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## The Flame that Sparked Outrage: Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

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THE FLAME THAT SPARKED OUTRAGE

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## *Abstract*

The 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, a tragic event in New York City, reflected the ignored demands by both foreign born and U.S born citizens. The unrelenting rioting and protesting marked a turning point in progressive American politics. The late 19th and early 20th century was a glorious time for new beginnings in America. The buzz about the opportunities in the States roamed the globe and sparked interest in every person encountered. The ships carrying Eastern European immigrants; Italians, Jews, and those of Polish descent, were migrating across seas to enter into the modern world of the United States. Contrary to the welcoming propaganda that is featured in their home countries, the opinions of some American born residents were less than enthusiastic about the incoming foreigners. The jobs that are available to the immigrants were meek at best, with intensive and frequent hazardous conditions for the men and women. This paper will uncover the array of problems factory owners caused their immigrant workers, in addition to the continuous strikes from the garment workers and a select few of the affluent class. Finally, the paper will close with the highly suspicious motives that came from both Triangle Factory owners Max Blanck and Isaac Harris. These theories include whether Blanck and Harris had a coincidental wrap sheet of unknown insurance collections, or the reasoning behind these unsafe working conditions, that led to multiple catastrophes, are part of a bigger scam.

## *Acknowledgements*

Before beginning, I would like to acknowledge my supporters in my academic career that inspired my efforts towards this topic. I want to thank my family, friends, librarians, and professors that helped guide my research to the finish line. You all inspired me . . .

## *Introduction*

The topic for my paper was created through a "trial and error" platform. At first, my research led to the 1863-1869 American Transcontinental railroads, with a primary focus on Chinese laborers. The goal of my initial topic was to highlight the overlooked history of the Chinese railroad construction. Searching for primary sources, I looked to the *Library of Congress* and discovered a song by David Meyerowitz, Louis Gilrod, and Jack Kammen. The Yiddish song is titled "Die Fire Korbunes," and pays tribute to the Jewish factory workers that died in the Triangle Factory Fire.<sup>1</sup> Lacking the historical background of the fire, I began researching countless databases to be fully equipped with the history of the fire. After my research journey, I decided to change my topic and focus distinctively on the 1911 New York City Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.

In the history of New York, the 1911 fire was the worst tragedy to occur in the city. There were a record high number of casualties from the fire; 146 deaths. At this point in history, it was New York's deadliest event. Most of the people that died were young immigrant women. The 1911 fire remained the worst event to occur for the next 90 years. The fire remained a record, until the terrorist events that occurred on September 11th, 2001 (9/11). The planes that crashed into the Twin Towers killed 2,977 people.<sup>2</sup> The events that had taken place on 9/11 outnumbered the casualties from the fire by 2,831 victims. The victims from both events are extraordinarily high for moments in history that could have been avoided.

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<sup>1</sup> Meyerowitz, David, Louis Gilrod, and Jack Kammen. *Die Fire Korbunes*. Theodore Lohr, New York, New York, 1911.

<sup>2</sup> "September 11 Terror Attacks Fast Facts." CNN. Cable News Network, November 13, 2019.

Terms of the tragic events aside, the dates of both events are oddly similar. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire has a date that aligns with the events of 9/11. The date of the Triangle fire is on March 25th, 1911, and the date of the terrorist attack is September 11th, 2001 (9/11). The city of New York has two events that have the number 9 & 11 next to one another. This coincidence is astonishing, given that the events are over 90 years apart, and encapsulates the city's most horrific episodes.

As of May 2020, the COVID-19 virus has taken the lives of over 78,000 people across the country.<sup>3</sup> The current pandemic of the virus has affected communities on a global scale. Social distancing and the use of masks are important factors that help prevent the spread of the virus. The year 2020 has broken record high numbers of casualties in the U.S. In a recent news report, the virus outnumbered the amount of casualties on 9/11.<sup>4</sup> My topic has brought my research to lessons about the past I was not expecting. For example, New York is currently a hotspot for the Coronavirus. The nurses at the hospitals in New York are understaffed and lack proper hygiene materials. The lack of masks and gloves prevent the nurses from working in a safe and clean environment. Amid the 2020 pandemic, the nurses unsafe workplace resembles the garment workers lack of safety precautions that they faced in 1911.

Today, the Triangle Fire is an event that offers timeless lessons to be remembered. These lessons include unequal pay for women, and immigration prejudices and laws that still plague the political spheres of today. With the current political climate the U.S. is involved in, the history of immigrant women dangles in the horizon. The dynamics of the pay gap between men and women is an issue that still resides in our country. The gap includes women making .79 cents on the

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<sup>3</sup> "COVID-19 United States Cases by County." Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

<sup>4</sup> Prochilo, Peter and Brittany. "Coronavirus Death Toll in NYC Tops 9/11 Attack." Fire Engineering, April 7, 2020.

dollar, compared to men. It's important to note that the work between the sexes is the same. The difference between working men and women resides solely on the inequality of pay.

In 1909, the factory women earned a salary of \$30 per week. The salaries given to the young women contributed to the paycheck for the entire family. This, not excluding, the money that was being sent home to their mother lands. The mother lands of the Triangle Factory women included Southern and Eastern European countries; Italy, Poland, and those of Jewish heritage. Today, over 109 years after the fire, women are still fighting for equal pay. It is important to remember the historical salaries of working women, as they mirror the lower salaries that are given to the working women of today.

