Lessons learned from the Triangle Waist factory fire

BY PETER DREIER AND DONALD COHEN

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 New York’s business leaders had it right.

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, iron 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.
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