# Implications of Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire

## History of the fire

The triangle shirtwaist factory fire, as it happened on 25 March 1911, was the result of human negligence regarding the safety features that needed proper adherence by the factory owners and managers. While The factory located in New York city completely burned, the fire killed 145 workers. The tragic incident is being remembered even now, a century later, as an infamous event in the history of American Industry.

This factory, as owned by Isaac Harris and Max Blanc, employed female migrant workers as they were cramped in narrow space while working on lines of sewing machines. As all workers were teenaged girls, they could not speak English. At the time of fire, only one elevator was working, out of four elevators. Workers needed to run down a narrow, long corridor to reach the functional elevator. Out of the existing two stairways, one was locked from outside and the other one had opening to certain other interior part of the building. The available fire escape was almost non-existent as it was unable to carry all the workers to safety, within the fleeting period. The fire ultimately resulted in enactment of regulations and laws required for adherence to needed safety features. (Triangle, nd)

## Exploitation of workers

This factory employed young girls, many of whom were child laborers aged around 14 years. These girls, being immigrants from Spain and Italy, could not speak English. They worked almost 14 hours a day as the owners exploited their living conditions and suffering due to poverty. There was no workers’ union existing in the factory at the time of this incident. As no worker dared to speak against the prevailing inhuman conditions, the owners had full freedom to overlook all the safety features required in case of any natural disaster in the factory. Owners’ greed was the prime factor responsible for such behavior. (Fire, nd)

## Protests

During the weeks following this tragedy, several protest and mourning rallies emerged in the city where people gathered in churches and in streets to show their protest towards the greed of owners and their lack of human concern. Monitoring the cause of the victims that included the survivors and dead females being part of the 500 employees of this factory, “The International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union” organized such protests in the direction of demanding justice and firm action to safeguard the oppressed and vulnerable people working in such miserable conditions. As these efforts resulted in greater mobilization of workers’ support, this union made a case for trial of factory owners along with the need for providing safe working conditions in similar factories. These events made it clear that unions can have an active role where workers can remain conscious about their rights and getting the needed access to better working conditions. As relief was organized soon after the tragedy, many organizations joined the relief work. These included the Jewish Daily, Women’s Trade Union League and United Hebrew Trades as they became the part of “Joint Relief Committee” that overlooked the work of allotting relief amounts to victims and their relatives. In addition, the organized efforts of “American Red Cross” also helped in collection of funds from public. (Mourning, nd)

Harris and Blanc were indicted on several counts by a jury in April 1911 charging the two owners under the prevailing Labor Code-Section 80, referring to the requirement of doors being open, and not locked, during the working hours. However, another jury acquitted the convicted duo during December 1911, on the plea that they were ignorant of the doors remaining locked during the fire. As several individual suits came up against the owners of the factory and the relevant building, Blanc and Harris finally settled, during 1914, by paying 75 US Dollars for each lost life. However, they showed no reluctance to their disregard to safety rules, as their factory was shifted to new premises that had no fire escapes and was not found to be fire-proof. Ironically, the owners maintained all along that their factory was a “model of cleanliness and sanitary conditions” while being “second to none in the country”. (Investigation, nd)

## Formulation of Social Security Act

The above-detailed fire tragedy resulted in establishment of this Act along with its implementation, almost 20 years after the tragedy, as the first woman secretary, Ms. Perkins, in the cabinet of President franklin Roosevelt, responsible for labor affairs formulated this Act during her 12 years’ official tenure. The Social Security Act was the milestone in the American legislature history as she was responsible to shape laws and regulations in the direction of creating unemployment insurance along with the establishment of minimum wages regulation. The Act also helped in formulating the legislation guaranteeing the workers their right to get organized to bargain collectively.

While considering the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire as the prime reason to mobilize such regulations, the cabinet secretary for Labor, Ms. Perkins also laid the foundation of “Occupational Safety and Health Administration” (OSHA) by establishing the Labor Standards Bureau of her department at that time. The standards of the bureau later became known as OSHA regulations. Thus, the Labor secretary of Roosevelt administration laid the foundation of America’s current social safety regulations.

