

# Triangle shirtwaist company's fire

[Business](#), [Company](#)



## Introduction

The Triangle Shirtwaist company operated a ladies garment factory at the top three floors of a tenth story building at the intersection of Green Street and Washington place in lower Manhattan. A shirtwaist is a female bodice which was very popular at that time. The production of triangle shirtwaist started on the eighth floor on cutting tables where workers would pile up cotton fabrics in layers on the table and cut the fabric in the desired style. After the cutting is over, the fabrics are hung over wires and scraps were placed on the bins. It was one of those bins which caught fire accidentally, and spread in a devastating way (Zalosh, 2003, p. 361).

The company was owned by Max Blanck and Isaac Harris and was the largest blouse making operation in New York according to the State Labor Department. There was tremendous demand for Blanck and Isaac factory made blouse and more than a million dollar worth of shirtwaist had been sold every year. Blanck and Harris owned several other shirtwaist factories as well besides Triangle (Drehle, 2004, p. 37).

Majority of Triangle Shirtwaist Company employees were immigrants who were paid abysmally low wages. Even after the immigrant workers become experience sewers, the contractor refused to upgrade their wages. The contractors and the Triangle Shirtwaist Company would pocket the profits earned at the expense of these poor immigrants. Not only were these workers paid low wages, there were deduction from wages for things like use of office locker, accidental spoiling of clothes, using of office chair and so on.

As the company hired the immigrants through contractors, company didn't have knowledge about the actual number of immigrants working for them and the payroll of the company was issued in the name of the contractors. The payment was on a weekly basis and there was no fixed pay rate and it all depended on the contractor's whims (Broyles, 2004, p. 14). Although Blanck and Isaac used to supervise the work their employees, they never went to personal level and always maintained a formal relationship (Drehle, 2004, p. 37). Worker never had the opportunity to share their adversity with their employers.

### Background

In 25<sup>th</sup> of March, 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Company was caught in a fire, which originated from a rag bin on the eighth floor, and the fire engulfed the whole building within minutes, killing 146 workers, majority of who were immigrant workers. Workers efforts to extinguish the fire proved futile as piles of fabrics caught fire all over the eighth floor. The fire extinguisher hose was found to be in a dilapidated condition. The ten stories building which housed the company, there was just three ways of escape for the employees which was the freight elevators, the fire escape or the stairway.

The freight elevator was totally inadequate for such emergency, which used to function between the eighth and the second floor. Due to overcrowding in the elevator, some of the employees fell from the elevators to the landing below. Although there were two stairways on the eighth floor, one was found to be locked and the other was jammed with workers from the ninth and tenth floor.

The tenth floor employees escaped through the stairway and climbed to the roof of the building from where they descended through ladders, stretched by students of New York University which was located just across the building. The ninth floor employees were the worst sufferers, because due to malfunctioning of telephone, the warning sent from the eighth floor didn't reach them. By the time they realized about the fire, it already engulfed the whole of the building and most of their escape route was blocked.

As the freight elevator was already jammed with people, the tenth floor employees were all headed towards the fire exit. However, as fire exit too was already jammed and it was holding weight beyond its capacity, it separated from the wall and collapsed, carrying with it hundreds of people. Ninth floor workers ran to the window ledge and they jumped to the net spread below on the street. No one who jumped survived (Phillips & Axelrod, p. 209).

Isaac Harris and Max Blanck's Company was run by immigrants worker, who were mostly ladies and girls, and the company operated outside of Trade Union. It operated on the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of the Asch building which housed 600 cutters and seamstresses packed in all the three floors, which were littered with clothes and tissue papers soaked in oil from sewing machine. The building was not equipped with basic fire safety measures.

Except for narrow staircases leading to the ground floor exit, there was no proper fire exit for the ninth and tenth floor in case of emergency. Fire prevention measure was in the form of a bucket of water and a rotten hose. One of the fire exit was closed from outside to prevent the girls from slipping out in between work.

The most glaring of all defects of the company's location was the height which prevented the fire brigade ladder from reaching the eighth floor. The height of fire brigade ladder could reach to a maximum of sixth floor only. This being the situation, it was obvious that most of the escape route failed when the fire broke out (Brenton & Largent, 1998, p. 15). The company was squarely to be blamed for not provided the basic safety measures to their workers.

Another irony was that the Triangle Shirtwaist Company's production process was thought to be state-of-the-art, with the replacement of foot power machine with electric machine. However, it was never come to the fore how the workers were treated in the factory and only after the great fire did such sordid story came to the forefront. For instance, Triangle factory's efficiency measures included prohibition of conversation among women workers sitting next to each other. However, this restriction was limited to unskilled migrant workers and not to skilled cutters and tailors. In case of migrant workers, the company followed typical sweatshop tactic (Hapke, 2004, p. 51).