On world relations, U.S policies are seen in many global news headlines. The majority of the headlines involve our country's immigration laws. President Trump has issued claims stating that immigrants are "aliens" and "smugglers". The transparency of President Trump's allegations towards immigrants align with past prejudices. These prejudices include immigrants of the past given unwanted jobs and being treated as second-class citizens. Today, immigrants receive the same unwanted jobs that include factory and farm work.

The Southern and Eastern European immigrants of the 19th century, were treated similarly to the present-day immigrants in the U.S. The garment workers affected in the fire were hard-working immigrants who wanted a place to call home. This included a home that was free of hate and judgment. In the early 19th century, immigrants faced the hardships of assimilation. The immigrants of today have received a push from different political heads. Certain political figures have blurred the lines of immigration and have allowed stereotypes and judgment to run wild. More historical prejudices are seen later in my paper, and are closely related to the same



antics and jargon that is spoken by those who support President Trump. The structure of my paper is going to look at the effects of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire and how the disasters occurred. My paper is organized in chronological order, along with divided sections that lead to separate subtopics. The subtopics encompass the Triangle Fire, with alarming theories that spark deception from the owners of the factory.

To start, the beginning of my paper discusses the political and socioeconomic backgrounds European immigrants faced migrating to America. Then, I proceed to uncover the lives of the women before the 1909 protesting and discover their world in the factories. Next, the details of the mass protest organizations and strikes are explained, along with specific individuals that were exemplary during this time.

The second half of my research includes primary sources that cover the eerie depictions of the photographs taken from the building's exterior on the day of the fire. I then proceed to discuss the aftermath of the fire. The aftermath of the fire includes answering my audience's concerns from the day in question. An example of these inquiries include, "How did the fire happen?" and "What backlash occurred from the workers in New York?" The answers to the multitude of questions are from Leon Stein's critically acclaimed book *The Triangle Fire*. Stein's book was published in 2011, and offers a complete outline of the events during and after the Triangle fire of 1911. Stein's writings are powerful in depicting the tragedy of the fire. The research and effort that Stein put into his book reflects dedication to the immigrants that lost their lives due to negligence. Towards the end of Stein's work, he included an in-depth synopsis of factory owners Max Blanck and Isaac Harris's suspicious insurance claims. After the final inquiries are answered, my paper begins to close with the brief trial of Blanck and Harris. Then,

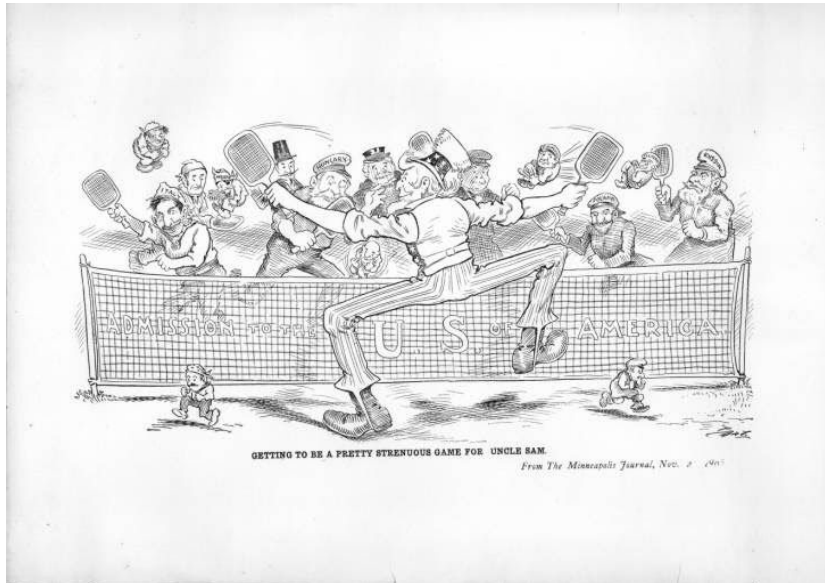
the paper discusses the present laws that are in place to avoid disasters similar to the 1911 fire. The hopes for writing on the topic of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire is to promote change and recognize the women who unjustly died in the fire. This research paper is written to encourage those who decide to read about the troublesome history of the Triangle fire, and to not forget what history has taught us. One must never forget that history is the answer, and change is the goal.

## *Labor and Immigrant Life*

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 occurred due to the ignored demands that united both nonnative and U.S born protestors, along with socioeconomic backgrounds that caused tension with Americans. Protesting aside, those of authority carried prejudices towards the working class. With little success coming from the strike organizers, 146 garment workers, most being young immigrant women, were killed. The casualties of garment workers could have been avoided, but factory owners Max Harris and Isaac Blanck rallied against the women's demands for safer working conditions.

The buzz about the opportunities in America roamed the globe and sparked interest in everyone. Ideas of a home where anything was possible, made America the best place for innovation and change in the world. The boats from all over Europe carried the hopes and dreams of families. The factory workers of the late 19th century to early 20th century, were primarily of Italian, Jewish and Polish descent. The “American Dream” was eye-catching for those seeking a prosperous future for their families. The aforementioned European immigrants, along with other nationalities, were migrating across seas to the modern world of the United States. Although this era was *advertised* as a glorious time for new beginnings in the United States, immigrants found this to be astonishingly inaccurate. Contrary to the welcoming testimonials heard in their home countries, the opinions of some American-born residents were not enthusiastic about the incoming foreigners. The American-born residents' dislike for foreigners, led to shocking realities for the newly migrated immigrants.

