

The 1911 Fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company Factory

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In 1909, the Triangle Shirtwaist Company witnessed hundreds of women employees went on strike. They were protesting dangerous working conditions, low wages, and poor management—specifically their disregard for the International ladies' Garment Workers Union. The strike grew to around twenty thousand workers. This ended in February 1910 when the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) stepped in.

Factory management policy was to lock all doors during the day to keep workers from pilfering. One day in 1911, a cigarette was dropped on a pile of cloth, engulfing the entire factory in flames. With all exit doors locked shut, workers were forced to jump from the windows, often over a hundred feet high. Out of 500 workers in the fire, 146 lost their lives. Conveniently, the owners of the factory escaped, unharmed. However, they were taken to court for negligence. Due to the worker dropping the cigarette, the owners were not convicted.

A leading WTUL organizer, Rose Schneiderman, made a speech during the memorial service for the workers. In her speech, she said, "I would be a traitor to those poor burned bodies if I came here to talk good fellowship. We have tried you good people of the public and we have found you wanting.... I know from my experience it is up to the working people to save themselves.... by a strong working class movement." (Roark et al., 2020)

As a result, a factory investigation commission was created to inspect the factories and buildings in New York City. The commission inspected 1,836 buildings and found that 14 had no fire escapes. The Triangle fire led to fire drills, sprinkler systems, etc. These regulations are still in place today and serve our workforce in the United States.

References

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