THE TRIANGLE FIRE: A SPARK THAT TRANSFORMED
THE LABOR LAWS OF THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

The United States underwent an economic transformation during the Era of Industrialization that characterized the second half of the nineteenth century. The introduction of the assembly line sped up the process of production and enabled goods to be sold for less. The increase of immigration to the United States provided a steady flow of employees to the burgeoning factories in many of the country’s major cities. Ruthless tactics emerged among management teams in order to remain competitive within the new markets; this was especially true among garment factories in the newest fashion capital of the world, New York City. Strikes were common due to the declining conditions within the workplace, the inhumane working hours expected of all employees, and the meager pay. An organized strike among all women workers within the garment industry, later known as the Uprising of Twenty Thousand, secured workers decreased working hours and higher pay, more stable employment schedules, and engaged the interest of many upper middle class women who aided the strikers. Yet not all companies were forced to negotiate with the strikers and some, including the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, were large enough to escape the workers’ plea to recognize their union.

The fire at the Triangle Company occurred in 1911 and sparked public outrage
about the true conditions of factory life. Strikes and boycotts were regular occurrences during the Industrial Era but no workplace tragedy had killed so many young working women. The Factory Investigating Committee was formed to provide a detailed account of the conditions of the Triangle factory at the time of the fire and to investigate other factories throughout the state. Improved safety standards were established and enforced by members of the FIC and other state funded investigators. The committee was headed by Robert Wagner who was later elected to the United States Senate and led the crusade for the protection of workers’ rights at the federal level. Although the FIC lasted only four years, the effects of the Triangle fire lingered through the passage of the Wagner Act in 1935 and remain an example of a terrible tragedy resulting from insufficient safety protections.
INTRODUCTION

Around four o’clock in the afternoon on Saturday, March 25, 1911, a fire broke out in the Triangle Shirtwaist Company factory located in New York City’s Greenwich Village. The fire engulfed the eighth floor of the very modern and fireproof Asch building while March winds blew flames through the windows of the ninth and tenth floors. As panicked workers struggled to reach the exits leading to narrow staircases or rickety fire escape ladders, they discovered the doors were locked. A foreman on the eighth floor used brute strength to push girls away from the exit, unlock the door, and pull it inwards opening a path for escape. Employees on the tenth floor rushed up the staircases to the roof where New York University law students used makeshift ladders to help them avoid being burned. The elevator operators struggled to make as many trips as possible up the burning elevator shaft to provide a way out. However, workers on the ninth floor were not warned of the impending disaster. The girls finished their work and flocked to the cloak room to gather their coats and receive their weekly pay, oblivious to the fire surrounding them.

One hundred forty six workers died that afternoon. Most were young Jewish and Italian immigrant women who died from asphyxiation or from injuries sustained after they jumped from the ninth story windows. New Yorkers watched in horror as girls hurled themselves toward safety nets or horse blankets held by desperate firemen only to rip through them and dash to the sidewalk. These girls were not faceless workers toiling in a factory. The women workers of garment industry of New York had recently staged
the largest successful strike in United States history. Also known as the Uprising of Twenty Thousand, the strike encompassed the entire industry and won workers a shorter workweek, more equal pay scales, the right to unionize, and many other important provisions. However, larger factories, such as the Triangle Company, were able to withstand the four-month long strike and agreed to as few terms as possible to entice workers to return to their sewing machines. Wealthy women felt a sense of solidarity with their working neighbors and pumped thousands of dollars in aid to their unions, joined the picket lines, and even provided legal counsel to those strikers who were locked in prison or sent to workhouses for peacefully protesting. The charred and broken bodies that littered Washington Place and Greene Street were not random bodies but young girls who had fought for a better way of life and had achieved important gains in that direction.

It took thirty minutes for the fire to engulf the entire factory and was the worst workplace tragedy New Yorkers had witnessed to date. Newspapers across the country provided first hand accounts of the heroics of law students, firemen, and elevator operators alongside tragic stories of many families who lost loved ones in the blaze. For the first time in history, the courts ignored the pleas of small businessmen and sided with workers. They agreed that safety reform was necessary in order to provide protection against another tragedy of this scale. Investigations into factory life revealed the underbelly of American capitalism. Child labor, terrible working conditions, meager wages, and long hours were commonplace occurrences. Legislation protecting the working class became the first priority of the Factory Investigating Committee that took
the reins in leading the quest to discover the direct and indirect causes of the fire.

Robert Wagner, the appointed chairman of the FIC, was later elected to the United States Senate where he used his first-hand knowledge of factory conditions and management systems to support new federal legislation that provided protection for the worker. The culmination of his work was the passage of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935, also known as the Wagner Act, and it continues to protect the rights of workers today. The Triangle fire was a major event in the fight for safer working conditions in all industries. The lingering effects of the tragedy remain evident in the current labor laws of the twenty-first century.
CHAPTER ONE
THE INDUSTRIAL ERA

The era of industrialization in the United States was defined by enormous economic progression. However, the financial accomplishments of a lucky and successful few overshadowed a depressing picture of the working men, women, and children who toiled endlessly. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw social transformations due to the technological achievements of the era. Most Americans living in the 1700s were self-employed as farmers, shopkeepers, and the like; an example of a large business was the iron industry which “employed perhaps twenty five employees.”\(^{1}\) Around one hundred years later the majority of the working population worked for enormous firms such as Ford or U.S. Steel.\(^{2}\) In pre-industrial society, life and work flowed together to accomplish what was necessary for life; the industrialization of society divorced the synchronized relationship as work was moved outside the home.\(^{3}\)

The advances of technology such as the railroad, the steamship, and the telegraph, created an international economy. Small communities, where face-to-face interaction was the norm, prevailed at the dawn of the industrial era.\(^{4}\) New advancements of the late nineteenth century, the Gilded Age, ushered in a social jungle where a powerful few dominated both society and the economy and used them to their own advantage. This


\(^{2}\) Ibid., 106.


new structure left the masses helpless, frustrated, and unable to fully comprehend the new technological and bureaucratic arrangements.\(^5\) The American way of life had always been focused on the individual; men and women flocked to the new country to start a new life without an overbearing and wealthy social class in power. However, the new corporate arrangement was in conflict with the traditional American system of “individualism, free competition, and equal opportunity.”\(^6\) The working American public did not take well to the new structure implanted by the elite few; labor conflicts, trade union structures, and political protest movements became popular features of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The traditional face-to-face system of values dissolved and was replaced with a bureaucratic one and the rules of the economic system were re-written. Competitors mercilessly destroyed one another to gain the upper hand in the market while economic security became the new rule of the game. Reduced competition through corporate mergers became the norm, technological advances were adopted in response to economic fluctuations while the needs of workers were ignored, and unilateral control was exerted over employees in every aspect of their working lives.\(^7\) When small communities attempted to fight the emerging corporate giants, employers turned to the power of the state and federal governments. Near the end of the 1800s, it was clear to the working class that their only advantage over employers lay in forming national trade unions to pool their strengths. According to David Montgomery, a distinguished labor historian,

\(^5\) Dubofsky, *Industrialism & the American Worker*, 37.

\(^6\) Ibid., 38.

\(^7\) Ibid.
“A larger proportion of the industrial labor force enrolled in trade unions during the years immediately preceding the depression of 1873 than in any other period of the nineteenth century.”

The year 1866 marked the first attempt to legally limit the work day to eight hours. Ira Steward headed the Grand 8-Hour Leagues which sought “legislation to limit the workday to eight hours without reducing wages.” He attempted to link the shorter workday with the idea of democracy through his argument that “without time to think, read, and reflect on their situation, workers would be vulnerable to the political influence of their employers” and be unable to form opinions of their own. Several attempts to unionize followed the push for the eight-hour workday although most did not include women as equals. The National Labor Union, founded in 1866, supported “the daughters of toil in this land” and passed a resolution calling for “equal wages for equal work,” the first in the world. The NLU met its end because most newspapers portrayed the new concept of radical unionism as a foreign concept brought to the good American shores by the influx of immigrants.

The first union effort to organize based on industry and not a specific craft was the formation of the Knights of St. Crispins. The group originated as a defensive mechanism for shoeworkers to “block the introduction of greenhands, the unskilled, from

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9 Ibid., 98.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 100.
doing their work.” However, this union dissolved as the owners of capital adopted new technologies. Instead of being replaced by greenhands, workers were removed because new machinery was introduced and could produce shoes faster and more efficiently than human labor.

Not all attempts to organize labor were in vain. The Knights of Labor was dubbed “the most important national labor organization in the United States in the nineteenth century.” The group was all inclusive with skilled and unskilled, black and white, men and women, immigrant and native born. The Knights strove to use reason and conciliation rather than confrontation and strike as methods to solve labor disputes; the ultimate goal of the group was to continue the Jeffersonian idealistic tradition of educational enlightenment. The Knights of Labor were a major example of uplift unionism which the unions aspired “chiefly to elevate the moral, intellectual, and social life of the worker.” However, the popular press targeted the Knights as being responsible for the huge strike wave and labor conflicts of the late nineteenth century. Between the years 1881 and 1885, there were fewer than 500 strikes throughout the country involving approximately 120,000 workers each year. In the year 1886 alone,

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12 Nicholson, Labor’s Story in the United States, 102.
13 Ibid., 113.
14 Budd, Labor Relations, 112.
there were 1,432 strikes involving 400,000 workers,\textsuperscript{16} unrest within the working community was evident.

The economic depression between 1873 and 1878 caused much distress among the working ranks. A large unemployment demonstration was held in Manhattan’s Tompkins Square Park in January of 1874. A group of 7,000 gathered only to be “beaten and trampled for several hours for gathering without a proper permit.”\textsuperscript{17} While so many were without work, the burden of the depression seemed to be falling on the shoulders of the workers rather than the owners of capital. One of the great efficiencies of the private system of enterprise was that “free workers [were] also free to starve or perish for lack of adequate shelter or medical care.”\textsuperscript{18} Private enterprises did not find it necessary to provide any type of compensation for their workers; such a system would jeopardize the financial bottom line. Government set a precedent for siding with management rather than protecting the workers. The protection set a strong undertone of emboldening big business “to confront labor rather than bargain with it” as the “fears of future labor insurrections led to more aggressive strategies to repress labor activity.”\textsuperscript{19} The Great Uprising of 1877 reflected the many frustrations workers felt during this period of industrialization including the “conflict between labor and capital.”\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{16} Nicholson, \textit{Labor’s Story in the United States}, 116.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 106.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 105.

\textsuperscript{19} Budd, \textit{Labor Relations}, 112.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 111.
A Philadelphia coal mine fire resulting in the deaths of 110 workers sparked a massive and all encompassing strike in 1877. The miners organized to force management to provide safer working conditions. However, Pinkerton Agency spies hired by Franklin B. Gowen, owner of the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company, either discovered the inner workings of the union or fabricated details of a group of Irish rebel workers known as the Molly Maguires.\(^{21}\) When the group of miners was brought to trial, the courts sided with management and most of the Molly Maguires were hanged despite insufficient evidence. This outrage, along with wage cuts, repression of labor unions and organizations, and staggering unemployment rates, played a role in a large wave of strikes and uprisings that spread throughout the country beginning in July of 1877.\(^{22}\)

Strikes started in Martinsburg, West Virginia, a small railroad town, on July 16, 1877.\(^{23}\) Striking workers uncoupled locomotives and refused to operate their machinery until a ten percent wage reduction was restored.\(^{24}\) The effects of the small group of workers in this town in West Virginia were staggering. The strikes spread out from the railroad yards and several days later the consequences of halted train traffic were felt as far as Buffalo.\(^{25}\) There were no overarching and unified goals of the strike, no common ideal tied the workers together, and no leader emerged to articulate exactly what workers

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\(^{22}\) Ibid., 108.