An example of the Americans' dislike for the newly migrated Europeans were seen in multiple newspapers. With the permission of the Hennepin County Library, *Figure 1* depicts a



**Figure 1:** (Used with permission from the Hennepin County Library)

on the United States influx of Eastern European immigrants. In the cartoon, Uncle Sam is shielding his side of the tennis net from foreigners. The Europeans are portrayed as both tennis balls and players. Bartholomew's sketch depicts the immigrants as nuisances that are hard to keep track of. Uncle Sam is the hero that plays in the tennis match. In the cartoon, he is drawn as the hero of American immigration and keeps his side clear from intruders. The piece symbolizes the Anti-European biases that the American people carried towards immigrants. The intolerances that Americans had towards immigrants, created Antisemitic and Anti-catholicism messages. The two main religions that belonged to Southern-Eastern Europeans were Judaism and Catholicism. Southern-Eastern Europeans were migrating to a country that, in the nineteenth and twentieth century, was overwhelmingly Protestant.<sup>6</sup>

The Europeans' migration to the United States was wearisome. Traveling by sea, they carried small suitcases. The ships endured strong weather, while passengers experienced freezing

<sup>5</sup> Bartholomew, Charles Lewis. *Getting To Be a Pretty Strenuous Game For Uncle Sam*, (Minneapolis Journal, November 26, 1905).

<sup>6</sup> Waters, Mary C., and Philip Kasinitz. "Immigrants in New York City: Reaping the Benefits of Continuous Immigration." *Daedalus* 142, no. 3 (2013): 92-106, 94.

temperatures. When the Europeans arrived in America, the job prospects were undesirable and dangerous. The popularized stigma of “hard work equaling prosperity”, led the factory workers to life threatening workplaces. The stigma of the “American Dream” featured hard work that will earn a family their dreams. The American-dream ideal led workers to believe that the dangerous jobs that were offered to them, were normal jobs that many Americans gladly received. Contrary to this belief, the immigrants were given jobs that were unwanted from American-born citizens. The false pretenses of the immigrants' jobs, plus the ideals of the American Dream, led immigrants to the disastrous garment jobs that were seen in the Triangle Shirtwaist factory.

The factory workers had grueling hours and working conditions. The women garment workers took shifts that continued late into the night, rarely having breaks. The various factory positions included canners (individuals that worked at canning factories) and garment work. The health and safety of the immigrants were being overlooked. The safety precautions that were being overlooked included; suppressant lighting, cramped work areas, and tasks highly prone to injuries. The array of complications factory workers faced led to boisterous protests, the Triangle Factory fire, and evidence to suspect factory owners, Max Harris and Isaac Blanck, of being accountable.

Arriving in America, the newly migrated families played an important role in conventional sociology. Conventional sociology, “. . .long viewed the family as an end product of socioeconomic forces and as an institution which functions to maintain the existing social order.”<sup>7</sup> The family dynamics surrounded the “end product” or paycheck. The paycheck connects the working class community with a single goal of survival. In addition, the working class had a

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<sup>7</sup> Yans-McLaughlin, Virginia. "A Flexible Tradition: South Italian Immigrants Confront a New Work Experience." *Journal of Social History* 7, no. 4 (1974): 429-45, 429.

constant worrying of money, causing an effect on the social normalcy of the classes. This effect on the social classes led to the middle class, made up of families that worked hard, but were not considered a low class. The middle class featured families with many jobs, or a single job depending on the size of their household, and primarily along with the husband's job title.

Jacob A. Riis, a crime reporter, photographed the lives of not only the middle class, but also the working class. Riis photographed the public in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. A society spokesperson named A.T. Shauffler describes Riis' work as, “. . . a most remarkable set of stereopticon slides, illustrating the manner of life of many thousands of our fellow creatures in this city.”<sup>8</sup> In Riis's book, *How the Other Half Lives*, he captured the American middle class with black and white photographs depicting their conventions and day-to-day habits.

Riis proclaims that the middle class, “. . . controls the conflict between rich and poor, to distinguish itself from the two extremes and oversee the smooth operation of American society.”<sup>9</sup> The quote outlines Riis' mantra of the overlooked vitality of the individuals that create the middle class. In American society, the middle class is used as a scale to balance the upper and lower classes. Later in history, the middle class becomes, “America's dominant class.”<sup>10</sup> The uptick of families residing in the middle class creates a division between the social hierarchies. The jolt of tension between the classes creates dichotomies. In the context of opposing classes, the term dichotomy refers to the stressful occurrences that came from foreigners migrating to the industrial nation of the United States.

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<sup>8</sup> Riis, Jacob. *How the Other Half Lives*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

The American lifestyle in New York contrasts with the Southern and Eastern Europeans' previous way of life. The European's latter customs in their homelands were called "peasant lifestyles". A peasant lifestyle, is a term that explains a former way of living that revolves around small communities. These communities are called villages. In accordance with a peasant lifestyle, the majority of work is agriculture based. A common job in peasant communities involved working on a farm.<sup>11</sup> The different lifestyles were contrasted between the peasant lifestyle, and the modern American lifestyle. The defining differences between the societies defined when, where, and how Southern and Eastern Europeans challenged and progressed through modern America. The assimilating factors led women migrants working in industrial labor. Coming from a peasant-lifestyle, the modern work the women faced were virtually unknown to them. The conditions the women garment workers faced were, in fact, strenuous, but coming from a peasant lifestyle, they were impressionable.