Reflecting on the tragedy, Solis (2011) informs through her article in Washington post that the situation towards carrying out business remains largely same as owners did not follow safety regulations, years after this tragedy. According to the author, around 75 immigrants from Thailand lived in inhuman conditions, during 1995, in a so-called factory located in El Monto, California, as their employer took away their passports and forced them to sleep, eat and work in the same place. Most of these female workers worked in poorly-lit garages that had barbed wires leaving no chance for the workers to escape. Ultimately these workers were freed from such bonded labor while they narrated different stories to Solis about their inhuman living conditions. Hilda Solis (2011), who was Labor Secretary in US administration at that time, opines that more tools are required for OSHA to strictly implement the safety regulations. These include strong protection for whistle-blowers and imposition of harsher penalties for employers who have no regard to human values while deploying risky working conditions for their workers. (Solis, 2011)

## Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire triggers the American moment for safety

Reflecting on the tragedy, a press release from “Office of the Press Secretary’, American White House, dated March 24, 2011 remembers this sad event as a galvanizing moment for the American administration towards re-examination of conditions prevailing at work places. While remembering the event that caused loss of almost 150 workers, the press release mentions that the tragic fire gave momentum to formulate safety regulations while recognizing the importance of organized unions to safeguard the rights of helpless workers. However, the same press release mentions that American administration is still, as of 2011, trying hard to improve the working conditions of employees in factories, while upholding the power of collective bargaining as an instrument to protect workers against exploitation by the employers. This press release ends with the proclamation by President Barrack Obama to remember the anniversary of this tragic event by urgently providing the much-needed safe working environment for all workers in the country. It also calls for commitment by all Americans towards their shared responsibility in this direction. (presidential, 2011)

## Commemorating the anniversary of Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

The “New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health” (NYCOSH) has come out with a publication on this anniversary that contains opinion of several authorities in this field. William Henning, Jr, (Lessons, nd) “Chairperson of NYCOSH Board of Directors and Vice President of Communications Workers of America” asserts in this paper that irrespective of efforts by Secretary Perkins, in President Roosevelt administration, towards formulation of safety laws in favor of workers’ rights, the country got its “first major industrial safety law”, in the form of complete OSHA, in 1970 during the tenure of president Nixon administration. However, Henning informs that despite all the established laws and regulations, fire on 3 September 1991 in a Chicken processing plant located at Hamlet, New York City resulted in the death of 25 workers while injuring around 54 employees. He asserts that non-enforcement of rules is the reason for such tragedies, as government lacks resources needed for this purpose. (Lessons, nd)

Another article in this NYCOSH publication provides the opinion of “Dennis M. Hughes, President of the New York State AFL-CIO” According to Hughes, while it is the responsibility of labor federations at state levels to implement the safety laws, the administrative system is compromised with selfish interests from private owners dominating the scenario. He further asserts that the prevailing economic system provides incentive to private enterprise for earning more profit, which means overlooking the welfare of workers while aiming at maximizing the profits.

Reflecting on the lessons learnt from Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire, this NYCOSH publication carries opinions from several knowledgeable personalities in the direction of assessing the effectiveness of measures taken to avoid such tragedies in New York as well as in other parts of USA. According to Peg Seminario, “Safety Health Director for the National AFL-CIO”, several health and safety protection regulations for employees at workplaces were formulated many decades after this tragedy. However, these alone could not stop the occurrence of more such tragedies resulting in many deaths. Seminario (Lessons, nd) asserts that the bargaining power of workers, under the umbrella of organized workers’ unions is effective in combating the occurrence of such incidents. An example in this direction, relates to the explosion at a West Virginia coal mine which claimed the lives of 78 coal miners, in 1968. The workers at this mine resorted to strike, after this tragedy, which resulted in closure of mines as they demanded strict protections for their health and safety. The strike of miners resulted in the passage of “Federal Coal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1969”, as enactment of OSHA followed this Act during 1970. Progress witnessed during next 40 years towards implementation of these safety regulations has been observed, according to Seminario, it resulted in fewer occurrence of deaths, injuries and occupational diseases at workplaces. The steps taken in this direction include setting of standards to limit the exposure of workers to asbestos, toxic substances and coal dust along with the workers gaining rights against discrimination and having access to the relevant information about hazards at work places. However, Seminario asserts that worker unions had to legally fight for winning these protections while demanding government action to implement OSHA and mine safety laws. However, reflecting on the tragic events of Triangle Fire, the author opines that even after one century, workers’ health and safety protections face the threat of erosion from corporate interests at state and federal levels. Accordingly, there is a need to remain organized for attaining these rights, at present. (Lessons, nd)

Continuing with the need to learn lessons from Triangle fire tragedy, Linda Rae Murray, (Lessons, nd), the “President of American Public Health Association and Chief Medical Officer for the Cook County Department of public health” asserts that the practice of locking workers indoors is still prevalent in US establishments. The author in her article in NYCOSH publication informs that Wal-Mart used to lock their workers doing night shifts in the direction of preventing thefts from the stores. Murray further informs that workers currently need to fight for their rights while lack of much-needed immigration reforms has resulted in denial of certain basic rights to immigrant workers. The author ends with the cautious note that division of workers based on race, gender and legal status weakens the workers’ force while the need remains to assess the effectiveness of safety and health protection regulations against the present and future requirements. (Lessons, nd)

## References

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