

Triangle Fire takes 146 lives

by Mallory M.

Fire ripped through the Triangle Waist Factory at 23-29 Washington Place March 25, 1911, tragically killing 146 young immigrant workers. The company's owners, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, are blamed for the deaths because all of the doors but one in the factory were cruelly locked.



Firefighters try to extinguish the fire.

The shirt making company operated in a fireproof building, but under harrowing and deplorable sweatshop conditions. The perfect breeding ground for fire was created by crowded machines and highly flammable cloth material, with the wooden workbenches acting as kindling. Hundreds of employees working long hours in dark rooms for low pay made the chances of such deadly error sky high.

Although the building was fireproof, many say that is not enough. One father of a young Italian victim stated, "The greedy employers are saying they are not to blame because they fireproofed it, but that will not bring back my daughter." The man could only spare those few words, as he had to repeatedly tend to his wife who kept collapsing from grief.

The fire, which broke out near the top of the building at around closing time, leaped floors at a time. Bystander William Cody said, "There was nothing we [other witnesses] could do besides call the fire department and watch. The fire moved like nothing I have ever seen. It seemed to swallow the building within minutes."

While this overpowering fire spread, a slow trickle of desperate girls found their way out of a small door in the rear of the building. The less fortunate were seen throwing open windows all over the building, gasping for air. What they didn't realize however, was that this oxygen they longed for only fueled the fire they were so desperately trying to escape.

Women were also seen jumping from the windows, meeting instant death. "Girls seemed to be falling from the sky," firefighter Jack Collins stated. "We tried to catch them on extended parachutes, but most missed and were killed instantly. I even saw someone get hit by a woman that jumped.

Mourning is expected to last through the next few weeks, while police and the morgue attempt to identify all of the bodies and distribute recovered belongings to victims' family.

The New York City morgue spokesperson stated at a recent press conference, "It's hard to tell anything with these bodies. We have three particularly gruesome deaths where all we can't even discern faces. All that's



Police carry recovered belongings to the city morgue.

for sure is that they all suffered from extremely painful burns before their death. Other victims suffocated from heavy smoke inhalation."

The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union is expected to proclaim a day of mourning for those lost in the fire. Other services are being, and will continue to be held at local churches and synagogues.

The beginnings of protest are starting to rise, with numerous groups complaining of the atrocious working conditions found in nationwide city factories.

The spotlight hasn't been fully cast on the owners of the company,

Blanck and Harris, but the two men will and should be blamed for the deaths of the 146 innocent mothers, daughters, and sisters who met their painful deaths in the fire.

As for the poor working conditions of the Triangle Waist Factory, the building is fireproof, so its structure is still solid. The inside is a different story; scorched sewing machines, tables and benches are barely recognizable among the soot and charred bodies still trying to be recovered.

One solution to the ever-growing problem of poor working conditions is for the federal government or state legislative boards to pass building codes for factories to abide by. By doing this, more windows that would be installed would result in more light in the factory rooms.

In addition, part of the building code must include that during the hours of business operation, all exit doors must be unlocked from the inside, providing more than one way out if such a disaster ever occurs again.

Union member Christopher Mitchell commented, "It is outrageous that they [employers] expect us to work without light and safety equipment. It is no wonder that this fire broke out, it was bound to happen somewhere. It's just a shame so many people were killed."

Other reforms already on the table that will help the alleviate danger in the workplace include not only building more fire-proof buildings, but regulating the interior setup, so such fertile breeding grounds for fire are nonexistent.

Applicable Facts The Triangle Waist Company Fire

On March 25, 1911 a fire broke out on the top floor of the Triangle Waist Company building. The shirtwaist company operated as a sweatshop at 23-29 Washington Place in the heart of Manhattan, employing over 500 workers. 146 of these workers, mostly young Jewish and Italian immigrant girls, died in the fire. The large number of dead workers was due to the fact that every door in the building was locked except for one, so the women couldn't take breaks. Women were seen jumping from windows to escape the quick-moving flames. New York City citizens mourned the deaths of the young women for weeks, lining up processions to pay respects to the dead; many bodies were never identified. Soon groups started to protest such dangerous working conditions as those at the shirtwaist factory. The owners of the company, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, were accused of knowing that all but one set of doors in the factory were locked but later vindicated on their charges. The jury only had to determine if Blanck and Harris were aware of the fact that only one set of doors was open.

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