\(^{23}\) Ibid, 109.

\(^{24}\) Ibid.

\(^{25}\) Ibid.
were seeking; only a sense of economic injustice and anger toward wage cuts were present throughout the strike.²⁶

While there may not have been a solid foundation of goals present in 1877, multiple consequences resulted from the affair. Every industrial city took serious care to reevaluate and reorganize its police force; a National Guard presence became commonplace in most cities as preparation for future worker rebellions.²⁷ Combating labor unions became a priority at both the state and private business levels. Malicious conspiracy laws targeting organized labor groups were enacted to prevent future strikes. The use of blacklists to ban dangerous men from the workplace became frequent and many managers forced their employees to sign contracts that banned membership in any labor union.²⁸ Immigration was the major player in labor unrest. In 1870, most employers in large-scale industries were native born, largely of Protestant and northern European decent; the vast majority of employees were new immigrants from Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe. Frustrations over scarce jobs and the social divide between new immigrants and their employers were expressed through increased violence; the homicide rate tripled in the 1880s and the prison population doubled.²⁹ Despite the overall defeat of the Uprising of 1877, workers won small victories and the seed to formally organize was planted.

²⁷ Ibid., 110.
²⁸ Ibid.
²⁹ Ibid.
Two new systems of management were introduced between 1880 and 1910 that revolutionized industry, welfare capitalism and scientific management. Employment was becoming scarce despite population increases and employers discovered it was easier to replace their unsatisfied American workers with new and eager foreign ones. Welfare capitalism was only available to a small portion of the work force; it was exemplified in company towns where a worker’s every need was provided for within the campus. Despite its good intentions, welfare capitalism was a sham. Most management teams provided services only for the betterment of their own image and not for the employees housed on their land.\(^{30}\) At its best, welfare capitalism “transformed laborers into twentieth century serfs” by forever tying employees to the corporation.\(^{31}\)

The second system of management was referred to as Taylorism in honor its founder, Frederick Winslow Taylor. Taylor developed his new system of management by deliberately applying science and mathematics to economic productivity; he studied the progress of the moving assembly line and the simplifying of each labor task into smaller units and its impact on overall productivity levels.\(^{32}\) The system resulted in higher productivity and consumer prices fell.\(^{33}\) In theory, it was a win-win situation for both management and employees; however, in reality, most of the rewards went strictly to management. In return for their higher wages, workers lost all control they had over

\(^{30}\) Dubofsky, *Industrialism & the American Worker*, 96.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 97.


\(^{33}\) Dubofsky, *Industrialism & the American Worker*, 95.
their work practice, the pace of the work was accelerated, and skilled workers were vulnerable to replacement either by greenhorns or new technology. Yet modernism within the workplace went beyond the deskilling of workers in hopes of increased production. Efficiency and techniques for strengthening management infiltrated every aspect of the labor process. Differential pay scales along with bonus plans were introduced within industries where mass production was commonplace. Employees were placed into different categories and were then paid by the week, month, or year in order to distinguish them from simple hourly employees.

Strikes and labor unrest were not uncommon after the railroad workers in West Virginia decided to strike. In Chicago’s Haymarket Square, a rally for an eight-hour work day was held on May 1, 1886 and 80,000 workers marched on Michigan Avenue; two workers were killed by police the next day. A second rally was held on May 4th to protest the police killings; despite the poor attendance of protesters a large contingent of police was prepared for another riot. Unfortunately for the labor movement, a bomb was thrown as the crowd dispersed and one policeman was immediately killed while seven others received fatal injuries. Eight men were charged and convicted and seven were sentenced to death; all appeals failed and four of the condemned were executed while one committed suicide in his cell. Seven years later the three other men were

34 Nicholson, Labor’s Story in the United States, 164.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 117.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
pardoned by the Illinois Governor, John P. Altgeld, on the grounds that most of the evidence given at the trial was pure fabrication.\textsuperscript{39} This incident is yet another example of the lengths management was willing to go in order to avoid negotiations with labor.

Employees of Carnegie Steel in Pennsylvania mobilized their entire town of 10,000 workers in 1892 to protest the eighteen percent wage cut proposed by management.\textsuperscript{40} Technological advances of the time enabled the plant to hire untrained strikebreakers more easily than ever. After four months of inactivity, a twenty-five percent wage cut, and an extended twelve-hour work day, Carnegie broke the strike and employees returned to work.\textsuperscript{41} Two years later another strike was waged against a major railroad company. The Pullman strike began in 1894 as a result of pay cuts while not reducing the rent charged in the company town that housed the majority of workers.\textsuperscript{42} Four thousand workers voted to strike after concessions were refused by management. The movement escalated to the national level as other railroad union members voted to boycott and refused to “work on any trains carrying Pullman cars.”\textsuperscript{43} Within three days, all rail traffic was at a standstill to the south and west of Chicago and the U.S. Army was sent in to protect the mail service.\textsuperscript{44} Progressive critics and experts on efficiency throughout the country discussed what the long- and short-term economic waste

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{39} Nicholson, \textit{Labor’s Story in the United States}, 117.
  \item \textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 120.
  \item \textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 135.
  \item \textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 136.
\end{itemize}
inevitably produced by such struggles was. The Erdman Act was passed by Congress in 1898 to protect against the stoppage of the rail service by providing both mediation and arbitration services. Businessmen began to explore their options and introduced themselves to “new concepts of scientific management and worker representation” that could improve their control at a lower cost.

Businessmen and professionals in smaller industrial cities organized open-shop and anti-boycott associations in response to the rise of union membership between 1897 and 1904. An open-shop is a nonunion operation and the movement was driven by the desire of employers to maintain union-free workplaces and emphasize the ideal of individual freedom. Employers argued that unions violated the individual liberties of workers by denying them the ability to choose their own terms of employment through collective bargaining practices; in theory, “each individual worker should be entirely free to join or not join a union.” Many small businessmen organized in response to the growth in labor organization and formed the National Association of Manufacturers in which members vowed to never negotiate with unions or sign union contracts. Smaller companies felt more threatened by the organization of labor than larger companies, they were more vulnerable to strikes, boycotts, and other demonstrations carried out by

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45 Nicholson, Labor’s Story in the United States, 141.
46 Ibid., 164.
47 Dubofsky, Industrialism & the American Worker, 103.
48 Budd, Labor Relations, 129.
49 Dubofsky, Industrialism & the American Worker, 98.
50 Ibid., 97.
unions. The early 1900s saw a collective effort by business to push the belief that union membership was un-American. In Minneapolis, 200 employers formed an alliance in 1903 that blacklisted union supporters, hired labor spies, recruited a private army, and paid dues that helped fellow victimized employers until employees returned to work.\textsuperscript{51}

Big business continued to grow and labor unrest was the headline of national news as the United States became a major player in world affairs. The Spanish-American War of 1898 caused rapid expansion in military methodology and technology and both were key components in enabling the new expansionist policies. As wartime wages increased, union membership began to soar. War enabled the United States to establish itself as a major foreign power and prompted the country’s leaders to increase educational and technological opportunities for the next generation.\textsuperscript{52} Public education was expanded at the start of the twentieth century in order to train workers and expand the pool from which new engineers and technicians were drawn from. Education was viewed as a way to “enhance productive capabilities and military power.”\textsuperscript{53} This new mind set paved the way for the Progressive Era. As the younger generation reaped the benefits of the emerging education system, the technological advances and the new corporate system of working outside the home planted the seeds for labor upheavals in the textile industry.

\textsuperscript{51}Dubofsky, \textit{Industrialism & the American Worker}, 130.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 142.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 141.
Around the end of the Civil War, fifty percent of adults were self-employed in an agrarian economy. By 1920, the United States was an urban nation and rarely was a laborer self-employed.⁵⁴ Between the years 1870 and 1920 “almost eleven million Americans deserted farms for cities.”⁵⁵ There were four great waves of immigration to the United States totaling nearly twenty million new bodies on American soil with the largest influx of people arriving between 1898 and 1914.⁵⁶ New York City retained a large portion of those entering the country; by 1910, eighty percent of the city’s two million inhabitants had at least one foreign born parent.⁵⁷ Most of the two million Italian immigrants arriving on the shores of New York City between 1900 and 1910 were fleeing environmental disaster. The Italian elite had cut down thousands of trees on their land in order to make profits from timber; immense soil erosion, a ruined economy, and tropical disease outbreaks resulted.⁵⁸ Another two million Eastern European Jewish immigrants arrived in the United States between 1881 and the end of World War I.⁵⁹ It was not only the young and the poor who crossed the Atlantic. Increased anti-Jewish violence forced the professional class, idealists, parents with sons eager to save them from mandatory

⁵⁴ Dubofsky, Industrialism & the American Worker, 2.
⁵⁵ Ibid., 3.
⁵⁶ Ibid., 10.
⁵⁷ Ibid.
⁵⁸ David VonDrehle, Triangle: The Fire that Changed America (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 108.
⁵⁹ Ibid., 10.
service in the czar’s army, as well as the unskilled poor all piled into ships headed for New York.

The population of the United States increased with newcomers and new political ideas infiltrated the free capitalist way of life. The Socialist Party, led by Eugene Debs at the turn of the twentieth century, focused on the totalitarian and oppressive working conditions, the greed of employers, and the squashing of democratic ideals with expansive workplace tyranny.60 President Theodore Roosevelt was warned by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge that the stubbornness of businessmen not to negotiate with their employees was “breeding socialism at a rate which is hard to contemplate.”61 It was believed that the type of person who was attracted to the ideals of Socialism would not be interested to place a vote in elections; nevertheless the increase in public education encouraged more working class men to voice their opinions. The socialist movement was banded together through shared values and the belief that a better and more moral society could be built with the hands of a united and class-conscious working class.62 However, the American way of life did not provide a fertile breeding ground for socialist tendencies. In a country where no strict class lines exist, where the ability to move throughout social classes remains a possibility, and where wages are generally high enough to maintain a living, workers eventually lost interest. Yet in the years leading up to the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire, the deplorable working conditions, general


61 Ibid., 147.

living standards of the working class, and lack of government regulations enabled the socialist movement to attract an alarming number of supporters.

The needle trade industry, or garment industry, was a breeding ground for labor organizing activity and provided a platform for young and ambitious reformers to gain support. Generally speaking, work in a garment factory consisted of ten- to twelve-hour work days, between fourteen and sixteen hours during the busy season, and deplorable conditions. Large factories took advantage of subcontracting work from other organizations which made regulation of the trade nearly impossible.63 Strikes within the industry were commonplace and workers were generally filled with bitterness against their employers. Union recognition, improvement in working conditions, along with shorter hours and better pay were all major points of contention between labor and management.64 The socialist ideal became extremely popular within the needle trade industry; it stood for “an end to abuse and exploitation by arrogant and autocratic bosses, and a chance at a safe and decent life as a worker in an imperfect world.”65 This socialist belief became the unifying language of immigrant workers entering the garment industry.

Large textile mills were constructed outside of Boston and Philadelphia in the 1820s. The work completed within these factories could easily have been done at home but management saw the advantage to closely supervise hundreds of workers under one

63 Nicholson, Labor’s Story in the United States, 155.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid., 156.
These mills implemented new concepts combining new technologies, a large wage labor force, and centralized management skills under one roof for profits. The rise of the garment industry truly began to take shape in the 1840s with the invention of the lock-stitch sewing machine and later during the Civil War when mass-produced and standard-sized uniforms were necessary to outfit the troops. Department stores and their mail order catalogues opened up a realm of possibilities for the ambitious businessman. Standardized clothing produced in factories in the major cities along the eastern seaboard could reach the small towns in the center of the country. The invention of the cutter’s knife permitted one man to cut dozens, or even hundreds, of equal size fabric pieces with one swoop of his knife. The rise of ready-made fashion for women and the ability to quickly finish pieces coincided with the new incoming labor force, especially Russian Jews who were skilled with a needle and thread.