Italian immigrants had the ideals of a peasant upbringing still intact, after coming to America. Virginia Yans-McLaughlin wrote a journal article called, "A Flexible Tradition: South Italian Immigrants Confront a New Work Experience." In the text, Yans-McLaughlin stated, "American style definitions of success or the reality of what produced economic progress in modern cities could not easily pierce this cocoon."<sup>12</sup> The "cocoon" for the newly migrated Italian immigrants included an intense yearning for owning land and having large families. This was a treasured goal Italian families carried into modern America. Similarly, Jewish and Polish families carried the same traditions as Italian families. The hard work and yearning for land and large families, left the European immigrants persistent in their factory positions.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 431.

<sup>12</sup> Yans-McLaughlin., 224.

In 1912, Lewis Hine photographed a Jewish family working in their home. With the permission of the National Archives Catalogue, *Figure 2* shows Hines' photograph. The photo included six children, along with an older woman and man sitting at a cramped table. In the



**Figure 2:** National Child Labor Committee Photographs taken by Lewis Hine, ca. 1912 - ca. 1912, National Archives Catalogue.

photo, the family and neighbors are depicted working on a cloth-like item. The description of the photo reveals that the family and neighbors are working late into the night. The cloth-like fabric that the workers

were tending to, are garters<sup>13</sup>. In 1912, it was not uncommon for children to have jobs. In fact, the jobs available to children included garment work and long hours. In the same year that Jewish families were working long hours, Polish families were battling a torn government.

In 1912, Polish migrants were facing a torn representation of both their political and social views in American newspapers. A political satire piece titled, "The Face of the Polish Press in America" appeared in a Polish publication in the U.S called, "Ameryka Echo".<sup>14</sup> The satire piece featured a cartoon drawing. The cartoon had a mouth that was outlined with the faces of men. The tone of the cartoon was ominous, with the mouth having a skull-like appearance.

<sup>13</sup> Hine, Lewis. *Series: National Child Labor Committee Photographs*, February 27, 1912. From National Archives Catalog.

<sup>14</sup>Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann Anna D. *"The Polish Hearst": Ameryka-Echo and the Public Role of the Immigrant Press*. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2015.



Polish-Americans concluded that, "The image was striking, and, frankly, a bit disturbing: a giant skull with a gaping mouth was composed of figures representing Polish political and clerical presses."<sup>15</sup> Polish-Americans viewed the comic as "a bitter commentary on the internal divisions within the Polish American press, which reflected tensions within the community itself."<sup>16</sup> The cartoonist drew their concepts of Polish politics within the American press, in the form of a satire piece. The piece revealed tensions within the Polish community. The dramatic satire piece led Polish-Americans to create opinions about the current political environment in Poland. This includes the differing views that Polish-Americans felt towards the cartoon, which eventually led to open dialogues that needed to be acknowledged.

The garment workers spent their weeks creating shirtwaists to fit the "Gibson Girl" persona, a classic 19th century working-girl garment. A shirtwaist was a clothing item designed for a women's figure. The shirtwaist had long sleeves and resembled a blouse-like clothing item. The blouse-like item was traditionally white, with a cinched waist. The shirtwaist material was made with ivory linen. The linen was made with lace insets and had a high buttoned collar.

The women garment workers were paid a set salary of \$6 for every 13-hour shift.<sup>17</sup> In mathematical terms, an employee of the factory working from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m., would receive a payment of .46 cents/hour worked. Concluding these calculations, a week's takeaway for a garment worker would be about \$30. A garment worker in the 19th century would earn less than \$50, for approximately 65 hours of work. In today's America, it's hard to fathom supporting a family with five members or more on a weekly budget of \$30.

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<sup>15</sup>Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann, "The Polish Hearst": *Ameryka-Echo and the Public Role of the Immigrant Press*, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>17</sup> Ross, Robert J. S. "Memory of Strike and Fire.", (Michigan Press, 2004), 56.

## *The Protests*

The Italian, Jewish, and Polish immigrants' working conditions and prejudices were not improving. The women garment workers had faced enough intolerances, and decided to protest. The protesters in New York had many supporters that stood against how they were being treated. The supporters acknowledged that the workers were being harassed for their gender, and immigrant status. In 1901, Pauline Newman helped women labor unions find their footing.

Pauline Newman, a famous labor-activist, worked in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. She continued her work in the factories until 1901. She discontinued her garment work at the factory when the strikes started to approach.<sup>18</sup> Newman refused to work at the Triangle factory, given the horrific conditions. After quitting her job, Newman worked to raise money and spoke on behalf of the Labor Council.<sup>19</sup> Newman spent her time, ". . .from November to the end of March upstate in New York, speaking to the ladies of the Four Hundred [the elite of New York's society] and sending money back."<sup>20</sup> During this time, Newman recognized the importance of funding for a campaign, and encouraged her audience to be a part of the Women's Labor Union in New York.

The International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) stated, "The operators wanted their desperately low wages raised; they wanted recognition of their union, the embryonic ILGWU; and they wanted health and sanitary provisions, such as clean restrooms and fire sprinklers."<sup>21</sup> Along with these demands, the women asked to end their 52-hour week positions, that did not include pay for overtime.<sup>22</sup> Today, the ILGWU plea's are promoted by feminists around the globe. Presently, ILGWU's plea would not have been seen as unorthodox,

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<sup>18</sup> Morrison, Joan, Charlotte F. Zabusky, and Oscar Handlin. "Pauline Newman: From Lithuania, 1901", 12

<sup>19</sup> Morrison, "Pauline Newman: From Lithuania, 1901", 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>22</sup> Pool, "The Politics of Mourning": The Triangle Fire and Political Belonging, 194.

especially for an around-the-clock workplace. Contrary to the 20th century, with women not yet having the right to vote, their reasonable appeals were viewed as ludicrous amongst lawmakers and business owners in 1901.

