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Lessons learned from the Triangle Waist factory fire

BY PETER DREIER AND DONALD COHEN

Some of the 146 victims of the Triangle Waist Company factory fire lay on the streets of New York's Lower East Side, March 25, 1911. Photo: International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union

For a listing of Triangle Waist factory fire centennial commemoration events around Los Angeles visit jewishjournal.com/calendar_stories.

On March 25, 1911, 146 garment workers, mostly Jewish and Italian immigrant girls in their teens and 20s, perished after a fire broke out at the Triangle Waist Co. factory in New York City's Greenwich Village. Even after the fire, the city's businesses continued to insist they could regulate themselves, but the deaths clearly demonstrated that companies like Triangle would not, on their own, concern themselves with their workers' safety. Despite this business opposition, the public's response to the fire led to landmark state regulations.

The fire was a milestone in Jewish, labor and women's history, and Americans are now observing the tragedy's 100th anniversary. Last month, PBS broadcast a new documentary about the fire, and HBO will air its own version next week. In Los Angeles and elsewhere, academics, unions and Jewish organizations have organized conferences, plays and memorial

ceremonies. Publishers have recently issued several histories, a novel and a volume of poetry about Triangle.

The themes are similar: We should remember those who perished and know that their deaths were not in vain. The tragedy was the catalyst for a century of reforms that made our jobs safer and families more secure.

But the fire also offers valuable lessons that resonate with contemporary political battles. Businesses today, and their allies in Congress and the state houses, are making the same arguments against government regulation that New York's business leaders made a century ago. The current hue and cry about "burdensome government regulations" and unions that stifle job growth shows that the Triangle fire's lessons may have been forgotten. Here is what happened.

One hundred years ago, New York was a city of enormous wealth and wide disparities between rich and poor. New industries, including the clothing industry, were booming. The new age had created a demand for off-the-rack, mass-produced clothing sold in department stores. The Triangle company made blouses, called shirtwaists.

Few consumers who bought the ready-to-wear clothing gave much thought to the people who made it. The garments were sewn in miserable factories, often by teenage girls who worked seven days a week, from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. and longer during the busy season. They were paid about $6 per week, and often were required to use their own needles, thread, irons and even sewing machines. The overcrowded factories (often a room in a tenement apartment) lacked ventilation; many were poorly lit firetraps without sprinklers or fire escapes.

In November 1909, 20,000 shirtwaist makers from more than 500 factories walked off their jobs. They demanded a 20 percent pay raise, a 52-hour workweek, extra pay for overtime, adequate fire escapes and open doors from the factories to the street. Their union, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), held meetings in English, Yiddish and Italian. The police began arresting strikers — labeling some of them "street walkers," which was literally true, as they were carrying picket signs up and down the sidewalks. Judges fined them and sentenced some of the activists to labor camps.

But the strikers held out, and by February 1910, most of the small and midsize factories, and some larger employers, had negotiated a settlement for higher pay and shorter hours. One of the companies that refused to settle was the Triangle Waist Co., one of the largest garment makers.

That July, more than 60,000 cloak makers, mostly men, went on strike. As the strike escalated, union and business leaders invited prominent Boston attorney Louis Brandeis to New York to mediate the conflict. Brandeis (later a

Supreme Court justice and leader of American Zionism) plunged into a crusade to bring industrial democracy to New York's clothing industry.

Operating as a neutral mediator, and without pay, Brandeis brought the manufacturers (through their trade association) and the workers (through the ILGWU) — both led by Jews — together to hammer out an industry-wide agreement that would make strikes less likely. With Brandeis' nudging, the two sides signed the Protocol of Peace agreement that set minimum industry standards on wages, hours, piece rates and workplace safety. Under the agreement, manufacturers were to give preference to union workers. Both sides agreed to take disputes to a three-member board of arbitration.

The protocol laid the foundation for future workplace reforms during the New Deal. But the protocol's weakness was that it was a voluntary agreement, not a government regulation, and not all manufacturers signed on. Once again, one of the holdouts was the Triangle Waist Co.

The company was owned by Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, both up-from-the-sweatshop Jewish immigrants, known as the "the shirtwaist kings." They were rabidly anti-union.

