her dress and hair in flames.

"My God, I am lost," were the last words she heard Schwartz say.

Those who tried the one narrow fire escape found that it didn't go all the way to the ground. More than worthless, it fooled two dozen people into thinking they might use it to flee. Instead, their combined weight ripped the fire escape off the building.

One passerby as the fire raged was William Shepherd, a journalist for the United Press news agency. He described "a new sound, a more horrible sound than description can picture."

"It was the thud of a speeding, living body on a stone sidewalk," he wrote.

That sound was repeated 50 times. Among the jumpers, Shepherd saw a young man

LEWIS HINE VIA LOC (CHILD LABOR); THOMAS A. DORGAN (TAD); NEW YORK JOURNAL (VINTAGE CARTOON)

help four women to their deaths, kissing and embracing the last one, who was evidently his girlfriend, before leaping himself.

The next day, *The New York Times* reported that four hours after they had extinguished the blaze, firefighters discovered Hyman Meshel, 21, in the flooded basement, water up to his neck but still alive. He had escaped by sliding down the steel cable of an elevator shaft and "the flesh of the palms of his hands had been torn from the bones."

"My sister, my sister," he kept mumbling. His sister Annie had worked on the eighth floor.

The fire lasted only a half hour, but its repercussions lasted much longer. Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, the two owners, were tried for manslaughter in December, though their lawyer cast doubt about whether they knew the ninth floor door was actually locked. The *Times* reported that Leonora O'Reilly, a labor leader, had spoken to many survivors, who all agreed some doors were routinely locked to prevent workers from stealing blouses.

But enough doubts were cast that the jury, after two hours of deliberation, acquitted the owners. Harris and Blanck slumped in their chairs while their wives sobbed. Outside, David Weiner, whose sister Rose had burned to death, called them murderers and cried out, "Where is the justice!"

By coincidence, one witness to the fire was an advocate for the poor named Frances Perkins, who was having tea in a nearby townhouse when she heard the fire engines. She went on to become Secretary of Labor under President Franklin D. Roosevelt—and the first woman in the Cabinet. Perkins oversaw the passage of landmark laws protecting workers' rights and safety.

Triangle's Legacy

Joshua Freeman, a labor historian at City University of New York, says the Triangle disaster prompted a dramatic upsurge in worker protections. Robert Wagner, who as a New York state legislator held hearings on the Triangle calamity, went on as a U.S. Senator to write the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (known as the Wagner Act). It prohibited employers from discriminating against workers who joined unions and assured the rights of workers to negotiate terms of their employment.

The Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938 established a national minimum wage and guaranteed overtime (time and a half) for most kinds of work beyond 40 hours a week. It also fixed minimum ages of 16 for work during school hours, 14 for certain jobs after school, and 18 for dangerous work.

Since the New Deal, the number of workplace deaths has been cut to a fraction of what they were in 1911. But some fac-

tory owners still bend the rules. In 1991, in North Carolina, 25 workers died in a fire. And sweatshops crowded with underpaid and often illegal immigrant workers continue to operate in places like New York and Los Angeles, as well as in factories abroad that manufacture clothing for American brands like Wal-Mart, Nike, Tommy Hilfiger, and the Gap.

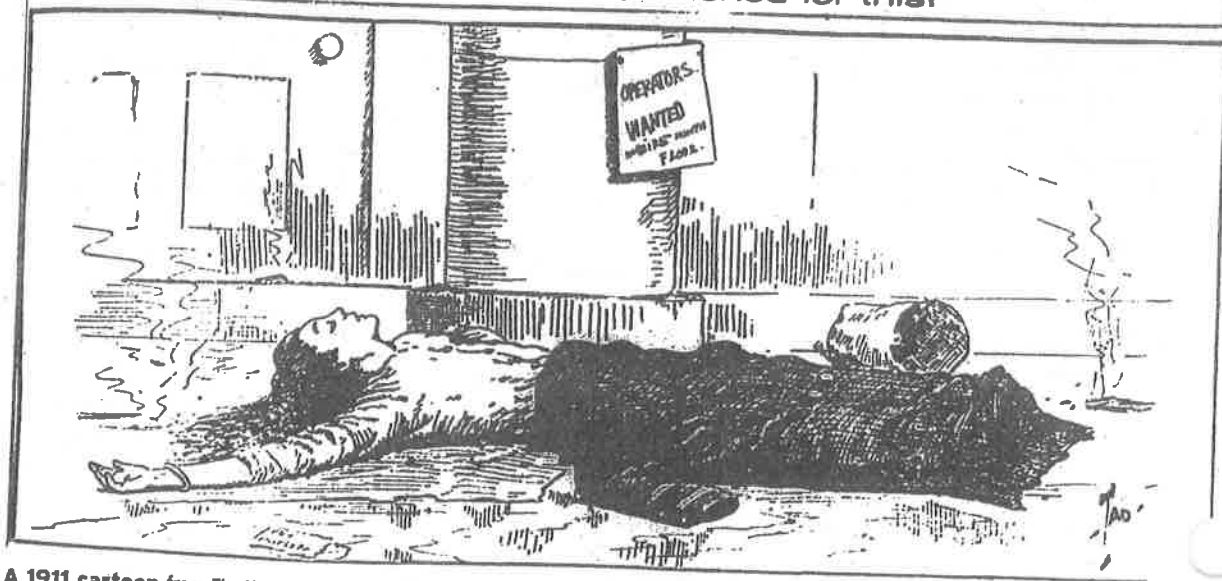
As recently as December 2010, 29 workers in a garment factory in Bangladesh were killed in a fire that bore eerie echoes of Triangle. Most of those who died jumped from the ninth floor to avoid the flames. A local journalist reported that a stairwell gate was locked. The fire happened just as protests rippled across Bangladesh against the nation's minimum wage, which is equivalent to \$45 a month.

Nevertheless, at least in the U.S., the risk of death in the workplace has been cut to a fraction—1/30th by some estimates—of what it was in 1911. And 100 years later, the impact of the deaths of those young immigrant women and men continues to resonate.

"Of all the events in the history of this is the one most often taught in schools because it was young girls who died," says Raynor of Workers United. "The anniversary is a great moment to teach people about it and reflect about why it was so significant."

This Is One of a Hundred Murdered

Is any one to be punished for this?



A 1911 cartoon from *The New York Journal* captured the public outrage over the conditions that led to so many deaths at the Triangle factory.