In 1909, the garment workers were labeled as "Sewing Girls". At times, their male employers would refer to them as "girls", and their names would not be remembered. The garment workers, at times being 14-years-old, began protesting against apparel firms in New York.<sup>23</sup> The 1909 strike was an event that cast a shadow for revolutionary change amongst factory owners in New York.

The meetings and events leading up to the 1909 strike involved Max Blanck and Isaac Harris. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory owners tried to derail the event in strange forms. In September, upon hearing about the upcoming strike, both Blanck and Harris locked workers out of the factories. Blanck and Harris decided to hire prostitutes to stand outside the factory. The prostitutes were hired as "strikebreakers".<sup>24</sup> The term "strikebreaker" included a person or a form of a distraction to manipulate an organization's efforts. The prostitutes were hired to sully the efforts of the women who organized the strike. With civilians witnessing prostitutes next to the protestors, the efforts of the women began to slowly weaken. Blanck and Harris hired the prostitutes to terminate the credibility of the strike organizers.

The strike organizers included all industry-wide workers. The goal of the strike was to include workers from every corner of the city that felt exploited.<sup>25</sup> In most cases, specifically amongst the protestors, they opposed two main companies in New York. These companies were

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<sup>23</sup> Ross, "Memory of Strike and Fire.", 52.

<sup>24</sup> Pool, Heather. "The Politics of Mourning": The Triangle Fire and Political Belonging, 193.

<sup>25</sup> Stein, Leon. 2011. *The Triangle Fire*. Vol. Centennial ed. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press. Stein, xiv

The Triangle Shirtwaist Company and Leisorson's Dressmaking Factory.<sup>26</sup> The strike included an array of speakers. In Leon Stein's *The Triangle Fire* he states, "Speeches were translated among English, Italian and Yiddish."<sup>27</sup> The translations of the speeches emulated the majority of the worker's nationalities. Later in history, the strike of 1909 was called "The Uprising of the Twenty-Thousand." The strike procured the name from the amount of workers that rallied together in protest. The 1909 strike had over twenty-thousand protesters. The Uprising of the Twenty-Thousand was the most significant recorded strike organized by women. Later, the strike revealed to be the biggest world-wide strike, organized by women in the 20th century.<sup>28</sup>

By November, the strike was fully initiated across the state of New York. The audience and passerbys of the protesters started to grow tired of their message. The protestors' message plainly asked for improved wages and safer working environments. Ignoring the women's speeches, onlookers decided to show their aggression. Men and boys abused the women by throwing objects and physically assaulting the strikers. During the months of organized strikes, over 100 protesters were severely injured and arrested.<sup>29</sup> A journalist of the New York Chronicle was at the scene when a group of women were being arrested. The journalist wrote, "-arrested women appeared in court with broken noses and bandaged arms and heads."<sup>30</sup> In court, the women pleaded to be treated with the rights of an American citizen. To the protesters pleas, law enforcers mocked their cries of justice. The police officers that arrested the women viewed their

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>28</sup> Stein, *The Triangle Fire*. xiv

<sup>29</sup> Pool, Heather. "The Politics of Mourning: The Triangle Fire and Political Belonging." *Polity* 44, no. 2 (2012): 182-211, 193.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 193.

efforts as unforgiving. Instead of arresting the men that openly abused the women in public, the officers took the beaten women to jail.

The opinion of most men working in the garment factories did not support the efforts for women's suffrage. In 1909, women did not have the right to vote. They were unable to voice their opinions in the form of a ballot. The patriarchal laws that ruled women's every moment, were voted in favor of men. During this time period, the laws mandated by Congress did not favor women. The laws in 1909 inclined male factory workers to ignore women's suffrage. Men were unbothered by the industrial conditions the women were forced to work in. This could have been due to the low titled positions the women were automatically assigned too. The men, fearing to have a lower salary than a woman, did not complain about the salary differences.

In the Triangle Shirtwaist factories, ". . . men held supervisory and more lucrative positions in the ladies' garment industry, women did the bulk of the work."<sup>31</sup> The "bulk" work involved women working in tight sewing quarters amongst one another. Along with the cramped working conditions, the women had trouble completing their Shirtwaists due to a lack of lighting. Support for women's workplace conflicts turned bleak amongst the male employees of the workplace. During this time, Samuel Gompers had much to say about the treatment of women in the Triangle Factories.

Samuel Gompers was the president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Gompers was cherished for his progressive ideals from both male and female garment factory workers. Although he indicated his ambivalence towards the generality of strikes, he proclaimed that if one were to go on strike, then one must finish with determination.<sup>32</sup> Gompers had a sharp

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>32</sup> Ross, "Memory of Strike and Fire, 53.

tongue towards the inequality that occurred at the Triangle Factories. One of his quotes began with, "Yes, Mr. Shirtwaist Manufacturing," continuing... "it may be inconvenient for you if your boys and girls go out on strike, but there are things of more importance than your convenience and your profit. There are the lives of the boys and girls working in your business."<sup>33</sup> The ending of Gompers' quote addresses Blanck and Harris' disdain for their workers on strike. In addition, Gompers connects the lives of "boys and girls" with the unsafe working conditions in the Triangle Factory.

During one of his proclaimed speeches, a socialist daily newspaper called *The New York Call*, quoted Gompers in an article.<sup>34</sup> The article stated, "I have never declared a strike in all my life. . . but there comes a time when not to strike is but to rivet the chains of slavery upon our wrists."<sup>35</sup> Within this quote, he compared slavery to garment workers that chose to not protest. Gompers revealed that if one chooses to not strike, then one is allowing oneself to be enslaved to the conditions of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. Other exemplary activists during this time include a societal woman named Miss Anne Morgan who could not ignore her sisters' cries for help.