New York City emerged as the fashion capital of America in the late nineteenth century. The manufacturing of ready-made clothing also increased and by the year 1890 forty-four percent of all standard size clothes were produced in New York. As in most industries, there were both busy and slack seasons; during the slack seasons in the garment industry, thousands of workers were laid off and forced to survive on the meager pay they saved while working twelve- to fourteen-hour days. Along with the regular

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69 Ibid., 28.
seasonal fluctuations of work, wages and rates per piece completed were falling, more subdivisions and simplifications of work tasks led to decreasing income for workers with an increase in hours.\textsuperscript{70} Workers learned to deal with the inability to count on full-time employment for an entire year. Depressions and recessions forced employers to lay off workers when they were unable to provide enough salary, seasonal unemployment was caused by style changes, and new technological changes and advances were constantly replacing human skills with mechanical ones.\textsuperscript{71} One woman worker commented on her life as a garment factory worker struggling in New York City, “I didn’t live, I simply existed. . . . It took me months and months to save up money to buy a dress or a pair of shoes. . . . I had the hardest struggle I ever had in my life.”\textsuperscript{72} The control of workers within the factories was reinforced with extremely harsh penalties; for example, a quarter of a days wages were deducted for being fifteen minutes late, two days pay was taken for missing one day without a sufficient reason, and two weeks pay disappeared for quitting without permission from management.\textsuperscript{73}

The garment industry was the main employer of the newly arriving Jewish immigrants in urban centers. Between 1880 and 1910, the great expansion of demand for ready-made clothing paralleled the peak of absorption of Jewish immigrants into the

\textsuperscript{70} Soyer, \textit{A Coat of Many Colors}, 118.

\textsuperscript{71} Dubofsky, \textit{Industrialism & the American Worker}, 25.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 23.

\textsuperscript{73} Budd, \textit{Labor Relations}, 107.
workforce.\textsuperscript{74} By the mid-1890s, seventy-five percent of the 65,000 workers in the garment industry were Jewish, the cloak making industry in 1910 had 15,000 workers with 12,000 of them Jewish.\textsuperscript{75} The new arrivals were welcomed into the huge garment factories because of the familial ties that brought them to Manhattan. Most of the Jewish population lived in incredible poverty on the lower east side of Manhattan.\textsuperscript{76}

For female immigrants, the chance to work within the garment industry was an incredible opportunity to escape the confines of home work, tenement life, and also provided a chance to become independent during the social liberalism of the Progressive Era. Working in a garment factory enabled girls to be surrounded by workers their own age and provided a job where they could sit all day; sewing may exhaust their eyes but it was not physically straining. Working in a laundry was another available employment option at the time, but this work was dangerous and exhausting as it required real manual labor for a full twelve- to fourteen-hour workday. Department stores hired female workers but the clerks were expected to stand whenever a customer was in the store, which was almost always between eight in the morning and midnight; additionally, they had to walk to and from work. Housework for one of the wealthy New York families supplied cheap labor for middle class families and provided the girls with a safe working

\textsuperscript{74} Soyer, \textit{A Coat of Many Colors}, 117.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 118.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 28.
environment; the down side was that they were surrounded only by the family and unable to make any friends.  

Male immigrants were encouraged to attend City College, “the Harvard for immigrant Jews,” even if the family was in dire need of their wages.  Female immigrants resigned themselves to their lot in life: work. The surrounding world, especially in the bustling city of New York, was “passionate for advancement, for education, for ideas, for improvement” and these girls “suffered under limitations of time and place.” The Uprising of Twenty Thousand, as the garment strike of 1909-1910 would later be known as, was a shining example of female workers’ refusal to accept the sexism of the twentieth century.

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77 VonDrehle, *Triangle*, 113.
78 Ibid., 103.
79 Ibid., 104.
CHAPTER TWO
UPRISING

Good citizenship and pride in the United States were new themes during the Progressive Era. The Pledge of Allegiance was introduced to schools in October of 1892 in order to connect all young schoolchildren with a more concrete understanding of citizenship.\(^1\) Originally, the Pledge was introduced as a part of the Columbus Day celebrations but its regular use quickly spread throughout the country. William D. Boyce brought the scouting movement to the United States from London in 1910. He established the Boy Scouts of America in the same year with the intent to promote ideological goals such as patriotism, militarism, and training in citizenship for all young male members.\(^2\) Rotary Clubs and Kiwanis Clubs sprung up in almost every city or town to advance a similar message to businessmen as the boy scouts did for their sons, a sense of patriotism with less military characteristics.\(^3\) An emphasis on social service projects that concentrated on the improvement of the surrounding community were popular in the early twentieth century; businessmen invested in the public to negate their otherwise selfish public image. However, the fruits of these efforts were not evident at the time of their inception. Factory owners continued their cutthroat tactics and it was not until

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\(^2\) Ibid., 165.

\(^3\) Ibid., 166.
twenty thousand young women walked out of their jobs that the idea of providing assistance to the needy truly took hold in the American business system.

The Progressive Era was a time of immense prosperity despite the pitiful average annual income of the working class. The richest one percent of households in the United States controlled forty-five percent of the wealth within the country around 1900, the highest percentage ever recorded.\(^4\) This illustration of immense industrial growth and individual wealth paralleled the fairly stable, yet inadequate, wages and very dangerous working conditions of the lower classes. Estimates of what was considered necessary to provide a decent living for a family of four was between 800 and 875 dollars a year, yet the average income was somewhere between 550 or 600 dollars.\(^5\) In the year 1909, there were over one hundred thousand tenement buildings in New York City. One third of these buildings had no lights in the hallways, there were approximately two hundred thousand rooms with no windows, and most immigrant families on the Lower East Side slept five or more in a room.\(^6\) There were an incredible number of people pouring into the city and no public works agency existed to enforce building codes.

The need to organize the largest industry in New York stemmed from a number of issues workers faced in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The working conditions in garment factories were no better than the living conditions of the laborers. The term


sweat shop is derived from the employment method of sweating workers, when employers squeezed “more work for less pay” from their employees. Agencies increased production rates through forcing employees to work longer hours. This increase in work time along with the deplorable working conditions and other intense practices of factory owners produced one “of the highest industrial accident rates in the Western industrial world.” Between 1880 and 1900, 35,000 workers were killed annually and 536,000 were injured. Within the garment industry, more than eighty percent of workers were female, and the majority of them were between the ages of sixteen and twenty two. The female worker population increased from 34,000 to 2,229,000 in the fifty year span of 1870 to 1920. Also in 1909, “more people worked in the factories of Manhattan than in all the mills and plants of Massachusetts, and by far the largest number of them were making clothes.” By 1913, seventy-five percent of the female workforce was under the age of twenty-five with fifty percent of them were of Jewish decent.

The International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, known as the ILGWU, was organized within the immigrant labor sweatshops of the garment industry in New York

7 VonDrehle, Triangle, 42.
8 Dubofsky, Industrialism & the American Worker, 24.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 14.
11 Ibid., 15.
and other cities around 1900. The organization grew despite the overall trend of slow union growth throughout the United States in the early 1900s. The depression of 1908 and 1909 wiped out trade unions across the country yet between the years 1909 and 1913 almost 400,000 workers joined the ILGWU. It was also one of the few craft unions that allowed female membership; most other craft unions denied women membership because of the general cultural belief that they belonged in the home despite the overall need for their wages. The union emerged in response to the lack of government intervention to their cries for improving conditions, shortening working hours, and other grievances that fell on the deaf ears of their employers. Workers in garment factories underwent serious abuses; they “were trailed to the bathroom and hustled back to work; they were constantly shortchanged on their pay and mocked when they complained,” owners would fix time clocks to stretch the work day and cut minutes off the lunch hour. In an effort to persuade employers to recognize the union, members argued that an efficient union would provide a stable source of labor and therefore provide employers with a more efficient labor force.

The 1909 strike of the garment industry was the largest and longest strike organized by women. Karl Marx, the social scientist and revolutionary, once said, “Anybody who knows anything of history knows that great social changes are impossible


16 Dubofsky, *Industrialism & the American Worker*, 104.
without the feminine ferment.”  The female population of New York City was united and in an uproar. The Uprising of Twenty Thousand gained enormous amounts of public support and was never officially broken by management tactics. The strike began in the winter of 1909 by the Ladies’ Waist Makers Union, Local 25 of the ILGWU in New York after employers refused to recognize the legitimacy of the union. The spark igniting the strike occurred in the Rosen Brothers shop in July of that same year.

Conditions of economic survival were difficult for owners of capital as well as those working in factories. Inside contracting had become a means of existence for employers in large companies to stay competitive with the smaller factories. Small shops were able to sweat labor more easily by continually pressuring the labor costs of wages and conditions downwards and they were therefore able to undercut the larger factories.

Many times work done in the tenement homes, known as home work, was used by smaller shops to get the most production form their workers. When work was done outside factory walls, there was no way for emerging governmental agencies to regulate it.

Investigations conducted at the time discovered many mothers worked long hours into the night and children as young as four were making brushes. Small business owners who relied on the home work system argued that if such production was

18 Ibid., 156.
19 Ibid.
21 VonDrehle, *Triangle*, 100.
regulated, wages would increase and their business would be driven out of town by the larger companies. The American economic system at the turn of the twentieth century was such that private enterprise was considered sacred and, therefore, such restrictions of trade would not be enforced. Businessmen and politicians also argued that women belonged in the home to care for children. Home work provided the opportunity for women to both support her family while caring for them.22

To combat the tenement work system utilized by small factory owners, employers of larger companies took middle-men contractors within their own walls. Inside contracting allowed manufacturers to save money on management, rent, sewing machines, and fuel while also providing a buffer between the owners of capital and “the details of production.”23 The distance between management and workers provided invisibility and an opportunity to turn a blind eye on unethical production practices. The profits for the middle-men came from cutting the workers wages; they kept the difference between the manufacturer’s wages and what they deemed fair for their own hired workers.

Clothing was designed and manufactured at the Rosen Brothers establishment. Skilled cutters made the patterns, settled on a final price per finished item, and the company then sold the finished goods to retailers.24 The inside contractors, or the skilled cutters in this particular case, hired their own people to assemble the pieces and then

22 Soyer, A Coat of Many Colors, 37.

23 Ibid., 118.

settled on their own piece rate. All work on the garments was done under one factory roof. The benefits of inside contracting for Rosen Brothers were plentiful. Such a system allowed management to sweat labor easily, the middle-man provided a buffer against any labor conflict arising over wage disputes, and it gave management the freedom to expand or contract production according to the demand for the garments without the responsibility of hiring or firing the work force.\textsuperscript{25} The main advantage of the system for larger firms was the ability to sweat the labor while avoiding discussion; they could lower the rate per item to stay competitive while the middle-men dealt with announcing it to workers.\textsuperscript{26}

The system worked for Rosen Brothers until management refused to pay the agreed upon rate per completed piece. When upper management cut the piece rate, the inside contractors were unable to make a profit from their own workers without decreasing the already meager salary. The inside contractors then explained that if they did not receive the agreed upon price, workers’ wages would decrease yet again; their employees walked out on the company. The strike lasted five weeks until the company broke the strike and settled with the workers.\textsuperscript{27}

There were factory owners such as Louis Leiserson who came to United States from Eastern Europe and worked in factory conditions that were very similar to what current workers suffered under. Leiserson began his life in America as an “overworked,

\textsuperscript{25} Greenwald, \textit{The Triangle Fire}, 28.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
underpaid greenhorn” but eventually worked his way up the ranks to become his own shop owner. He had both witnessed and been a victim of the disastrous conditions in the needle trade factories and promised to hire only union members to work in his factory. Regardless of his good intentions, his promise became too expensive to keep and Leiserson was forced to hire nonunion workers who were willing to work the same grueling hours for less money. Such was the competitive environment of the New York City garment industry; without sweating labor, there was no way for the company to survive.