Just one year before the fire tragedy, the International Ladies Garment Worker's Union had made the Triangle Sweatshirt Company its primary target for bringing it into the fold of the Union. More than 75 percent of the garment industry workers supported the migrant workers in the Triangle Sweatshirt Company and demanded the improvement in the working condition, and payment of higher wages along with granting Union recognition to these workers most of whom were Jews.

Virtually the entire leadership of the labor movement in the garment industry were Jews and as the Jewish highly values communal responsibility, the Union

tried their best to bring justice to their brethrens working in the Triangle Sweatshirt Company. The strike, although was mainly successful with more than 300 manufacturers signing contract, except for the Triangle owners, who held for thirteen weeks and did not budge. Ultimately, their workers had to call off the strike and returned to work without a union. One year later, the same horrific working conditions which the workers protested led to the death of many of them in fire (Feldberg, p. 192).

#### Significance of the study

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire can be termed significant for a number of reasons. The tragic loss of life and the unprecedented media coverage it received led to a series of investigation. The accident and the resultant furor led to the writing of the first edition of NFPA 101 life safety code, to upgrading of building codes, and fire protection regulations throughout the U. S. There were also a number of worker safety reforms, expedited by increasing labor union movement (Zaosh, 2003, p. 361).

This tragic incident acted as a catalytic factor in bringing out some much needed reforms in labor law. The tragedy also increased support for the ladies garment workers union. The New York State legislature passed thirty-six laws improving safety at the work place (Bunyan, 1999, p. 125).

The Triangle tragedy roused public outrage as no other previous industrial accident had. New York cities tabloids ran harrowing stories of the victims, and picture of severely burned bodies and corpses were depicted in most of the leading dailies. There was mass outrage and public protests about the

incident, which saw the up gradation of many labor related laws (Feldberg, 2001, p. 192).

The public outcry after the fire had a positive effect and within few months of the fire, the New York City passed the Sullivan Hooey Law in October 1911, creating the Bureau of Fire prevention. The fire commissioner was given new powers, and the fire department hired several new inspectors who could inspect the factories and demand immediate improvement wherever applicable.

Even before the Sullivan Hooey Law, with the advice from the committee on safety, the New York State legislature passed a law creating the factory investigating commission to inspect factories in the New York State. The commission was responsible for investigating fire prevention, unhygienic working conditions, working hours, ventilation, lighting, and health problem related to unsuitable work place (Schaefer, 2003, p. 39).

#### Repercussion of the tragedy

The public was outraged by the fact that the factory owners did nothing to protect the workers. During that period, safety measures were almost non-existent in the factories, as government never regulated factories. This situation was going for quite some time and social reformers often brought up the issue to the public and discussed about the dangers involved to work in such unprotected surroundings. After the Triangle shirtwaist fire, the government could no longer ignore the need to involve themselves in the regulation of factories. The fire had made it clear that safety and health at

work were being denied to hard working factory people (Schaefer, 2003, p. 5).

Soon after the disaster, there were unprecedented protests from people everywhere. The women's Trade Union League, started protest March and left no stone unturned to investigate the causes leading to the tragedy. The Union members collected information on factory's working conditions, emergencies facilities, as the also the testimonials of factory workers and survivors. Thanks to their persistence in seeking justice, the Government of New York appointed factory investigation commission within a month of the disaster. This commission was instrumental in bringing about reforms in existing labor laws as well as formulating and passing some important factory safety legislation. <sup>1</sup>

With the setting up of the commission and the brief investigation that ensued, one thing that clearly emerged was the neglect of human work force in an industrial set up. Most of the industries including the Triangle Shirtwaist Company were found to be located in multistoried buildings with modern machineries and state-of-the-art technologies.

However, while coming to the issues of workers health, safety, and work atmosphere, the owner's of industrial house hardly invested a penny. The valuable work force at whose expense these industries were striving, were exploited and neglected and the owner's totally disregarded their welfare issues, impacting their health and productivity in the long run.

As the workers in sweatshops and factories toiled major part of the day, their surroundings impact their health in a significant way. Scent regard to



improve the worker's surroundings negatively impacts the health of workers. The factory owner's were surely not immune to such facts, yet they refused to invest on welfare measures and siphoned the profit earned elsewhere. Under such circumstances, it is crystal clear why the owners of Shirtwaist never bothered to invest on fire safety measures.

1. Investigation, trial and reform, retrieved from the url. [http://www. ilr. cornell. edu/trianglefire/narrative6. html](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/narrative6.html) on 18th Aug, 07

### 1. The Triangle Factory Fire

#### Outcome of the study

The research findings show that the Triangle Shirtwaist Company had exploited the immigrant workers in a rampant way and extracted from them as much work as possible in return of meager wages. As most of the immigrant workers employed by Triangle Shirtwaist were Jews, and as all these workers were unskilled, they accepted whatever wages the company gave them, since “beggars cannot be choosers”. Taking advantage of their deplorable economic conditions, the factory owners, particularly the shirtwaist companies spread across the U. S. employed mainly Jewish and Italian immigrant to reduce their production costs and increase profits.