Miss Morgan came from a lavish upbringing. In 1909, Morgan ". . . worked with the National Civic Federation to provide food to underprivileged women workers in New York."<sup>36</sup> Morgan's progressive political stances were not commonly shared among her class. Her strong political beliefs led her to support the women's labor movement. In 1910, a flyer was created in Morgan's honor. The flyer stated, "Rich Women's Aid Gives Strikers Hope, Shirtwaist Girls Sure

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>34</sup> "The New York Call-1909-." *The New York Call*: 1909.

<sup>35</sup> Kheel Center, Cornell University. *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*.

<sup>36</sup> "Anne Morgan: Advocate for Women and Workers." PBS. Public Broadcasting Service.

of Victory Since Miss Morgan and Others Joined Their Causes. . ." <sup>37</sup> Morgan's donations helped the strikers who lacked funds to excel in their efforts. Morgan, and many women alike, helped to ensure the strikers efforts were not fruitless. Protest organizers recognized her efforts and held Morgan's name with legacy and honor.

A glimpse of the women's working conditions was told by Clara Lemlich Shavelson, a 23-year-old garment worker.<sup>38</sup> Shavelson revealed the working conditions of the Triangle factory. She chose to enclose her experience working at the factory to a former newspaper company, *New York World*. Shavelson stated, "The girls at all the other rows of machines back in the shops have to work by gaslight, by day as well as by night. Oh, yes, the shops keep the work going at night, too. The shops are unsanitary—that's the word that is generally used, but there ought to be a worse one used."<sup>39</sup> Shavelson explains that the factory never stops running. It is



**Figure 3:** Group of striking women - shirtwaist workers. NYC. 1909, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA.

vital for a factory with around-the-clock workers to have regular maintenance checks on the machines. The facilities should have remained clean in order to prevent workplace incidents. Clara's descriptions of the

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., Anne Morgan PBS. Public Broadcasting Service.

<sup>38</sup> Ross, "Memory of Strike and Fire", 54.

<sup>39</sup> Ross, "Memory of Strike and Fire", 56.

an accident-prone factory painted a picture for her audience. The picture invoked a chaotic environment. Consequently, with Morgan's support and contributions towards the garment strikers, the 1911 fire was very much on its way.

The 1909 strike occurred two years before the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911. The strike's success came from the collaboration of both men and women workers who, during the time, had vulnerable labor unions. The constant protests and strikes that occurred in 1909 made small waves of change. After the strikes ended factory owners had, "Many employers, especially the smaller operators, were compelled to agree to better terms of employment or to accept a union to represent the workers."<sup>40</sup>

The working conditions from other proprietors, including the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, remained satisfied with their workplace conditions and salaries



**Figure 4:** Group of mainly female shirtwaist workers on strike, in a room, New York, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA

did not increase. The strike organizers, along with the twenty-thousand that participated, had anticipated goals were not reached.

In a one year period, photographs were taken of different women protesters in 1909 versus 1910. With the permission of the Library of Congress, *Figure 3* and *Figure 4* feature groups of women

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<sup>40</sup> Stein.,59.



that had entirely different facial expressions. The photograph in *Figure 3* was taken in 1909. The strikers in New York City assembled in a line, holding onto one another in laughter with expressions of hope. The strikers were dressed in hats, ankle-length skirts, and mink scarfs. The women in the photo were standing in front of a building with an ascending staircase, to a possible courthouse in the background. The results of the 1909 strike, with the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, along with other establishments not changing their policies, added to the sad faces in the 1910 photograph. *Figure 4* displays a photograph taken in 1910. In the photograph, a meeting of mostly female strikers gathered in a small room in New York City.<sup>41</sup> The photograph, compared to the picture taken a year prior, showed expressions of exhaustion. The strikers were abused and harassed, and their demands were still not met. During this time, women of all classes were choosing to either ignore the strikes, or help by joining the cause. The societal women that ignored the protestors pleas, did so because they were not directly affected by the factory. While the working women who chose to not participate, feared losing their jobs.

The employers of the garment workers lacked empathy for the women and their harsh working conditions. There were high amounts of suspicion towards the immigrants in the factory. The suspicions of theft led employers to mandate strict policies against workers. For example, before each of the women's shifts the employers on duty would lock the doors behind them to avoid theft of material. The women would remain locked in tight working quarters with insufficient lighting and were expected to continue working quietly. Prejudice towards women

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<sup>41</sup> Group of mainly female shirtwaist workers on strike, in a room, New York., 1910.

garment workers, combined with improper maintenance, led to poor working conditions that provoked the disastrous fire on March 25, 1911.

### *The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire*

The fire started at approximately 4:30 p.m. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, ". . . was located on the corner of Greene Street and Washington Place, just to the east of Washington Square, in the heart of Greenwich Village."<sup>42</sup> The fire spread through the fourth and ninth floors of the garment factory. When the fire started, women were locked in their quarters, creating shirtwaists. The women and men that escaped the building, were met with their employers at the exit. The employers on the bottom floor checked every worker's items and pockets to ensure they were not stealing. The checkers became oblivious to the catastrophic scenes occurring on the floors above them. The employers were checking the frightened girls' personal items, as hundreds of employees screamed amongst the roaring flames. The scenes of the fire shocked the pedestrians walking near the building, as they gazed up towards the smoke filled building.

