

One hundred years ago this month, New York City's Triangle Shirtwaist Factory burst into flames, killing 146 garment workers and fundamentally changing the way America viewed its laborers. In the months after the blaze, dozens of workplace regulations were passed, helping to make factories much safer. More importantly, the Triangle fire inspired a massive unionization push that paved the way for the development of America's strong middle class.

A century after the blaze, however, many of the worker protections that grew out of the Triangle fire are under attack. Today, laborers from Dhaka, Bangladesh, to Trenton, N.J., to Madison, Wis., are fighting for many of the same protections the Triangle's workers desperately craved. And, like the seamstresses who perished 100 years ago, they are still being vilified by politicians -- and sacrificed on the altar of lower taxes and cheaper consumer goods.

The Triangle Fire

On March 25, 1911, a fire tore through the top three floors of New York's Asch Building, home of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. On the eighth floor, where the blaze began, garment workers and their supervisors quickly filed out. Two floors up, the company's owners -- Max Blanck and Isaac Harris -- were notified by telephone of the fire and escaped by jumping to the roof of a nearby building.

But on the ninth floor there were no phone calls, fire alarms or other warnings. In fact, the 200 seamstresses who worked there -- many of them new immigrants to America -- didn't realize there was a fire until smoke began pouring in from the floor below. Within a half hour, more than half of those women were dead: They had either died in the flames, been caught in the building's elevator shaft, or lay mangled and bleeding on the sidewalk below after jumping from the windows to escape the fire. The last victim, who fell 90 feet, died five days later. Six of the victims were burned so extensively that they would remain unidentified for almost a hundred years.

A year before the Triangle fire, the factory had made headlines when its workers went on strike, demanding higher wages, shorter hours and the right to unionize. A few weeks after they walked off the job, the workers were joined by 20,000 of their fellow shirtwaist seamstresses. The "short revolt," as it later came to be known, ended in December 1909, when factory owners agreed to give the strikers shorter hours and better wages. But the companies refused to budge on the seamstresses' biggest demand: the right to organize into unions. In fact, garment workers unions didn't really gain power until after the Triangle fire, when the horrific tragedy brought national attention to the plight of New York's factory workers.

Out of Triangle's Embers

In the months after the fire, the New York State Legislature launched a factory safety commission and passed more than 30 laws reforming the workplace. Among other things, those laws set standards for minimum wages, maximum hours and workplace conditions. New York's fire safety commissioner also began inspecting the city's factories, ultimately finding that hundreds were unsafe. Between the stronger laws, increased enforcement and the 1911 development of the American Society of Safety Engineers, New York became a model for factory workers' rights.

A hundred years after the Triangle fire, however, many of the inequities that led to the disaster still exist -- but with some important changes. As Richard Greenwald, author of *The Triangle Fire, the Protocols of Peace and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York*, points out: "Industry's solution has been to outsource production to other countries." After all, while the Triangle fire led to strict regulations governing workplace safety in the U.S., these rights aren't available to many workers overseas. Not surprisingly, this has led to a mass migration of textile jobs: today, roughly 95% of all clothing sold in the U.S. is made overseas. In 2010, that translated into \$93.2 billion in clothing and textile imports, according to *Women's Wear Daily*.

In addition to outsourcing production, American companies are outsourcing labor exploitation -- and workplace disasters. This trend was thrown into sharp relief on Dec. 13, 2010, when a fire tore through the ninth and tenth floors of the That's It Sportswear Limited factory, part of a huge complex located outside Dhaka, Bangladesh. Within minutes, 28

people were dead and hundreds were injured in a disaster that bore some eerie parallels with the Triangle fire. The workers in Dhaka had recently protested the low minimum wage and poor workplace safety standards in their country. And, like the Triangle workers, they had discovered Bangladesh's police firmly supported the factory owners: Three workers were killed and 100 were injured in protests that had occurred the day before the fire.

But the workers' protests were only the beginning of the similarities. As Triangle's Harris and Blanck had done a century before, the factory owners in Dhaka had locked some of the building's exits to prevent workers from stealing merchandise. And, like the Triangle factory, the facility in Bangladesh had insufficient emergency gear and fire escapes. Finally, just as some of the Triangle fire's victims desperately attempted to escape the flames by jumping from windows, many of the Bangladesh victims leaped to their deaths rather than burn.

There are other similarities between Triangle and That's It Sportswear: In Triangle, immigrant women regularly worked 14-hour days to make blouses that sold in upscale boutiques on New York's classy "Ladies' Mile" and at high-end stores across the country. The Bangladeshi factory's workers produced clothes for The Gap (GPS), Abercrombie and Fitch (ANF), Wrangler (VFC), J.C. Penney (JCP), Target (TGT) and Osh Kosh B'Gosh (CRI). At the Triangle factory, wages topped out at \$2 per day; in Bangladesh, the state-mandated minimum wage is \$43 per month -- roughly \$2 per day -- although many factory owners pay less.

Everything Old Is New Again

But one doesn't have to go to Bangladesh to see workers fighting for the same rights won by the Triangle factory's seamstresses. Wisconsin's recent struggle revolved around state attempts to ban collective bargaining, the same right that Triangle's owners repeatedly refused to extend to their workers. This is not a minor consideration: as international labor relations expert Edward Weisband notes, public service unions like the teachers' union in Wisconsin, arose out of "concern over the ability of public service workers to strike." Policemen, teachers, firemen and other urgent service workers needed to be able to collectively bargain, in part because a strike -- one of the other major union tools for exerting pressure -- could seriously threaten society's safety.

In recent decades, however, laws have been passed making it illegal for public employees to strike. Spared that worry, politicians like Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker have raised the specter of intransigent or rigid unions refusing to bend. But Weisband points out these concerns are "belied by the willingness of public sector unions to make numerous major concessions to state governments." Considering that Wisconsin teachers are legally barred from striking and are eager to compromise with legislators, it's worth asking why Gov. Walker -- like the Triangle's owners Blanck and Harris -- is so dead-set against collective bargaining.

As Richard Greenwald notes, it's hard to underestimate the impact of unions on the history of the United States. During the 1940s and 1950s, he says, "unions were responsible for the formation of the middle class. By negotiating wages, benefits and hours, they made it possible for many workers to achieve membership in the middle class." Six decades later, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie argues exactly the opposite point, claiming that wage protections and other benefits were tanking the Garden State's budget. Or, as he put it, "the unions are trying to break the middle class in New Jersey."

Discussing the Triangle fire, American Federation of Labor President Samuel Gompers allegedly said, "Rarely do you get an opportunity for such legislative reform, but women had to burn first in order for this to happen." With worker rights under attack across the United States, in Bangladesh and elsewhere, it's worth asking what it will take to shift the tenor of the national conversation.

For his part, Greenwald offers measured optimism: "The attention surrounding Wisconsin's teacher protests signal a turning point," he says. "Hopefully, it won't take another catastrophe to remind us of the lessons of the Triangle fire."