On Saturday, March 25, 1911, at 4:45 p.m., near quitting time, a fire broke out on the building's eighth and ninth floors. Factory foremen had locked the exit doors to keep union organizers out and keep workers from taking breaks and stealing scraps of fabric. Other doors only opened inward and were blocked by the stampede of workers struggling to escape. The ladders of the city's fire engines could not reach high enough to save the employees. As a result, workers burned or jumped to their deaths. Experts later concluded that the fire likely was caused by a cigarette dropped on a pile of "cut-aways," or scraps of cloths, that had been accumulating for almost three months.

Out of that cauldron of misery and protest emerged a diverse progressive movement composed of unlikely allies. It included immigrants, unionists, muckraking journalists, clergy, middle-class reformers like Frances Perkins (then a Consumers League activist who would become Franklin D. Roosevelt's trailblazing secretary of labor), socialists and socialites, including Anne Morgan (daughter of Wall Street chieftain J.P. Morgan).

On April 6, 30,000 New Yorkers marched — and hundreds of thousands more lined the march's route — to memorialize the fire's victims. Numerous rallies and editorials called for reforms — not only for fire safety codes but also workplace safety standards, child labor standards, shorter work hours, minimum wages and limits in home work.

Within days of the fire, groups organized mass meetings to demand reform. Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, one of the featured speakers at a rally at the Metropolitan Opera House, did not mince words.

“It is not the action of God but the inaction of man that is responsible,” he thundered. “The disaster was not the deed of God (a natural disaster) but the greed of man (systematic).”

Wise did not seek charity. He demanded justice.

“We have laws that in a crisis we find are no laws, and we have enforcement that, when the hour of trial comes, we find is no enforcement. Let us lift up the industrial standards until they will bear inspection. And when we go before the legislatures, let us not allow them to put us off forever with the old answer, ‘We have no money.’ If we have no money for necessary enforcement of laws which safeguard the lives of workers, it is because so much of our money is wasted and squandered and stolen.”

Then Rose Schneiderman — a Jewish immigrant, sweatshop worker, union organizer and socialist — rose to speak. She echoed Wise’s sentiments, but went further. Having seen the police and the courts side with the garment manufacturers against the workers, and politicians in the pockets of business community, she questioned whether better laws would make a difference if they weren’t enforced.

“I would be a traitor to these 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,” Schneiderman said. “This is not the first time girls have been burned alive in the city. Every week I must learn of the untimely death of one of my sister workers. Every year thousands of us are maimed. The life of men and women is so cheap, and poverty is so sacred. There are so many of us for one job, it matters little if 146 of us are burned to death. … I can’t talk fellowship to you who are gathered here. Too much blood has been spilled. I know from my experience it is up to the working people to save themselves. The only way they can save themselves is by a strong working-class movement.”

Public outrage led New York Gov. John Alden Dix to create the Factory Investigating Commission, with broad subpoena powers and teams of investigators, led by two savvy politicians, state Assemblyman Al Smith and state Sen. Robert Wagner. Over two years, commission members traveled up and down the state, holding hearings, visiting more than 3,000 factories in 20 industries and interviewing almost 500 witnesses. They found buildings without fire escapes, bakeries in poorly ventilated cellars with rat droppings (only 21 percent even had bathrooms, most of them unsanitary), children — some as young as 5 years old — working in canning factories and women working 18-hour days.

After the fire, many officials acknowledged there was a problem. Edward F. Croker, New York City’s retired fire chief, told the commission that employers “pay absolutely no attention to the fire hazard or to the protection of the employees in these buildings. That is their last consideration.” His

department had cited the Triangle building for lack of fire escapes a week before the fire.

But the garment manufacturers, and the real estate, bakery and cannery industry groups, sought to stymie the commission. After the fire department ordered warehouses to install sprinklers, the Protective League of Property Owners denounced the mandate, angrily charging the city with forcing owners to use "cumbersome and costly" equipment.

A representative of the Associated Industries of New York insisted that regulations would mean "the wiping out of industry in this state." Mabel Clark of the W.N. Clark Co., a canning corporation, opposed any restrictions on child labor. "I have seen children working in factories, and I have seen them working at home, and they were perfectly happy," she declared.

Terence McGuire, president of the Real Estate Board, summed up the business argument against regulation. "To my mind this is all wrong," he declared. "The experience of the past proves conclusively that the best government is the least possible government." The board warned that new laws would drive "manufacturers out of the City and State of New York."