The pictures of that fateful day show broken fire escapes and a plethora of other issues. Captain Dominick Henry was one of the first responders at the scene. He later spoke in a court case against the garment company. Captain Henry stated, "I saw a scene I hope I never see again. Dozens of girls were hanging from the ledges. Others, their dresses on fire, were leaping from the windows."<sup>43</sup> Dozens of pictures taken on March 25, show police officers trying to identify burn victims. The burns of the deceased women were, at times, too extreme to identify. Firefighters searched maintenance holes near the factory for any possible survivors. On March

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<sup>42</sup>Karmel, Jonathan D. "The Torch That Lighted Up the Industrial Scene." In *Dying to Work: Death and Injury in the American Workplace*, Ithaca; London, 19-26, 19.

<sup>43</sup> Stein., 16.

26, one day after the fire, the ILGWU organized a memorial for the fallen men and women in Grand Central Palace. The group of people that came to the organized memorial were nearly all women.<sup>44</sup>

**Figure 5:** National Archives, 1911, "Demonstration of Protest and Mourning for Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of March 25, 1911". Photographic Prints of Occupations, Labor Activities, and Personalities, 1940 - 1970



The faces of the growing crowds during the fire carried a mixture of confusion and astonishment. In the crowd, "Thousands witnessed the fire firsthand; tens of thousands

viewed the bodies in a makeshift morgue over the next few days; and hundreds of thousands participated in an immense display of public mourning on April 5, 1911."<sup>45</sup> The 1911 fire that took 146 lives, shook the entire world. Weeks after the fire, on April 5, protesters mourned the deaths of the fallen garment workers. With the permission of the National Archives, *Figure 5* revealed protesters that held banners on the streets of New York. The banners portrayed the labor unions that protested against unsafe working conditions in the garment factories.

Blanck and Harris lacked safety precautions in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. The lack of precautions that the protesters demanded is what caused the fire. The banners stated, "Ladies

<sup>44</sup> Stein.,137.

<sup>45</sup> Pool, "The Politics of Mourning: The Triangle Fire and Political Belonging.",183.

waist & Dressmakers Union Local 25/ we mourn our loss” and “We mourn our loss-- United Hebrew Traders of New York.”<sup>46</sup> The protesters' banners depict the women that were killed, and specifically the Jewish women that were killed among the flames. One of the banners acknowledged the United Hebrew Trades of New York (UHTNY). The UHTNY created a banner in honor of the Jewish workers. During the time of the fire, 60 percent of all garment workers in New York were Jewish.<sup>47</sup> After the fire, the citizens of New York were in dire need of an explanation.

### *Blanck and Harris Trial and Theory*

After the tragic events of the fire, people began questioning the owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. During this time, speculations towards Max Blanck and Isaac Harris started to appear. Notions loomed whether the “Triangle King's” had planned the disaster. Many sources revealed paper trails towards the Triangle factories insurance claims. Leon Stein's text offers a complete outline of the factory's insurance claims with a multitude of primary sources.

Stein’s research uncovers insurance checks that the Triangle Factory received. The factory received insurance checks before and after the 1911 fire. Blanck and Harris claimed at least seven different incidents within their factories, all covered by insurance. The first insurance collection was issued to their Asch Building. The reason for the claim was due to *complications*. The sum of the claim amounted to \$19,142. Interestingly, the cause of the “complications” are unknown. The claims that are labeled “unknown” were never filed with an appropriate explanation. Additionally, the highest amount of insurance the factory procured (\$19,142)

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<sup>46</sup> Demonstration of Protest and Mourning for Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of March 25, 1911.

<sup>47</sup> Argersinger, Jo Ann E. *The Triangle Fire: a Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford/st Martins, 2009.

intertwined with the time period as the 1911 fire.<sup>48</sup> Why would the largest claim (equaling the most disastrous) suspiciously not have the appropriate reasoning filed? The suspicion towards Blanck and Harris' insurance claims became thicker.<sup>49</sup> The suspicion thickens with large sums of money that are not filed with a suitable reason, or an exact amount. For example, Blanck and Harris' claims were riddled with the word "unascertainable". The "unascertainable claims" were towards the sums of money that the factory was granted, yet it is not acknowledged in the insurance claims. The vague wording that is filed with Blanck and Harris insurance claims are skeptical. Stein's use of primary and secondary sources makes the reader question if Blanck and Harris had a coincidental wrap sheet of unknown insurance collections. Unless, the reasoning behind the unsafe working conditions in their buildings are a part of a bigger scheme.

The factory workers in New York, along with protesters in mourning, received news on the trial against Max Blanck and Isaac Harris. The trial occurred, "On April 10, 1911, barely two weeks after the fire, Blanck and Harris were indicted for manslaughter and criminal negligence. But they were absolved of guilt at their trial and were acquitted on all accounts."<sup>50</sup> The verdict of the trial was a shock for the supporters of the 146 deceased garment workers. After the trial, the labor organizations received an immense amount of support.