Garment workers complained of the inhumane treatment they received at factories; petty abuses from foremen, tyrannical supervisors, rudeness, poor pay, and favoritism were suffered daily. Workers were forced to pay for necessary production tools such as “needles, thread, and electricity.” Other abuses suffered by the workers within the garment industry included being “charged for ‘damaged’ goods or products deemed of poor quality.” A ticketing system was in place in most factories where each finished product was awarded a small ticket. These tickets were saved but containers were neither provided nor allowed, and, because of their small size, many were lost and laborers were cheated out of pay. If any workers complained or attempted to challenge

28 VonDrehle, Triangle, 9.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
these abuses, they risked being fired, labeled as troublemakers within the factory, or, worse, blacklisted within the entire industry.\textsuperscript{33}

The only way to gain the attention of management was a general strike. Previous smaller strikes within individual factories were successful, but after concessions were made by management, workers would terminate their union memberships and the labor organizations found themselves unable to make any real gains.\textsuperscript{34} The female workers who organized the strike of 1909 “were a catalyst for the forces of change” in that they led the charge for women’s and other civil rights, the rise of union membership and power, and the utilization of the government to address social ills.\textsuperscript{35} Workers were striking for democracy, a foundation of the American dream that most immigrants had traveled to achieve.\textsuperscript{36} The song sung during the 1909 strike incorporated the desire for freedom and the sense of purpose the strikers felt.

\begin{center}
In the black of the winter of nineteen nine,  
When we froze and bled on the picket line,  
We shoed the world that women could fight  
And we rose and won with women’s might.  

Chorus: Hail the waistmakers of nineteen nine,  
Making their stand on the picket line,  
Breaking the power of those who reign,  
Pointing the way, smashing the chain.  
And we gave new courage to the men  
Who carried on in nineteen ten  
And shoulder to shoulder we’ll win through,  
Led by I.L.G.W.U.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{33} Greenwald, \textit{The Triangle Fire}, 26.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 31.

\textsuperscript{35} VonDrehle, \textit{Triangle}, 12.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 27.
The song represented the new found power and confidence of women. They had stopped the garment industry in its tracks and forced change, or so they thought.

At the time, Constitutional law required reforms to be enacted at the state level or implemented by private insurance groups of voluntary welfare associations. Federal authorities were denied the ability to have a major influence in social reform.\(^\text{38}\) Traditionally, the federal and state governments could regulate adult male labor but women and children found themselves outside the protection of the law.\(^\text{39}\) American industrialists were never subject to succumb to an anti-capitalist aristocratic class, such as in Germany or Great Britain, who would ally themselves with the working class.\(^\text{40}\) American judges of the Progressive years in the late nineteenth century stressed the sacredness of private property and the right of individuals to freely contract themselves out to employers. As a result, the law clearly sided with management’s right to conduct business as they saw fit. With so many factors siding against the poor working class, “most welfare reforms focused on women and children” and women began to assert themselves and had a large influence on passed legislation.\(^\text{41}\)

The Uprising of Twenty Thousand was a major walkout of labor in the garment industry; factories as far as Philadelphia staged their own walk out as a symbol of


\(^{38}\) Dubofsky, Industrialization & the American Worker, 90.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 87.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 90.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 88.
solidarity among the industry. Management of many small shops in New York City agreed to union recognition and either a union shop or union preference when hiring new workers. A shop-committee arbitration board was established to settle piece rate negotiations, meaning labor representatives and management agreed upon the rate paid to workers per completed garment. Workers would no longer be charged for thread, needles, and electricity and a fine for management was installed if any points were not upheld. Larger factories, such as the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, were able to hold out longer than the smaller shops. They withstood the strike by shifting production to factories outside New York City or subcontracted smaller shops that had already settled with the union. The strike began in November with the slow winter season fast approaching and the larger factories had the resources to wait it out.

The strike was not without its hardships. The police, courts, and most associations connected with the government sided with management. Newspapers transformed thousands of young Jewish girls into criminals who needed to be taught a lesson of humility. City gangsters found a lucrative side job in beating up on the strikers. Agencies, such as the Greater New York Detective Agency, provided both strikebreaking employees and body guards to protect those workers against the “violent” mobs of young women outside the factory doors. The detectives hired to protect the girls still working

42 Greenwald, *The Triangle Fire*, 34.
43 Ibid., 33.
44 Ibid., 34.
had lengthy criminal records that judges ignored in the courtroom. Clara Lemlich, a young immigrant publicly known for her support of the strike, was hospitalized for injuries received from a beating she sustained by thugs protecting the factories. Yet when the case came to trial, the men were acquitted and Lemlich was left with a shattered body.46 The Triangle Company utilized the new system of hiring strikebreakers, gangsters, and police support to crack the picket line.47 Management at the Triangle refused to recognize the garment workers’ union, the foundation of the strike and the one issue workers refused to compromise on.48

Eighty percent of strikers were young women and stories of outlandish violence spread through publications. Many progressive upper middle class women decided they had a duty to protect their working sisters and joined in the strike movement.49 A sense of paternalism prevailed among the upper classes; young and poor New York girls were in trouble and needed protection.50 The Progressive Era produced a generation of reform-minded women in the upper classes who stood for women’s rights. It was these women who linked the strike with the suffrage movement and decided to help fund the Uprising. Anne Morgan, daughter of steel tycoon J. P. Morgan, explained to the New York Times, “We can’t live our lives without doing something to help them. . . . Of course, the

46 Greenwald, The Triangle Fire, 35.
47 VonDrehle, Triangle, 4.
48 Ibid.
49 Greenwald, The Triangle Fire, 35.
50 Ibid., 36.
consumer must be protected . . . but 52 hours a week seems little enough to ask.”51
Middle-class help came in multiple forms; wealthy women joined the picket lines, they
coordinated press conferences and helped put together articles in the New York Journal
and The Call, they raised between fifty and sixty thousand dollars for fines and bail
payments and another twenty thousand dollars for the general strike fund, and legal
counsel and aid were also provided to help the movement.52

Peaceful picketing was legal in the state of New York in 1909 yet city judges
ruled otherwise. Girls were convicted of “vagrancy, solicitation, disorderly conduct, and
assault” and hundreds were fined or sentenced to the workhouse.53 Police found
themselves unable to distinguish between the laborers and middle-class women providing
support on the lines. Mary Drier, a socially prominent woman, was peacefully picketing
yet was verbally abused by thugs and when she attempted to defend herself she was
arrested. After police discovered her identity, she was immediately released.54 Drier
found her treatment intolerable and was upset by the fact that the working girls were
subject to such abuses on a daily basis. She called for the police and judges to award the
same treatment and respectability shown toward members of the middle class to all
women.55

51 VonDrehle, Triangle, 71.
52 Greenwald, The Triangle Fire, 41.
53 Ibid., 36.
54 Ibid., 38.
55 Ibid.
The Jewish community was extremely close and had supported one another in previous strikes. During the cloakmakers’ strike of 1890, when management had refused to fire workers hired during the strike, the Jewish community donated all they could – earrings, watches, rings, all they could afford – to benefit the strikers.\footnote{Soyer, \textit{A Coat of Many Colors}, 129.} During the 1909 campaign, Jewish men were known to take the law into their own hands; they raided the homes of scabs, strike breakers, and their families.\footnote{Ibid., 128.} In a time when stable unions were not the norm and funding reserves were not readily available, successful strikes depended on the support and generosity of the surrounding community; the Jewish community of the early 1900s was fully supportive of their own. However, the Uprising of Twenty Thousand needed support from outside the community, not matter how wary some strike leaders were of the intent of the middle class. Prior to the intervention of the middle class, the manufacturers were winning the strike. Many leaders were nervous the wealthy women would turn their struggle into a pity case while building support for their own suffrage movement. In the end, any financial support was appreciated.

The demands of the strike, as published by leaders, included a twenty percent pay raise, a fifty two hour work week, and the recognition of the union as the main bargaining agent for all shirtwaist workers. A “more rational way of dealing with the seasonal nature of the garment business” was listed along with set rules for overtime pay and a notice of job loss during slack time.\footnote{VonDrehle, \textit{Triangle}, 59.} These demands were not new to management.
Worker demands in the late nineteenth century included the abolition of contractor-owned workshops to stop the sweating of labor and the installation of a clock in all workrooms to cease the exploitation of hours at work.\textsuperscript{59} When negotiations between the Women’s Trade Union League and representatives of management were held on December 27, 1909, six points were agreed upon. A fifty two hour work week was set, equalization of pay during slack seasons, four paid holidays, all items necessary for production would be provided by management, piece-rates and wages would be agreed upon jointly by both shop committees and employers, and all striking workers would be hired back. However, the seventh, and most critical point of the agreement, remained a point of contention: management refused to recognize the garment workers’ union.\textsuperscript{60}

The rejection of the proposed negotiation forced the strike to last another six weeks until both parties agreed to a truce. Three hundred and two of the three hundred and twenty factories in New York City signed contracts to recognize the Women’s Trade Union League as the representative of garment workers.\textsuperscript{61} Membership in the union jumped from five hundred in August of 1909 to almost twenty thousand in February of 1910.\textsuperscript{62} The Triangle Company was forced to take back striking workers as the busy season approached. Management agreed to take back strikers at shorter hours and higher

\textsuperscript{59} Soyer, \textit{A Coat of Many Colors}, 121.
\textsuperscript{60} Greenwald, \textit{The Triangle Fire}, 45.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
wages and promised to recognize the union, but only in the sense that membership in the union was no longer prohibited.63

A leading result of the strike within the garment industry was known as the Protocols of Peace; “the unity of the labor force, public support for workers, and pressure from industrial democrats brought management to the bargaining table.”64 The chief goal of the Protocol was to modernize the industry, to gain profits through efficient use of labor and technology rather than simply sweating labor. In order to accomplish this goal, all shops within the garment industry needed to be covered under the Protocol umbrella which proved to be an impossible task without the help of state legislatures.65 The difficulties within the garment industry at the turn of the twentieth century were rooted in the inefficiencies of labor that resulted from cutthroat competition and the skyrocketing of big business.

The Protocol attempted to standardize the garment industry. It argued that unions would be able to supply efficient workers and therefore save manufacturers money in the long run.66 The Protocols of Peace was a three part agreement focusing on true democracy for workers. The first point was a labor contract covering the general issues of hours, wages, and paid holidays; it was the best labor contract workers in the industry

63 VonDrehle, *Triangle*, 86.


65 Ibid., 172.

66 Ibid., 74.
had seen to date. The second part called for the “abolition of charges for electricity and supplies; the establishment of shop committees to establish a just piece rate; and . . . a Joint Board of Sanitary Control.” The Board was made up of representatives from both the union and management who were responsible for maintaining safe working conditions. Finally, keeping with the tradition of efficiency of trade, a preferential shop was set up, a ban on all strikes and lockouts (unless conditions within the factory were deemed unsanitary), and the establishment of standardized grievance procedures; all of which promised to uphold the ideals of industrial democracy. Industrial democracy is the effort to align free market capitalism with democracy in order to provide a fair and just workplace; economic reform equaled political reform during the Progressive Era. The Protocol was more than a simple trade agreement; it transformed the industry by introducing a fresh look at labor relations.