Fortunately, Smith, Wagner and other political leaders, fortified by a vibrant progressive movement, ignored these opponents of business regulation. In the first year, the commission proposed, and the legislature quickly passed, laws requiring mandatory fire drills, automatic sprinklers and unlocked doors during work hours. They also created rules on the storage and disposal of flammable waste, and they banned smoking from shop floors.

The next year, the legislature passed additional reforms. It set maximum numbers of workers per floor and established codes requiring new buildings to include fireproof stairways and fire escapes. It required employers to provide clean drinking water, washrooms and toilets for their employees. It gave labor commission inspectors the power to shut down unsanitary tenement sweatshops. And it ruled that women could work no more than 54 hours a week and that children younger than 18 could not work in dangerous situations.

These path-breaking state regulations, provoked by the Triangle fire, proved that government could play a powerful role in the lives of ordinary people. Other states followed suit, and, ultimately, Roosevelt, prodded by Perkins, Wagner and other veterans of New York's progressive movement, introduced New Deal reforms ending child labor, establishing a federal minimum wage and a 40-hour work week, and creating a National Labor Relations Board giving workers the right to unionize and bargain collectively with employers.

The Triangle company's owners were tried for manslaughter but were found innocent when the judge told the jury that to return a guilty verdict, they had to find that the two defendants knew or should have known that the doors

were locked. But the company never recovered from the fire and the controversy. In 1918, it closed its doors.

That didn't happen to other city businesses. Contrary to the business leaders' dire predictions, they did not suffer from the new regulations. The New York Times reported in July 1914, "Notwithstanding all the talk of a probable exodus of manufacturing interests, the commission has not found a single case of a manufacturer intending to leave the State because of the enforcement of the factory laws." New York's Seventh Avenue remained the headquarters of the nation's garment industry for decades, until production gradually moved south and overseas after World War II.

Ironically, 100 years after the Triangle fire, we still hear much of the same rhetoric whenever reformers seek to use government to make businesses act more responsibly and protect consumers, workers and the environment. For example, the disasters last year that killed 29 miners in West Virginia and 11 oil rig workers in the Gulf of Mexico could have been avoided had lawmakers resisted lobbying by mine owners and oil-well owner BP to weaken safety regulations.

Today, the leading foe of reform is the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which is on a crusade against the Obama administration's plans to set new rules on unsafe workplaces, industrial hazards and threats to public health. The Chamber labels every reform effort a "job killer." Its most vocal ally in Congress is Darrell Issa, the California Republican who chairs the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. At the request of the Chamber and other industry lobbies, Issa recently launched a Congressional assault on safeguards in workplaces and communities.

In January, Issa sent letters to more than 170 companies and business lobby groups — including those representing the energy, auto, oil, chemical, health care, banking and telecommunication industries — asking them to identify "burdensome government regulations" that they want eliminated.

The business groups responded with a long wish list, including rules to control "combustible dust" that has resulted in explosions killing workers; rules to track musculoskeletal disorders such as tendinitis, carpal tunnel syndrome or back injuries that impact millions of workers at keyboards, in construction or in meat processing; and rules to address workplace noise that leads to hearing loss. And Republicans listened. They are proposing to cut Occupational Safety and Health Administration's budget by 20 percent, which, coming on top of decades of cuts, would cripple an agency that has been effective at significantly reducing workplace injuries and deaths.

If the Triangle fire occurred today, the Chamber would surely call mandatory sprinklers and fire escapes "job killing" regulations. It would call for "voluntary solutions" to sweatshops and firetraps, and ask to get government off the backs of private employers.

The Republican message, in House Speaker John Boehner's words, is that "excessive regulation costs jobs" and that the "path to prosperity" is by "getting government out of the way." Americans of earlier generations — who enjoyed the benefits of the Progressive Era and the New Deal reforms, and the political clout of a vibrant labor movement — understood this was nonsense, but it seems like these lessons have to be relearned. That's why it is important to recall the sordid circumstances in which 146 young women lost their lives at the Triangle Waist Co. a century ago.

On March 25, 1911, a fire started in the Triangle Waist Company in the Asch Building near Washington Square. In the end, the death toll was 146.

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