Within three consecutive years of ILG protesting, the organization's membership rose from, "58,000 in 1909 to 84,600 in 1912."<sup>51</sup> The side of over 26,000 members from 1909 to 1912 is directly tied to massive strikes (rain, wind, or shine), and the relentlessness of women. The women and men supporters proved they were worth more than their meager salaries and

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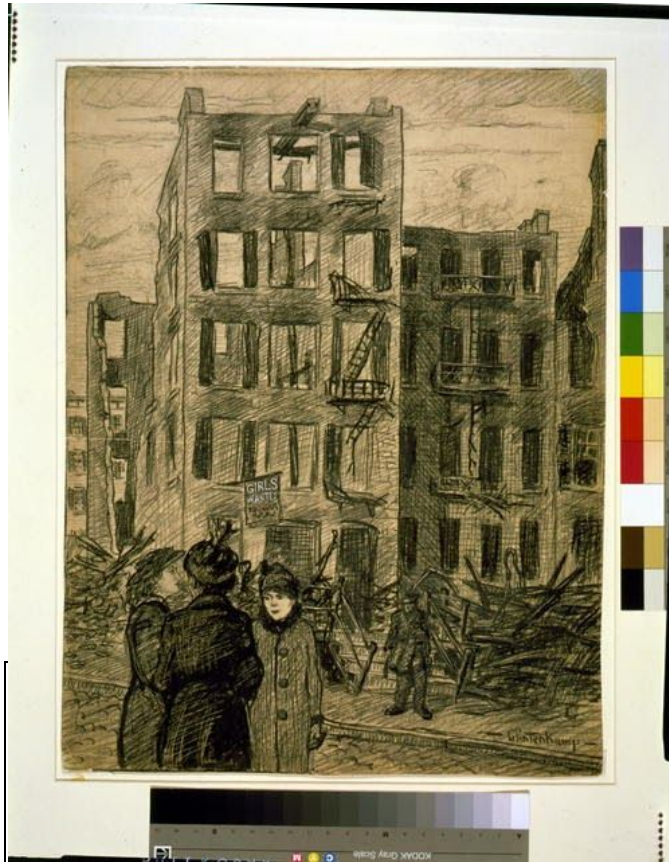
<sup>48</sup> Stein.,172.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.,172.

<sup>50</sup> Pool., 202.

<sup>51</sup> Stein.,59.

workplace conditions. Between 1913-1916, an artist named Henry Glintenkamp sketched scenes from the fire. With the permission of the Library of Congress, *Figure 6* displays a sketch named



*Figure 6:* Henry Glintenkamp, "Girls Wanted", Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C., Date: 1916

"Girls Wanted". The sketch includes three women talking in a circle with sullen faces. In the background of the sketch, a single police officer is standing in front of a fire torn factory. Glintenkamp's art paid tribute to the deceased workers and their families.<sup>52</sup> In later years, a ceremony was issued on the 50th anniversary of the Triangle Fire.

### *Remembering the Fire and Laws*

The 50th anniversary was held in 1961 in honor of the deaths of the immigrant workers.<sup>53</sup> Along with the ceremony, elderly survivors attended in tribute to their fallen sisters. The survivors remember their friends that were killed a mere fifty years ago. Between 1968-1970, laws were mandated to improve the health and safety of labor workers. Peg Seminario, Safety and Health Director for the national AFL-CIO, wrote an article titled, "Even

<sup>52</sup> Girls Wanted, 1916. Henry Glintenkamp, 1887-1946. Crayon. Published in *The Masses*, no. 8.

<sup>53</sup> Survivors at Ceremony Commemorating Tragedy. New York, 1961. Photograph.

after tragedy, it takes organized action to bring change.”<sup>54</sup> The article was written in 2011, which marked the 100 year anniversary of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. In her article, Seminario discussed the 1968 coal mine explosion killing 78 miners.<sup>55</sup> The coal mining tragedy encouraged the formation of the Federal Coal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1969. Following the 1969 act came the Occupational Safety and Health Act.<sup>56</sup> In 1970, the Occupational Safety and Health Act was born. In addition to the Occupational Safety and Health Act, Seminario stated, “Workers, unions and their allies again must rise up, defend the right to organize and to have a union, and demand the right to dignity, respect and safe jobs.”<sup>57</sup> Seminario implores her readers to remember the successes of protesting and the acts that brought change for labor workers.

### *Conclusion*

In the 21st Century, the fallen immigrant workers are memorialized. In 2018, New York protesters organized a ceremony called, “CHALK”.<sup>58</sup> The organized event included protesters, “. . .remembering the dead and writing their names in chalk on the sidewalks in front of their addresses in the Lower East Side, Little Italy and elsewhere.”<sup>59</sup> The importance of CHALK promoted open dialogue with individuals that were unaware of the tragedy. Additionally, the Workers Union annually commemorates the 1911 fire with the assistance of New York City

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<sup>54</sup> Seminario, Peg. “Don’t Mourn – Organize Lessons from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.” *The New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health*, March 25, 2011, 1–39.

<sup>55</sup> Seminario, Peg. “Don’t Mourn – Organize Lessons from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.”, 4.

<sup>56</sup> Seminario, 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>58</sup> Ticzon, David. “New York City Events Honor Triangle Fire Victims, Focus on New Activists.” *Cornell Chronicle*, March 1, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, David

firefighters.<sup>60</sup> A, “. . . fire department truck raises a ladder to the sixth floor, the highest its equipment could reach in 1911, painfully short of the eighth, ninth and tenth floors, where the fire occurred.”<sup>61</sup> The annual ceremony represents the accomplishments technology has made towards safety precautions. Including, the hardships that the 1911 firefighters faced trying to save the garment workers lives. The deaths of 146 women and men immigrant workers is a stain that cannot be undone by the employers of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.<sup>62</sup> The victims' history remains present within primary sources, secondary sources, historians and social activists. March 25, 1911 is a day when money and greed surpassed the lives of innocent immigrant workers.

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<sup>60</sup> Freeman, Joshua. “Remembering the Triangle Fire.” *The Nation*, June 29, 2015.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, Freeman

<sup>62</sup> Pool, *The Politics of Mourning: The Triangle Fire and Political Belonging*, 183.



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