As with any new system, the Protocol had a rough start. It promised to equalize the piece-rate system but an agreement on the actual rate could not be made. The Board of Arbitration and the Committee on Grievances were filled with ambiguous rules and too many clerks and independent investigations existed for true efficiency; and because it

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68 Ibid., 73.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 74.
71 Ibid., 3.
72 Ibid., 23.
was so slow, workers became frustrated with their new system.\textsuperscript{73} The Triangle Company, however, escaped the grasp of the Protocol; it was too large to be trapped in the newly formed procedures. Because of their size, Triangle continued the illegal practices and became the subject of major public scrutiny after the fire engulfed the factory in 1911.

Progressivism supported women’s right to vote, the protection of consumers and workers, trade unionism, and a scientific way of looking at society. New fields such as social work and socially conscious politics emerged at the turn of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{74} President Theodore Roosevelt led the charge of Progressivism in his challenge of big business by breaking monopolies and protecting consumers through food and drug safety. He was a pioneer government official who sided with labor during a coal strike and he even dined with a black man in the White House.\textsuperscript{75} Change was also evident in the New York governor, Charles Evans Hughes, who pushed insurance reforms, backed the early versions of worker’s compensation, and was against drinking and gambling.\textsuperscript{76} Even Tammany Hall, the strong New York City political force that represented the opposite of progressivism, was changing. Old Tammany Hall leaders had always sided with factory owners during disputes because the strikers “had no money, no ‘sugar,’ to pass around the station house.”\textsuperscript{77} The Hall took care of their own through promotions and

\textsuperscript{73} Greenwald, \textit{The Triangle Fire}, 91.

\textsuperscript{74} VonDrehle, \textit{Triangle}, 20.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 16.
employment within the New York government; yet progressives desired the civil service system to be such that certain political views were not necessary to gain a position.
CHAPTER THREE

FIRE

According to the New York State Labor Department, the Triangle Company was the largest blouse-making plant in the city. Almost two thousand garments were bundled, boxed, and shipped every day and it was estimated that more than one million dollars’ worth of garments were manufactured at the factory each year.¹ Pauline Newman, a worker in the Triangle factory, wrote in a letter in 1957 that “workers were actually eager to work for this company because there was steady employment.”² Despite the work day beginning at seven thirty and ending as late as nine in the evening during most of the year sans overtime pay, workers stayed at the Triangle because, as Newman stated, “One gets used to a place even if it is only a work shop. One gets to know the people you work with. You are no longer a stranger and alone.”³ Such a feeling of belonging was important for new immigrants to the United States and the Triangle provided a sense of kinship as most workers were young Jewish or Italian girls.

Friendships grew in spite of inhumane treatment. Finished garments were stored in large, high, and deep bins that could easily hide young children. When and if an inspector visited the factory, he found no violations of child labor laws because working youngsters were hidden in these bins and covered up with finished shirtwaists.

³ Ibid.
Deductions from pay began if workers were as little as five minutes late, most likely a result of transportation delays. Pauline Newman went on to explain that while she was a Triangle employee, the foreladies were constantly “watching you lest you pause for a moment from your work.”4 Before workers were allowed to leave, they were searched for the smallest piece of lace or thread, and if some was discovered their employment with the company was threatened. However, Harris and Blanck provided some incentives to continue to work despite the strict and awful rules. When forced to work late, the Triangle Company made up for it “by giving [workers] a piece of apple pie for supper instead of additional pay.”5

The fire that occurred on March 25, 1911 lasted for thirty minutes and was the worst workplace disaster to occur in New York City and remained so for ninety years.6 It proved that more was required to help protect workers than simply relying on managerial good will or successful strikes and boycotts. The unions proved they were powerful, but were still unable to make a significant impact on working conditions in large firms like the Triangle Company. Triangle had evaded the settlement of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) after the 1909 uprising because of its size and its ability to outsource a large portion of production to unaffected factories outside New York.7

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4 Cornell University, ILR School, *The Triangle Factory Fire*.

5 Ibid.

6 VonDrehle, *Triangle*, 3.

The Triangle factory was located in the modern Asch building in New York’s fashionable Greenwich Village.\(^8\) The main entrance to the building was on Washington Place with the service entrance on Greene Street. The rear corner of the building had windows opening up into an airshaft, not onto one of the large streets. This was where the city officials in 1900 allowed Joseph J. Asch, designer of the building, to hang the required fire escape.\(^9\) The Asch building was considered to embody the most modern design and was fire proof. Although technologies such as firewalls, fire stairs, fire doors, and automatic sprinklers were available for installation, it was next to impossible to find any factory equipped with such protections. The reasoning for the lack of safety devices was it was either too expensive or deemed unnecessary.\(^10\)

Loft factories were common in Manhattan. Such factories were located on the upper floors of the tall buildings in New York and were defined by large, open spaces with twelve-foot ceilings.\(^11\) These rooms allowed managers to attach long rows of machines to one electric shaft, a huge improvement over the pedal-powered machines previously used. Theoretically, these highceilings and open rooms enabled employers to pack more workers into one space while still complying with the law requiring at least 250 cubic feet of air per employee; in reality, no city official paid much attention to these

\(^8\) Greenwald, *The Triangle Fire*, 129.

\(^9\) VonDrehle, *Triangle*, 118.

\(^10\) Ibid., 161.

\(^11\) Ibid., 47.
Laws.\textsuperscript{12} Loft factories also housed the entire operation, including cutting, sewing, examining, and shipping, beneath one roof which saved on transportation costs and time.\textsuperscript{13}

A major drawback of overcrowding that concerned management was talk amongst employees. It was easy for workers to discuss their grievances with their coworkers and made the factory more susceptible to strike. The larger the factory, the more vulnerable employers felt.\textsuperscript{14} The fire department, however, warned factory owners of impending disasters that could result from too many employees in one space. The New York Fire Department became wary as more workers in Manhattan were employed higher than the sixth floor in their respective buildings; their ladders could not easily reach higher than that.\textsuperscript{15} Chief Edward Croker warned, “A fire in the daytime would be accompanied by a terrible loss of life.”\textsuperscript{16} The New York Fire Department was on the cutting edge of technology at the turn of the century. The department was made up of one of the first fully motorized units in the United States. Areas of the city were equipped with high water pressure for fire hoses, and many fire engines were also equipped with pumps and the tallest reaching ladders.\textsuperscript{17} These advances led to a sense of false security as most factory managers and workers believed

\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{12} VonDrehle, \textit{Triangle}, 47.
  \item\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
  \item\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 48.
  \item\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
  \item\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
  \item\textsuperscript{17} Greenwald, \textit{The Triangle Fire}, 133.
\end{itemize}
that if anything should happen, the most advanced fire squad would be at their disposal within moments.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Company was owned by Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, both Russian immigrants who were members of the great wave of Jewish immigration to the United States from Eastern Europe during the 1890s.\(^\text{18}\) The two men toiled in dim and claustrophobic New York City tenement factories where, as greenhorns, they were sweated by working longer hours with less pay. They were a minority in that they worked their way through the ranks and found themselves the owners of one of the most successful garment factories in Manhattan. Despite their history, Blanck and Harris did not share any sense of camaraderie with their employees.

One of the few safety precautions taken in the Triangle factory was the no smoking policy. Signs were posted on every floor of the workshop in English, Italian, and Yiddish to make certain employees were aware of the rule.\(^\text{19}\) Certain workers whose talents were vital to the successful profits of the company frequently turned a blind eye on the many postings. These men were the cutters; their job was to cut the fabric according to the patterns and waste as little material as possible. Their skill was the heart and soul of the garment industry.\(^\text{20}\) The extra scraps of cloth were saved and eventually sold to cloth dealers; in a factory as large as the Triangle Company it was not uncommon for over one ton of scrap to be accumulated before it was shipped out creating a very

\(^{18}\) VonDrehle, *Triangle*, 38.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 107.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.
dangerous fire hazard.\textsuperscript{21} On March 25, 1911, it had been over three months since the scrap was last picked up.\textsuperscript{22} That mass of material along with the large amounts of uncut cloth and the oil dripping from the long rows of sewing machines soaking the wooden floors caused the factory to burst in flames within minutes.\textsuperscript{23}

The fire was discovered around closing time on Saturday at approximately four in the afternoon by Eva Harris, the sister of Isaac Harris, on the eighth floor near the Greene Street windows.\textsuperscript{24} There had been small fires within the factory on earlier occasions, but they were easily extinguished. This fire was different. The buckets of water did not arrive at the flames fast enough due to the crowds of workers heading toward the coat room to gather their belongings and pay envelopes. When help from the building’s fire hose was called for, employees realized there was no water pressure, it was cracked and unusable.\textsuperscript{25} Samuel Bernstein, the manager on the eighth floor could “sense that the March wind, blustering down Greene Street, up the elevator shaft, and through the open doors, was driving and feeding the blaze.”\textsuperscript{26}

Dinah Lipschitz, the telephone operator on the eighth floor, called the tenth floor management offices to warn them of the fire.\textsuperscript{27} The telephone system within the three

\textsuperscript{21} Greenwald, \textit{The Triangle Fire}, 129.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{25} VonDrehle, \textit{Triangle}, 121.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 121.
stories of the Asch building that housed the factory was rigged in such a way that all communication between floors had to be directed through a switchboard on the tenth floor; there was no way for Lipschitz to directly call the ninth floor to warn them of the blaze. After Mary Alter answered the call warning the management offices of the flames she disappeared. Those working on the tenth floor made the climb to the roof and escaped via the New York University law building located adjacent to the Asch building. Despite the one-level height difference of the two buildings, the workers on the tenth floor escaped because of the heroics of a few law students. Unfortunately, the 260 workers on the ninth floor never received a warning of the fire.

Panic on the eighth floor set in as the fire spread throughout the room. The rear exit leading to Greene Street was blocked by the flames and the other exit was kept locked until the twelve-hour shifts were completed. The doors within the building were designed to open inwards because the stairwells were too narrow for them to swing out. This made it nearly impossible to open with both the heat and the weight of so many girls pressing up against it in their effort to escape. Lois Brown, the machinist in charge of the Triangle’s sewing plant, forced himself toward the door and unlocked the exit allowing everyone to exit without the loss of a single life. It took five minutes for two hundred people to evacuate the eighth floor. Had the ninth floor been warned of the fire

28 VonDrehle, *Triangle*, 121.

29 Ibid.


31 VonDrehle, *Triangle*, 123.
at 4:42 p.m. rather than 4:45 p.m., experts speculate it may have given workers nine minutes to evacuate before the last exit was blocked off, plenty of time to evacuate the two hundred and fifty workers.  

While workers on the eighth and tenth floors were escaping through narrow stairwells or up to the roof, the employees on the ninth floor were completely unaware of the impending disaster. The flames from the eighth floor eventually jumped in through the windows, igniting the left over fabric and oil soaked floors of the room. The exit doors were locked. The elevators, which enabled over five hundred workers between the three floors to escape, were overrun. As girls became more desperate, they jumped down the elevator shaft and those inside the car heard the thud of bodies and silver coins from the pay envelopes on the roof of the car. The elevators eventually had to stop running because the heat melted the cables; the operators were forced to abandon the hope of rescuing more women. Those workers who made it to the fire escape were quickly disheartened. The fire escapes of the Asch building were eighteen inch wide ladders in the back corner of the building located in what was described as a large airshaft. The ladders were barely wide enough for one person let alone the group of terrified young women. The bottom of the escape did not lead to the street, but ended over “a basement

32 VonDrehle, Triangle, 159.

33 Greenwald, The Triangle Fire, 130.

34 Ibid., 134.
skylight.” As more workers rushed to escape via the ladder, it gave way and the girls plummeted to their death.