The immigrant families were so poor that their children used to rush to factories after attending school to augment meagerfamilyincome. These people were easy target of exploitation and shirtwaist factories made them work for ungodly hours in cramped surroundings. They were not allowed to talk and such were the mistrust of owner's about their workers that they

used to lock the exit doors from outside to prevent the workers from going outside.

They were not only denied the freedom of movement, freedom of speech, and freedom of expression, but most importantly they were denied the basic human rights. At the end of grueling work, the workers were not paid in full and money was deducted from their salary for using company's needles, electricity, lockers etc. However, work was so hard to come by that they accepted whatever they received without complaint.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Company owners never did anything to make the workers working condition comfortable. The building infrastructures were never renovated to suit the need of the workers. Although the fire exit and the fire hose were in a dilapidated condition, owner never tried to replace the hose or to repair the fire exit. They did not even spend the barest minimum on the welfare and safety of workers, and extracted as much as possible from them.

While Shirtwaist Company went on making windfall due to skyrocketing demand for their products in the higher echelons of society, their miserliness in sparing some portion of profit for the benefit of the workers is amounting to sheer callousness on their part. Had they renovated the worn out safety systems like the fire exit and hose pipe, the causality would have been much less. The owners too got away Scot free even after such horrendous incident mainly because lack of standardization of labor laws.

It was an irony that in the shirtwaist factory where there were meters and meters of inflammable fabrics, machine oil stained clothes and tissue papers,

and littered bits of clothes everywhere, smoking was allowed. The use of gas lighter was an added risk. In spite of these risk factors, the owners never thought of providing fire extinguisher in each of the three floors. Providing bucketful of water in each floor can hardly be called emergency fire fighting facility. The owner simply didn't bother to upgrade the emergency fire fighting facilities for the simple reason of their complete indifference to the safety and welfare of the workers.

Triangle's owner Blanck and Harris were indicted but despite the testimonies that the sewing girls had been locked inside by the owners, both men were acquitted at the trial in December. When the victim's families repeatedly accused them of violating the fire law, they merely paid a miserly sum of \$75 to each of the 23 families (Lee, 1989). This paltry compensation too was not paid out of compassion or guilt, rather to suppress further negative reporting on the issue. Read also what can be concluded about the demise of the knights of labor?

## Conclusion

The Triangle shirtwaist factory fire of New York City in 1911 called attention to the sweatshop conditions under which women work stitching clothes. This tragedy was the first of many such fires to call public attention to dangers suffered by women employed in sweatshop conditions. This disaster, like similar ones that happened since, called attention to employers who have scant regard for the lives of their workers, who allows these conditions to continue despite knowing that their workers lives are in constant danger.

Tragedies like that of the Triangle Factory generate public support, which culminates into enforcement of laws to ensure that such incidents are not repeated. They are a metaphor for the conditions that women faces, now-a-days less in the United States and more so in the developing countries. However, it's a tragedy that such horrendous incident could act as the ultimate factor, which brought about such sweeping reforms in the labor and industry laws. Death of hundreds of innocent women could catapult the concerned authority into action, which if done earlier would have prevented this infamous tragedy to take place.

#### References

Bunyan, P (1999) All around the town: Amazing Manhattan facts and curiosities, Fordham University press, pp. 362

Brenton, D & Largent, C (1998) The paradigm conspiracy: Why our social systems violate human potential and how we can change, Hazelden PES, pp. 408

Broyles, J (2004) The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, The Rosen Publishing Group, pp. 48

Drehle, D. V. (2004) Triangle: The fire that changed America, Grove press, pp. 340

Feldberg, M (2001) Blessings of freedom: Chapters in American Jewish history, KTAV publishing house Inc, pp. 242

Hapke, L (2004) Sweatshop: the history of an American idea, Rutgers University Press, pp. 208

Lee, H (1989) They hit the pavement just like rain, The triangle shirtwaist factory fire, 1911, The Daily News Magazine, Jan, 22<sup>nd</sup>, in Daily News Books & Maeder, J Eds.(1998) Big town, big time, Sports publishing LLC, pp. 198  
Phillips, C & Axelrod, A (2004) What Americans should know about American history: 200 events that shaped the Nations, Adams Media Publications, pp.

367

Schaefer, A. R. (2003) The Triangle shirtwaist company fire, Gareth Steven Publications, pp. 48

Zalosh, R. G (2003) Industrial fire protection engineering, John Wiley and Sons publications, pp. 400