The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire
March 25, 1911

Saturday, March 25th, 1911 saw tragedy strike New York when the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory became engulfed in flames on its 8th and 9th floors. In the space of 30 minutes, 146 workers died, of this total 123 were women including teenagers as young as 14 years.

About 50 workers succumbed to injuries suffered as they leapt from the windows of the 8th and 9th floors. The Triangle fire was for 90 years, until the tragic events of 9/11, the worst workplace disaster in New York history.

With over 500 employees the Triangle Shirtwaist Company was the city's largest blouse company. New York was the largest needle trades center in the US, with over 40,000 workers employed in the trade, most of whom were members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU).

Garment workers, predominately women and girls, formed a large part of America's most unionized city. Between 1909 and 1913 trade union membership in New York increased eight-fold to over 250,000 workers.

Garment factories were full of young women, many of whom had recently immigrated to the Untied States from Eastern Europe. Working conditions were poor as was pay, but for many immigrants America represented hope as they escaped the violence and pogroms of late 19th century Eastern Europe.

A triangle worker Rosie Freedman, 18 years, was typical of many garment workers. She escaped Russian-occupied Poland in 1907. Arriving in New York, she secured work at the Triangle factory, living in crowded conditions with an uncle's family some four blocks from the factory.

In 1911 Rosie Freedman earned about $15 per week, working a 52-hour work week. She sent $15 per month home to Poland and after rent and food expenses she was left with about $2 per week.

On October 4th, 1909 some 15,000 shirtwaist workers struck throughout the city including Triangle workers. They enjoyed widespread public and media support. One strike ribbon said. "Starve to win…or you will starve anyhow".

The strike achieved a 20% pay hike and reduction to a 52-hour work week, but workers did not achieve the union shop recognition that they sought nor the health and safety protection they wished to secure.

Saturday, March 25th, 1911 near the end of their seven hour shift, fire broke out on the 8th floor of the Triangle factory. While the Fire Department responded within minutes, in New York at that time Firefighters had no ability to reach beyond the 7th floor of any building.

About 180 sewing machine operators, cutters and machinists were working on the 8th floor that day. There were two exits to stairwells on the 8th floor, both were locked. The subsequent trial heard evidence of the owners' practice of locking doors to prevent employee theft of materials.

The fire hose on the 9th floor didn't work. The single-person wide fire escape did not reach the main floor and was of virtually no use to workers that day.

In 45 minutes of panic about 50 workers leapt to their death to avoid the fire. Many succumbed in the stairwell of the one door that was finally unlocked. Others died in a heap near the Washington Place door that couldn't be opened during the short period of time it took flames to engulf the entire 8th floor.

By 1911, fire-safe factories had existed in some parts of the US for over 20 years, including firewalls, fire doors, fire stairs and automatic sprinklers. None of these existed in New York in 1911. The Triangle factory, typical of the garment trade in that era was housed in a loft building intended for storage, not manufacturing.

New Yorkers watched in horror as workers leapt to their death. Some 100,000 citizens lined up to view bodies in the makeshift morgue in the Manhattan Charities Pier. Over 350,000 lined the streets in the rain for the mass funeral held for the victims.

Despite widespread public support the response to the fire was sadly predictable. The owners were acquitted of charges of Manslaughter. They then pursued insurance claims and collected more than $60,000 above any loses they could prove – about $1 million in today's dollars.

A State Commission of Inquiry did result in legislative changes; some 25 bills in total including more fire safety laws, compulsory fire drills, doors that opened outwards and remained unlocked. The driving force behind these changes included two Democrats who would emerge in the 1930's as leading voices in the Roosevelt cabinet in the 1930's; Fances Perkins (the only female member of FDR's cabinet) and Robert F. Wagner, a towering figure who would introduce trade union rights to the nation in the midst of the depression and the New Deal initiative of FDR.

The anger, frustration and resolve of workers in New York in 1911 was captured in riveting fashion by Rose Schneiderman of the Women's Trade Union League in a public meeting held on April 2, 1911 a the Metropolitan Opera House:

"I would be a traitor to those poor burned bodies if I were to come here to talk good fellowship. We have tried you good people of the public – and we have found you wanting.

The old Inquisition had its rack and its thumbscrews and its instruments of torture with iron teeth. We know what those things are today: the iron teeth are our necessities, the thumbscrews are the high-powered and swift machinery close to which we must work, and the rack is here in the firetrap structures that will destroy us the minute they catch fire.

This is not the first time girls have been burned alive in this 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 property is so sacred! There are so many of us for one job, it matter little if one hundred forty-odd are burned to death.

We have tried you citizens! We are trying you now, and you have a couple of dollars for the sorrowing mothers and brothers and sisters by way of a charity gift. But every time the workers come out (on strike), the strong arm of the law is allowed to press down heavily upon us.

Public officials have only words of warning for us…and they have the workhouse just back of all their warnings. The strong hand of the law beats us back when we rise…

I can't talk fellowship to you who are gathered here, too much blood has been spilled. I know from experience it is up to the working people to save themselves. And the only way is through a strong working-class movement."

The 100th anniversary of the Triangle Fire is a time for us to remember those that perished, and the struggles of previous generations. There is much contemporary relevance to this history, including Rose Schneiderman's rallying cry. Immigrant labour remains exploited, women's work remains undervalued, and workplace health and safety issues abound.

The resolve of garment workers in New York 100 years ago is worth remembering along with the tragedy that befell many of these workers. Their inspiring story must serve to strengthen our resolve to create the "strong working-class movement" that Rose Schneiderman called for.

:nr/ceu