The Fire Department arrived on the scene as quickly as possible. As they already knew, their ladders only reached the sixth floor. They brought out life nets and horse blankets and told girls to jump from the windows; but the girls were too high and their weight ripped through the blankets and tore the nets from the hands of the firemen. Battalion Chief Worth lamented, “There was no apparatus in the department to cope with this kind of fire.” The only means the department had of alleviating some pain from the girls high above the sidewalk was from the water pumps. Fire Chief Worth later testified at the hearings following the disaster that “the water was driven out at 125 pounds pressure,” enough to provide a light sprinkling of water on those hanging from the window ledges nine stories up. The thought process behind this last effort was “to cool [them] off . . . to prevent the people . . . from jumping.”

New York Police Department Patrolman Meehan was walking through Washington Park when he heard an explosion. He turned and went to the corner of Washington Park and Greene Street and watched a man launch a bundle of cloth into the air. Meehan and others stared as the bundle unraveled in the March wind to reveal the

36 Greenwald, *The Triangle Fire*, 133.
37 Ibid.
body of a young girl. Other girls lost hope of escaping through the building, their clothes and hair began to catch on fire, and they climbed to the window ledges. There they debated whether to jump or wait to burn; the city watched in horror. The *New York Times* reported that five girls clung to one another as they jumped from the Greene Street windows. In an ugly twist of fate, it was later learned that the door leading to Greene Street on the ninth floor was not locked, but was blocked by bodies of girls who had waited too long to escape and died from asphyxiation of heat and toxic fumes.

A tragedy resulting in the deaths of 146 workers was not uncommon during the Industrial Era. A coal mine cave-in causing 146 male deaths would have been a bearable tragedy warranting a small headline in newspapers. But the deaths of 146 young girls in a terrible, yet preventable, tragedy “suggested a social universe spinning out of control.” The working girl suddenly needed protection. The mother of the next generation needed to be protected either by the state or their men. Even progressive women of the age agreed they were members of “the weaker sex.” Rose Sabran, a Triangle worker, stated, “If the union had won we would have been safe. Two of our demands were for adequate fire escapes and for open doors from the factories to the

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42 VonDrehle, *Triangle*, 186.
44 Ibid.
streets. But the bosses defeated us . . . so our friends are dead.”\textsuperscript{45} Most of the people watching the disaster unfold knew the Triangle factory well. The infamous strike in 1909 garnered the company a lot media attention. It was well known that the strike was broken at Triangle and each of the falling girls “had been forced to return to work without a contract or recognition.”\textsuperscript{46} Until the Uprising and the Triangle fire, it was a widespread belief that female workers were simply working for “pin money” or pocket change to buy fancy clothing or other frivolous items. Investigations by different agencies following the fire revealed that was not the case; many times, a woman was the main bread winner in a family. Their wages were low, their hours too long, the conditions deplorable, and “employers and foreman too likely to demand sexual favors in return for hiring or keeping a girl on.”\textsuperscript{47} Protection was needed at once.

Reactions to the tragedy were strong. The \textit{New York Times} reported in depth and printed first hand accounts of the happenings within the Asch building at the time of the fire. The \textit{Times} dramatically reported, “The fire had flashed through their workroom just as they were expecting the signal to leave the building. In ten minutes more all would have been out.” Another report stated:

The building itself was of the most modern construction and classed as fireproof. What burned so quickly and disastrously for the victims were shirtwaists, hanging on lines above tiers of workers, sewing machines placed so closely together that there was hardly aisle room for the girls between them, and shirtwaist trimmings and cuttings which littered the floors above the eighth and ninth stories.

\textsuperscript{45} Greenwald, \textit{The Triangle Fire}, 132.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{47} McClymer, \textit{The Triangle Strike and Fire}, 4.
Newspapers as far away as the *Chicago Tribune* recounted the heroics of the New York University law students who used a ladder to try “to get the girls in an orderly line to send them up the ladder to where [students] were waiting to grab them to safety.”

By the evening of March 25, 1911, 133 bodies were sent to the morgue or Charities Pier, located where 26th Street met the East River, known widely as Misery Lane. The corpses were propped in coffins and lined up along the pier. The morgue was opened to the public in the hope of identifying each victim. Over 200,000 people visited Charities Pier over the following four days to look at the bodies. The tragedy was turned into a spectacle. Eventually, a nurse was stationed at the doorway and was charged with turning away anyone not searching for a loved one.

Family members of the dead vowed to avenge the deaths of their daughters, sisters, and mothers. Union leaders were quick to convince them the only way to achieve this would be to join or support the unions; the “union would be the best and strongest weapon against the greed of the capitalists.” Between 1909 and 1913, the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union grew from a small and insignificant group to tens of thousands of members. The total number of workers joining a union multiplied eight-fold in New York City, the numbers jumped from approximately 30,000 members to almost 250,000. Previous disasters had followed a predictable series of steps: “shock,

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49 VonDrehle, *Triangle*, 181.


51 VonDrehle, *Triangle*, 172.
then outrage, then resolve, all leading up to lip service dwindling into forgetfulness. In order for real change, the city could not forget the tragedy. Union leaders and reformers understood that the Triangle fire needed to live on in the hearts and minds of New Yorkers in order for true reform to take place.

\[52\] VonDrehle, *Triangle*, 172.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE AFTERMATH

Middle-class reformers perceived the fire as an unfortunate natural disaster and similar events could be prevented in the future through the institution of proper fire safety laws. Workers viewed the fire as a symbol of their lack of authority over the safety of their own lives. While fire safety was an important component in their fight for recognition amongst the management class, it was only a subset of their larger dream for full industrial democracy and a fair and just workplace. Politicians responded to the fire through their realization that reform legislation was needed quickly. One school of thought supporting reform measures viewed political action to ameliorate workers’ discontent as an effort to stop the socialist movement from gaining more momentum.¹ The unease felt for the volatile masses led to reform within the United States not concern for the safety and well-being of the working class. The second school of thought was based on true concern for safety; prominent politicians of the era felt it was their duty to respond to the needs and wants of the working class.² In the end, it did not matter what school of thought was more valid, the Triangle fire sparked so much publicity and anxiety over workplace safety that Progressive Era legislators and reformers had no choice but to initiate change and ensure a tragedy of that magnitude would never happen again.

² Ibid.
The long list of consequences and reactions to the tragedy was packed with emotion. New Yorkers demanded that someone be blamed for the fire. Was the Triangle disaster caused by a pair selfish individuals or the result of a corrupt bureaucratic system? The New York Fire Department was first on the list of possible guilty parties. However, the city was too proud of its highly developed and advanced safety squad and refused to pin the fault of 146 deaths on the firemen. The public and the media turned their attention to the City Building Department and the factory owners, both were responsible for allowing the tall and overcrowded Asch building to continue to operate as rumors of locked exit doors spread throughout the city.

The owners of the factory, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, were indicted by a grand jury on charges of manslaughter and their trial got underway on December 4, 1911. The defense of Harris and Blanck was compiled by Max D. Steuer, a giant of the New York legal establishment at the time. The prosecution’s case hinged on convincing the jury that the owners knew the ninth floor exit doors were locked which impeded the ability to evacuate the floor and was a clear violation of city and state laws. The defense argued Harris and Blanck did not know the doors were locked during work hours, nor did they encourage the practice. The outsourcing of work and the presence of middle-men contractors enabled Harris and Blanck to honestly argue they were unaware of the

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4 Ibid.

happenings within their own factory. Steuer further strengthened the defense case by discrediting the state’s witnesses; his cross examination of the young women “tried to prove that the girls had panicked and that the panic had caused their deaths.”

Steuer twisted the tragedy into a story of irresponsible girls who killed their friends. The brutal tactics of the defense paid off; Steuer convinced the jury it was impossible to know whether Harris and Blanck were aware of the status of the locks at the precise moment of the fire and the two men were acquitted.

Relief programs were immediately established to assist the families who lost loved ones in the blaze. The Relief Fund Committee was formed by the Ladies Waist and Dress Makers’ Union. They aided families and union members and tried to establish labor and socialist-based movements to prevent future disasters. The Charities Organization Society was a Red Cross affiliate; they viewed the fire as a natural disaster and feared that offering too much charity to victims would spoil their work ethic. Rather than financially aiding the families, the COS chose to set up educational programs to better the lives of the victims.

A mass funeral was held for the 146 young women who perished; it was described as “one of the largest displays of class solidarity the city had ever experienced.”

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 136.
9 Ibid., 138.
10 Ibid., 138.
mass grave was provided for the five girls who were burned beyond recognition.\textsuperscript{11} Workers saw their chance to push the issue; they had an opportunity to move industrial democracy to the forefront of New York politics. Socialists, many associated with the Women’s Trade Union League, “labeled the fire ‘industrial warfare’ and demanded workers respond appropriately.”\textsuperscript{12} Shortly thereafter, a meeting was held at the Metropolitan Opera House where union members discussed what action was required in response to the tragedy. Rabbi Stephen Wise articulated what many in attendance were thinking, “The disaster was not the deed of God but the greed of man. Human greed had caused the tragedy.”\textsuperscript{13}

Industrial democrats viewed the aftermath of the Triangle fire as an opportunity to broaden laws and enforce building and safety codes while city managers and agencies decided to enlarge their own bureaucracies and shift blame amongst one another.\textsuperscript{14} No city agency accepted responsibility for the fire in the days following the tragedy. The Fire Department, the Building Department, the Coroner’s Office, the District Attorney, the Office of the Mayor, and the New York State Assembly and Senate initiated separate investigations of the fire and none were prepared to lead the effort to prevent future disasters.\textsuperscript{15} Under the current law of 1911, the State Labor Department had no authority to rectify the conditions of most of the city’s factories. Rudolph Miller, Manhattan’s

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Greenwald, \textit{The Triangle Fire}, 143.
\item Ibid., 155.
\item Ibid., 140.
\item Ibid., 150.
\item Ibid., 147.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Superintendent of Buildings, ordered 31 of the 233 factories be brought up to code or be closed.\textsuperscript{16} Repairs were immediately undertaken for most of the blatant abuses in the workplace but no action was taken to address the systematic breakdowns that caused problems for workers within the factories.\textsuperscript{17}

The Factory Investigating Committee was organized in the wake of the tragedy and changed the face of labor laws, New York politics, and marked the pinnacle of New York’s reform efforts during the era of Progressivism. The Committee was made up of a multitude of New York reformers. Robert F. Wagner and Alfred E. Smith were the chair and vice chair of the FIC. The FIC proposed legislation, sponsored investigations into factory conditions, and progressively took on more and more liberal causes during its four year tenure as the leader of safety reform. The committee operated on two Progressive Era premises; the belief that the ignorance of the American public was how such conditions continued and that the new concept of social science was the key to recommend solutions to the social ills.\textsuperscript{18} The American people, mainly the American middle class, were unaware of the state of the factories. Progressives believed it was this ignorance that allowed awful factories to flourish under the booming technological advances and new management science techniques of the early twentieth century. The new concept of social science was the Progressive weapon to attack this ignorance. The FIC relied on the objective solutions offered by these new social scientists to cure the

\textsuperscript{16} Greenwald, \textit{The Triangle Fire}, 150.

\textsuperscript{17} Philip Yale Nicholson, \textit{Labor’s Story in the United States} (Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2004), 159.

\textsuperscript{18} Greenwald, \textit{The Triangle Fire}, 170.
evils of industrial America. The FIC made it their goal to shed light into the dark corners of American capitalism.

