



A Voice at Work: 106 Years after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

On March 25, 1911, one hundred forty-six (146) workers, mostly young immigrant girls, died, as many of them jumped to their deaths from the 10-story building, unable to escape a fire because factory foremen had locked the doors. There were two narrow stairways to the street, one was locked from the outside to prevent stealing and the second only opened inward.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire was the deadliest industrial fire in the history of New York City and the fourth highest loss of life from an industrial accident in U.S. history.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire showed what can happen when employers refuse to work with unions. “If the factory owners had worked with the garment workers’ union, which demanded a decent fire escape and better safety conditions, 146 lives would have been saved.”¹

The fire “was a critical event in the history of the U.S. labor movement, the New Deal, the development of occupational safety and health standards, and the New York City Fire Department.”²

“The safety net of laws and regulations which were enacted after the Triangle fire arose out of the demands that workers and their unions had made for decades, and reflected a new vision of government.”³

“But as we commemorate” another “anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire..., it’s sobering to realize many of the lessons we thought had been absorbed must be re-learned again. And again, the Triangle fire, a symbol of unfettered gilded age greed, still stands burning before us— from lack of job safety and health protections, to neglect of the conditions endured by immigrant workers to the fundamental ability of workers to form unions and bargain for a better life.”⁴

¹ The Triangle Fire: Still Burning Before Our Nation, Tula Connell, March 24, 2011, The Nation.

² Don’t Mourn-Organize. Lessons from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, NYCOSH, 2011.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The Triangle Fire: Still Burning Before Our Nation, Tula Connell, March 24, 2011, The Nation.

“Immigrant workers face attacks by hostile state legislatures Some of the industries today where many immigrant workers are on the job are unregulated and have fallen outside the protection of existing labor laws, including the right to organize.”⁵

Newly elected politicians are paying back their corporate contributors by attacking the major institution which has defended the interests of working people – the labor movement. Right-to-work laws are being proposed in a number of states, and some politicians are pushing for national legislation.⁶

Just as "Occupy Wall Street" demands that the nation respond to the unrelenting pressure on the middle class, on workers and on the unemployed, the Teamsters have exposed the "War on Workers" being waged by billionaires and CEOs who seek to blame working people for the state of the economy and to "fix" the economy by giving to the rich and taking from the middle class.

“Over the last decade, workplaces throughout the world have experienced massive restructuring that has included downsizing, increased hours of work (e.g., 12 hour shifts, mandatory overtime), intensification of work (increased work load and/or job duties), increased pace of work ("push for production") and a host of changes in technologies, work processes and management techniques.”⁷

Behavior-based safety, or ‘blame-the-worker,’ programs where workers “observe” co-workers and record their “unsafe acts” are flourishing. These focus attention away from hazards and reinforce the myth that injuries result from bad behavior rather than hazardous conditions. These programs and policies also have a chilling effect on workers' reporting of symptoms, injuries and illnesses.⁸

“Collective bargaining still means a seat at the table to discuss issues such as working conditions, workplace safety and workplace innovation, empowering individuals to do the best job they can. And it means dignity and a chance for Americans to earn a better life, whether they work in sewing factories or mines, build tall buildings or care for our neighbors, teach our children, or run into burning buildings when others run out of them.”⁹

“We’re now in a very similar moment. We’re standing at the precipice of a major crisis for working people in their country, another moment where we have to stand up as immigrant workers and all workers to take back our rights and dignity in the workplace and in the economy as a whole.”¹⁰

“We need to give workers a stronger voice in the workplace, provide better protections for workers who choose to exercise their rights, reach out to educate immigrant workers about their right to a safe and healthful workplace, establish and firmly enforce sensible standards to prevent

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Teamsters Stand Up Against Damaging Bill, Continue Fight Against Right to Work, www.teamster.org, February 1, 2017.

⁷ Blame the Worker: The Rise of Behavioral-Based Safety Programs, *The Multinational Monitor*, November 2000 - Volume 21 - Number 11.

⁸ Confronting Blame-the-Worker Safety Programs, Nancy Lessin, May 19, 2010, *Labor Notes*.

⁹ What the Triangle Shirtwaist fire means for workers now, Hilda L. Solis, March 18, 2011, *The Washington Post*.

¹⁰ The Triangle Fire: Still Burning Before Our Nation, Tula Connell, March 24, 2011, *The Nation*.

injuries and illnesses on the job, and help employers comply with their legal responsibility to protect their workers. The spirits of those Triangle garment workers urge us to do better. We must. We will.”¹¹

¹¹ Don't Mourn-Organize. Lessons from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, NYCOSH, 2011.