The first two years of the existence of the FIC focused primarily on issues of safety and health. The FIC “recommended legislation that protected women and children workers.” New laws proposed by the FIC included restriction of working hours, four weeks maternity leave, the exit doors within factories were required to open outwards to facilitate exiting during an emergency, and automatic sprinklers and red lighting designated exits. The FIC also concentrated on areas of factory life including “fire hazards, factory inspection, sanitation, employment of women and children, disease, and special legislation protecting consumers in the baking industry and workers in iron foundries.” The FIC stepped in as the new state agency that vowed to protect the vulnerable working women of New York. Labor organizations gained nothing from the proposed legislation; there was no law protecting the right to join a union, workplace democracy was absent from the list, and workers relied on the state more than their union for protection. Labor organizations felt the power of the FIC did not reach far enough while businessmen complained it infringed on their right to practice business. They

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21 Ibid., 159.
23 Ibid., 153.
believed the government should only intervene in business when armed forces or restrictions were necessary to protect private property.25

Gender was the central issue in most reforms sponsored by the FIC. Women had found empowerment in the Uprising of Twenty Thousand, they had accomplished gains in the workplace that had eluded men for years, but the Triangle fire placed them at the mercy of government agencies once again. Survival in New York was estimated to cost around nine dollars a week. In the retail industry in the early 1900s, women workers earned approximately seven dollars per week after fines on their wages were deducted and seasonal unemployment was factored in.26 To make up for their lack of income, many women chose to live in cheaper lodging located in less than ideal neighborhoods; this choice generally put them in what was regarded as moral danger and was evidence enough for government intervention. One worker explained that it was impossible to make enough money to pay rent but was told by her supervisor that he would give her “a chance to make two or three dollars on the side any time.”27 Later research, done mostly by direct interviews in 1913, discovered many working women unable to support themselves considered prostitution a viable option to earn more money. Workers generally asked “whether there [was] any difference selling yourself for six dollars a week or five dollars per night.”28 This newly unveiled desperation was a far cry from the

25 Nicholson, Labor’s Story, 159.

26 Ibid., 209.

27 Greenwald, The Triangle Fire, 204.

28 Ibid., 211.
strong and independent women who had fought for workers’ rights during the strike of 1909.29

Protecting the morality of working women was only one of the items on the packed agenda for reform. Minimum wage topped the list of items to be accomplished and reformers had two arguments to support their proposed legislation. The first was a humanitarian claim; it was the social responsibility of people with economic means to help those in need. A law that required minimum wage would encourage the working class to become capable and independent individuals who would no longer be swayed by radical socialist ideals. The confidence in the state to tend to the needs of the working class would return if such a minimum standard of pay were established. Women had no means of achieving minimum wage without the intervention of the state while men had an opportunity to achieve such through union membership.30

The second argument for reform was social efficiency; it was not only cheaper but more efficient to raise minimum wage standards for workers to prevent poverty. By doing such it raised living standards, increased the purchasing power of the working class, prevented radical socialism, and promoted free market competition.31 In the long run, argued supporters, it would be cheaper to have safe and clean places of work because it would increase competition while decreasing accident rates and other harms workers faced daily. It was understood that raising the wage standards would hurt some


31 Ibid., 211.
manufacturers who survived cutthroat competition by paying low wages; but reformers hoped factory owners would learn to rely on technological advances, efficiencies, and the radicalization of the labor process to remain competitive in the market.32

In 1911, the FIC quickly became the leader in investigating the fire problem starting with factories located in New York City and later including the entire state. The committee created and sent a questionnaire to politicians, labor leaders, manufacturers, reformers, and fire experts delving into the exact conditions of factory buildings within the city limits. No one dared oppose or complain about the fire reform measures, especially after the horrific display of charred bodies in every newspaper throughout the United States.33 The result of the questionnaire proclaimed New York City was a disaster waiting to happen.

Most manufacturing of products took place in factories created from transformed tenement buildings; many were “poorly designed, dark, wooden, six to seven stories high, with little to offer in the way of fire safety.”34 Even the modern buildings, such as the infamous Asch building, were far less fireproof than advertised. The Asch building was deemed to be fireproof, and, after the Triangle fire, the façade of the building was unscathed but the inside was burnt beyond recognition. Most factory owners were unwilling to make even the smallest measures in fire safety despite the highly flammable

33 Ibid., 171.
34 Ibid., 173.
contents being produced because it was expensive and considered a superfluous measure in a fireproof building.35

Firewalls, fire proof stairwells, and general fireproofing changes in buildings were all recommended as a result of the in-depth FIC investigation.36 Fire escapes were present in many buildings but were too flimsy, not long enough, or generally insufficient to accommodate the capacity of workers within the factories. A decrease in occupancy on the upper floors of factory buildings was highly recommended. They argued that the number of workers on the upper floors of these buildings “should be based on the fire safety of the individual factory or building, and vigorously enforced.”37 The last of the recommendations of the FIC investigation following the Triangle fire dealt with issues directly relating to the disaster. Exit doors that opened inward, locked doors during work hours, and blocked aisles and exits were banned. Regular fire drills to familiarize workers with the procedure of emergency evacuations, the storage of hazardous materials in fireproof containers, and the timely removal of waste and scrap materials in garment factories were all recommended.38 There was cooperation between the FIC and several civic and business groups. The Civic Organization’s Conference on Public Safety included groups such as the City Club and Citizens’ Union, engineers, real estate

35 Greenwald, The Triangle Fire, 173.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.
interests, and insurance companies; each group provided their own detailed evidence
supporting fire reform and safety measures.³⁹

Hearings were held by the FIC where workers told their tales of awful factory
conditions. The meetings strove to yank at the heartstrings of the middle class and
convince the state their involvement was necessary in order to ameliorate the problems.
Workers deserved better conditions and the New York government was the only entity
that could provide an increase in their quality of life. Yet, passing legislation that
outlined the recommendations to achieve proper workplace standards was not enough.
The new laws needed to be strongly enforced and detailed definitions of words such as
“adequate,” “proper,” and “sufficient” needed to be clearly outlined to avoid confusion.⁴⁰

Dangerous trades were also investigated due to their obvious connection with
sanitation and health. Lead poisoning was a major topic of the hearings; no workers had
recalled being warned of the dangers of lead poisoning and the possibility of exposure at
the workplace. Managers and factory owners refused to take any responsibility; they
claimed workers assumed all risk when agreeing to work in their factory.⁴¹ The
unwillingness to assume responsibility of risk revealed the need to create a generalized
labor code rather than relying on the sufficiency of private contracts between
management and union leaders. Unions had advantages; they provided a forum for
workers to unite but were too weak to provide the necessary protection for women and


⁴⁰ Ibid., 177.

⁴¹ Ibid., 179.
children. Frances Perkins, a member of the FIC and later appointed the first woman member of the United States Cabinet under Franklin D. Roosevelt, was quoted saying, “I’d rather pass a law than organize a union;” laws have the backing of the state while a union must defend itself. A general code of laws that covered all workers in all industries better enabled the state to provide the protection New Yorkers were looking for in the workplace.  

By the middle of 1912, opposition against the proposed FIC fire safety plan gained momentum. Business and real estate agents argued that changes in fire codes would lead to higher rent in buildings that did not meet the new standards and many firms could not afford the extra expense. The FIC remained steady and declared that seventy-five percent of all industrial fires could be prevented if New York adopted the plan. By 1913, most of the proposed bills were pushed through the New York legislature. Factory owners were required to remove flammable waste twice per day and provide fireproof containers for scraps within the building, smoking on work floors was prohibited, and lighting and gas jets were regulated by the state. Fire drills were required in all places of work where twenty-five or more laborers were employed. In buildings of seven stories or higher and employing more than 200 workers, sprinklers were required. And,

42 Greenwald, The Triangle Fire, 190.
43 Ibid., 176.
44 Ibid., 174.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
finally, the reporting and enforcing of fire inspections between the various agencies of New York State were regulated. After the bills were passed, New York had the most advanced set of fire codes in the nation.\footnote{Greenwald, \textit{The Triangle Fire}, 175.}

The year of 1912 also saw many changes in social welfare reform. The FIC not only concentrated its efforts in fire safety but also sought to end child labor and protection for women workers. Such protective legislation was deemed necessary in order to keep the “natural resources” of the nation safe.\footnote{Ibid., 189.} Women and children were in a weaker economic position than men and therefore unable to remove themselves from poverty. Working mothers were unable to properly raise their children if they were gone for long hours in unsanitary conditions. Robert Wagner, the leader of the Factory Investigating Committee claimed, “The girl of to-day is the mother of to-morrow. . . . we have to preserve her a little better if we are going to have good future citizens.”\footnote{Ibid., 190.}

New York laws regarding women workers began in 1886 with the passage of the law requiring women under the age of twenty-one to be limited to sixty hours per week in the workplace; that law expanded to include all female workers in 1899.\footnote{Ibid., 193.} By 1906, New York women could work a maximum of twelve hours per workday. The research of the early twentieth century that was presented to legislators contained evidence that standing for long hours at work “put undue stress on a woman’s reproductive organs” and should

\footnote{Greenwald, \textit{The Triangle Fire}, 175.}
\footnote{Ibid., 189.}
\footnote{Ibid., 190.}
\footnote{Ibid., 193.}
be avoided; chairs were provided in factories as a result.\textsuperscript{52} Hour restrictions were limited to female workers only as the focus of the FIC and other reform agencies of the time was the future of the human race. The FIC later drafted a bill limiting women to a fifty-four hour workweek with a maximum of nine hours per day; the board argued that working longer hours was “the cause of all the ills woman’s flesh is heir to.”\textsuperscript{53} The moral well-being of women was another concern. Women workers were subject to walking home alone late into the night and could easily be lured into immoral situations. The New York legislature took it upon itself to protect the working woman in that respect too; in 1913, women were restricted from working past ten o’clock in the evening and could not begin work until six o’clock in the morning.\textsuperscript{54}

Children were protected under many laws that were passed as a result of the organization of the Factory Investigating Committee. The focus of the laws shifted to the protection of the well-being of children younger than eighteen. The FIC sponsored a law in 1913 that forbade any work that could be injurious to the health or well-being of children.\textsuperscript{55} In the year 1906, there were 16,032 work permits issued for children under the age of sixteen, by 1911 that number had jumped to 40,037.\textsuperscript{56} Women and children were cheaper to hire than men and, because of that, many managers exploited their labor. Children were forced to do dangerous tasks because they were small enough to fit into

\textsuperscript{52} Greenwald, \textit{The Triangle Fire}, 191.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 193.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 196.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 198.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
tight spaces. At the Triangle Company, the children who were working illegally jumped into bins that held scrap cloth if a state-sponsored investigation started unexpectedly. Many families relied on the wages brought in by children but the FIC and other Progressives did not believe the ends justified the means. Medical examinations were required for all children applying for a work permit, at least a sixth grade education was required before they could enter the workplace, and the job selection was limited to the qualified children.57

Sanitation and health issues highlighted the last round of legislation sponsored by the FIC. In 1912, three important laws were passed that turned the Empire State into the leader of workplace safety. The first law enabled the labor commissioner to inspect shops located in the tenement buildings, usually housing garment workers. If filthy working conditions were discovered, garments from that shop were marked and forbidden to be sold to the public. The markings were removed if the conditions in the factory improved to the satisfaction of the labor commissioner.58 Drinking water, washrooms, and toilets were all part of the recommendations organized by the FIC but none passed into law; however, employers were required to provide hot water if poisons or dangerous gases were a regular part of production.59 Eating in the work area was also prohibited in an effort to protect workers from accidentally ingesting harmful materials. Finally, and most importantly, all shops were required to register with the New York

58 Ibid., 181.
59 Ibid.
State Labor Department; this allowed regular inspections and the ability to collect statistics for future labor research.60

Most laws and investigations targeted tenement factories where home work remained a major problem. The Triangle Company was a large factory and place of business and there were many similar establishments throughout New York City. There were also thousands of men, women, and children toiling for long hours outside factory walls and in their own tenement buildings. The fire at the Triangle factory encouraged some people to argue in favor of home work by saying it was safer to be in a smaller building where, in case of fire, the Fire Department would be able to reach a ladder to the top window and rescue all inside.61 The fire was a turning point in New York City regulations because of the establishment of the FIC and the general public outrage but home work continued to be problematic. Investigations into the sanitary conditions of such tenement work focused on smaller factories. The imagination of Progressives was sparked by the possibility of transmission of germs and vermin via the garments produced.62 Consumer leagues and the FIC worried about the possibility of a smallpox outbreak because of the unsanitary conditions of the workplace; as a result, state laws began to target tenement production and home work.63

60 Greenwald, The Triangle Fire, 181.


62 Ibid., 36.

63 Ibid.
As with any change in procedure, there was unrest amongst managers. Opposition to the FIC and its agenda came from those who believed it was not the business of the state to protect the moral boundaries of workers. The workforce is responsible for its own well-being and businessmen are not accountable for the mental improvement of their workers. “This is not a charitable business” was the theme of businessmen groups to thwart the passage of many proposed laws.\textsuperscript{64} Bakeries were a main target of FIC investigations due to unsanitary conditions; many were shut down because they did not meet the new standards of cleanliness and posed possible health risks to workers and consumers. Bakers, the flour industry, and the real estate industry protested as a result. They stated the new protocol, including licenses, medical examinations for workers, and multiple inspections, would increase bread prices and drive small bakers out of business.\textsuperscript{65} Legislators broke precedent and did not side with the small businessman; they decided it was more important to protect the consumer lest a similar tragedy befall the city.

No other state legislature was as prolific as New York in 1913. Many important issues were raised and measures passed regarding wage earners during that session and New Yorkers were proud of their progressivism, “We doubt if any state in the Union can now compare with our Empire State in its present code of labor laws.”\textsuperscript{66} But the Factory Investigation Committee was short-lived. It lasted a mere four years due to limited

\textsuperscript{64} Greenwald, \textit{The Triangle Fire}, 180.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 164.
budgets, limited staff for the tasks at hand, and a confusing set of legal structures. For example, the FIC was permitted to investigate a factory only after a complaint was made and a warning was issued to management. A follow up inspection was scheduled one year later giving management plenty of time to hide any illegalities. Upstate cities, including Buffalo, sided with upset managers in New York City and opposed the FIC and the new laws. They argued that the efforts set forth by reformers dealt only with city problems and did not apply to upstate facilities. As momentum against the FIC and its mission grew, the committee began to falter. Continued attempts to pass a minimum wage law were in vain as such legislation was vetoed each time. In the wake of the final failure of minimum wage legislation to pass, the FIC collapsed entirely.

The Triangle Company fire left its mark in the political realm. Not only was the FIC established to clean up the unsanitary and unsafe working conditions in New York’s factories, but the political career of Robert Wagener began in earnest and labor laws within the country were transformed. Immediately following the fire, socialism threatened to become a political power in New York. The Socialist Party represented the working people and voiced the concerns many workers felt at the time; the party also seriously challenged Tammany Hall and the Democratic Party for working-class votes, votes the political machine had easily bought prior to the fire. The main issue in the campaign of 1911 was the fire and socialists made major gains on democrats; they won

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67 Greenwald, The Triangle Fire, 182.
68 Ibid., 167.
69 Ibid., 159.
approximately twenty-seven percent more votes than they had in the 1910 election and ran a full ticket for the first time in history.\textsuperscript{70} The creation of the FIC enabled the Democratic Party to regain the trust of workers and enabled them to show their true commitment to the working class.\textsuperscript{71}

The Empire State prided itself on being reform minded; leaders supported legislation to protect workers, improve working conditions, support workman’s compensation, unemployment and health insurance, the eight-hour work day, and the right of labor to organize.\textsuperscript{72} Many of these provisions passed the legislation process because of the efforts of Robert F. Wagner, a senator of New York whose name is now synonymous with many important labor laws in the United States. Wagner was born in Germany in 1877 and traveled to New York with his family at the age of nine. As the youngest of seven children he was able to attend to school while the rest of his family worked. He graduated from City College and law school in 1900, was elected to the New York State Assembly in 1904 and the New York State Senate in 1908. The position that enabled him to see the deplorable conditions of the workplace and would later shape his future as a politician was his appointment as the chairman of the Factory Investigating Committee in 1911 alongside Assemblyman Alfred E. Smith.\textsuperscript{73}

As a member of the FIC, Wagner spent four years touring many factories across New York and witnessed first-hand the conditions of factories where workers toiled for

\textsuperscript{70} Greenwald, \textit{The Triangle Fire}, 159.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 160.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 162.
\textsuperscript{73} Budd, \textit{Labor Relations}, 164.
most of their lives. Although he was a successful law school graduate, he never forgot his own childhood poverty. The Triangle fire and the creation of the FIC provided Wagner with an opportunity to reconnect with his family’s history and dedicate his work to provide better conditions for the working class. Wagner sponsored numerous state laws as chairman of the FIC including improvements in fire safety, safety standards for machinery, limits on child labor, and governmental control of tenement and home work.74 He supported the government’s ability to put a series of checks and balances on economic markets in order to provide more equal power distribution between labor and management. Wagner argued that the current industrial system enabled dominant management systems to keep wages depressed which, in turn, maintained substandard living conditions for their workers. Workers remained voiceless and powerless in their own lives threatening the very foundation of American democracy. The United States prided itself on being the land of opportunity but the conditions that remained in most industrialized cities were a clear indication that the balance among classes was off. The economy also suffered from the lack of equality because the working class had insufficient purchasing power.75

Wagner witnessed the collapse of the FIC but he graduated from the ranks of the New York State Senate to the United States Senate in 1926. It was there that the memories of the fire, the sub-par factory conditions, and the testimonies of so many workers during the multiple investigations played a major role in federal labor laws. By

74 Budd, Labor Relations, 164.
75 Ibid.
the time his tenure in Washington began, Wagner was convinced that the equality of bargaining power between labor and management was the key to achieving “economic prosperity and decent working conditions and living standards.”76 He worked tirelessly to pass legislation that protected the rights of workers against possible managerial abuses.

In 1935, the National Labor Relations Act was passed into law. Its central provisions are included in sections three through six outlining the creation of the National Labor Relations Board that was designed to “resolve representation questions and adjudicate unfair labor practices.”77 Section seven of the NLRA, also known as the Wagner Act, safeguards employees’ rights to organize and form unions, to bargain collectively with management, and engage in any other activity that is connected with providing mutual aid and protection to fellow workers.78 Most importantly, section eight of the Act clearly spells out the five major unfair labor practices, all are employee rights that are protected by the federal law. The first proclaims management in no way can interfere with the rights outlined in section seven of the Act. Employers are forbidden to interfere or dominate the administration and formation of a labor organization if employees choose to organize. Discrimination with regard to hiring and tenure within an organization is strictly prohibited as well as the encouraging or discouraging of employees regarding membership in a particular organization. If an employee chooses to file charges against a company under the provisions of the Wagner Act, employers are

76 Budd, Labor Relations, 164.
77 Ibid., 169.
78 Ibid.
forbidden to discriminate against that employee. And, finally, management must bargain collectively with a union if it is voted into existence by the employees of the company.79

The tragedy devastated the city but reforms protecting the safety of workers rose from the ashes. The Factory Investigating Committee established itself as a powerful leader in promoting necessary reform measures. Workers received opportunities to speak about their daily hardships in sub-par working conditions at the many hearings sponsored by the FIC. The stunning political career of Robert Wagner was jumpstarted as his post of Chairman of the FIC transformed into a seat in the United States Senate. The passage of the Wagner Act provided the legislation that finally protected workers and provided them with the ability to organize and protect their own interests.

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79 Budd, Labor Relations, 169.
CONCLUSION

The industrialization of the economy within the United States transformed the small, self-sufficient communities into an international economy. The American tradition of individualism, free competition, and equal opportunity all gave way to new systems of management and advances in technology. The invention of the assembly line and the idea of Taylorism simplified the tasks workers completed and provided a more efficient and productive process for producing goods. There was no longer a need for skilled craftsmen because factory owners could hire anyone willing to work for low wages. The ability of larger factories to utilize the new means of production was so profound that smaller businessman found it extremely difficult to remain competitive. Economic survival led to treating workers as tools of production rather than individuals; there was no more face-to-face interactions between owners of capital and those working to produce it.

Factory life became commonplace throughout the nineteenth century and, as competition became fiercer within industries, the conditions of factories began a downward spiral. The United States had the highest industrial accident rate in the Western world due to lack of interest in safety and worker well-being. The deskilling of the average worker left strikes and boycotts as the only two weapons labor possessed to confront management tactics. Many times, the stoppage of labor was easily broken by employers through threats to hire strikebreakers or by agreeing to a few of the demands to appease them. Ruthless tactics were utilized by management to break strikes such as the hiring of spies, the recruitment of state militia to intervene, and even the fabrication
of evidence in court to destroy workers’ hopes of achieving their goals. When cases were brought before the courts, most judges believed private property was sacred and therefore sided with the owners. Because management knew the courts would protect their private property rights, they had very little reason to bargain with workers; direct confrontation labor took less effort and would result in the desired outcome.

The population of cities within the United States soared as the fruits of industrialized factories matured. New York City became a fashion capital and the garment industry was booming at the turn of the twentieth century. Just as more workers were needed to fill the growing factories, large waves of Jewish and Italian immigrants arrived on American shores. The close-knit Jewish community provided a steady stream of workers into New York factories as family members encouraged loved ones to come to the Land of Opportunity. Young women discovered factory life provided an opportunity to escape the confines of home and offered a place to forge friendships with girls in similar life circumstances. Yet efforts to remain economically competitive required employers to depress the wages of their workers while increasing the working hours of the factory. Profits for inside contractors, or middle-men, came from decreasing wages paid to their workers from the funds the factory allocated for workers. The funds were eventually too low for the middle-men to make any profit without stripping their workers of all wages. A strike was, again, the only means workers had to gain the attention of factory owners.

The Uprising of Twenty Thousand was a major walkout of the entire garment industry in New York and surrounding cities that lasted four months between 1909 and
Abuses suffered at the hands of foremen and supervisors, poor pay, favoritism, and pay deductions for damaged goods and other means of production all played a role in the decision to strike. The women workers of the industry organized peaceful picketing and negotiations with employers to discuss grievances including pay raises, reduced hours, set rules for overtime pay and seasonal employment, and, most importantly, union recognition. The demands were met by many smaller factories that were unable to withstand the busy season with no workers, but large factories, such as the Triangle Company, held out as long as possible. They hired thugs and strike breakers and utilized the court system to have striking women unjustly thrown in jail or the workhouse. However, by February of 1910, Triangle and other large factories settled with their workers and provided most of the demands including the hiring of union members before nonunion members.

The victory was short lived. Thirty minutes provided ample time for flames to engulf the three stories of the fireproof Asch Building that housed the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. One hundred forty six young women, many were members of the historic strike, died as a result. The city was horrified and demanded action be taken to ensure a similar tragedy never happened again. The Factory Investigating Committee was established to lead investigations into the factory system of New York. It proposed legislation for safety reform and was the first important appointment of Robert Wagner’s political career. As the chairman, Wagner sponsored legislation protecting the safety of the workplace; later, as a member of the United States Senate, he supported legislation protecting the rights of the American worker.
The early twentieth century was a turbulent time of social, economic, and political change. The American population was swelling with newcomers who brought new ideals and skills with them. Socialism posed a legitimate threat to the democratic processes of the American governmental system because the political system in place was inadequate in the protection of workers’ right. Behind it all were the great advances of industrialization that rocked the core of American working life. Gone were the days of self-employment and face-to-face contact in small towns; anonymous, bureaucratic management systems were implemented into factories. The Triangle fire was only one among thousands of workplace accidents but the repercussions on American labor laws extended into permanent federal law. The 146 deaths resulting from the lack of safety measures was an unforgettable tragedy and the ramifications on federal legislation provide some solace that a similar incident will never occur again.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


