

100 Years After the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

Turn back the clock on New York City's garment district to around the year 1900.

“The average work week was 84 hours, 12 hours every day of the week,” said Ellen Rothman with the Jewish Women's Archive in Brookline, Mass. “During the busy season, the grinding hum of sewing machines never entirely ceased day or night.”

Conditions had begun to improve by 1911, but just slightly. On March 25th of that year, fire erupted at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in lower Manhattan. It was one of the worst workplace disasters in American history: 146 people died, mostly teenage girls and women, immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe and Italians.

Workers had few rights at the time. Garment factories were crowded, noisy and hot. Bathroom breaks were monitored. Workers had their bags inspected when they left for the day. When fire broke out at the Triangle Factory, the exits were locked to prevent theft.

“In trying to escape, there was no choice: be burned alive, or jump. And most of them jumped. And everyone who jumped died,” said Rothman.

Scores of people witnessed the horror, middle class patrons out for a Saturday stroll on a spring day in Greenwich Village. The accident made headlines across the country, and the labor movement in New York City, already in full tilt, was further galvanized by the Triangle Fire.

Within two years, New York State passed more than 30 labor laws, adding teeth to child labor protections, setting a minimum wage, and requiring safer conditions. Federal regulations followed during President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930's.



Garment workers around 1900. (Credit: Kheel Center, Cornell University, photographer unknown)

Jobs for New Americans

For decades after, New York City's garment district thrived. In 1948, 354,600 people worked in the city's garment industry, the peak after World War II. The numbers slowly started to decline in the 1960's and 1970's, then fell off a cliff. Today, only 16,700 garment workers are there, according to the New York State Department of Labor.

Like a century ago, most of today's garment workers are immigrants: Jews and Italians have been replaced by Asians and Latinos. Workplace abuses still exist, but generally, conditions are vastly improved.

I visited the Nicole Miller factory in Manhattan's garment district. The factory was well lit, clean, and ventilated.



Workers at the Nicole Miller Factory in NYC. Photo Credit: Jason Margolis

“When it comes to the working conditions, I would say it's good,” said Tony Persaud from Guyana.

Persaud works as a “cutter.” He's in a union. He earns \$35,000 a year, plus benefits. He came to New York in the 1980's. “It was very easy to get a job then. You could leave a job in the morning, go down to the 2nd floor and get a job,” said Persaud.

Persaud said he's worried about his job though. His co-worker Mariana Franke, a pattern maker from Argentina, shared his anxiety. “Everybody is trying to save money so ... I don't know what to say?”

Shifting Work, Shifting Danger

Garment jobs have been shifting to lower-cost operations in Mexico, the Caribbean, and Asia for decades, as have dangerous working conditions.

“Effectively what we have done is exported our sweatshops and exported our factory fires,” said Robert Ross at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. And it’s as if the 1911 conditions had been lifted up by an evil hand and dropped into Bangladesh.”

According to the Bangladeshi government’s Fire Service and Civil Defense Department, 414 garment workers were killed in at least 213 factory fires between the years 2006 and 2009. Last year, 191 people were killed in Bangladesh in a reported 20 incidents, according to Ross’ research. Last December, a fire killed at least 25 people in a garment factory there.

“And the pattern is disturbingly uniform,” said Ross. “The shops are often in high rise buildings, just like the Triangle. The pattern is that an electrical fire starts, and then without adequate, or any fire escapes, without sprinkler systems, the workers surge to get out. And in factory after factory, the newspapers report locked gates and locked doors. It’s a horrific duplication of what we earlier experienced.”

Why?

The question is: Why does this keep happening? Labor laws exist, both international and country-specific rules. But Heewon Brindle-Khym, with the Fair Labor Association in New York City, said laws are often ignored in places like Bangladesh and China.

“It’s cheaper for many factory owners to not abide by the law because it costs them money,” said Brindle-Khym. “In terms of the enforcement of the law, there’s just aren’t enough inspectors to go to each and every factory in China to ensure that labor rights are being enforced.”

Most American clothing companies are completely removed from the manufacturing process. They often don’t know what goes on in their overseas factories, or they choose not to investigate.

Still, part of the blame for unsafe working conditions in garment factories also lies with American consumers, argued Robert Ross.

“The average American has eight pairs of jeans,” said Ross. He said trends show that show Americans continue to spend less and less money on clothes, while buying more and more stuff. “People should buy better and fewer clothes. That would be good for garment workers.”

But that’s not something consumers generally want to hear.

Still, 100 years after the Triangle Fire, labor organizers, activists and social researchers want to remind people that there’s a worker behind the cheap clothes we buy. And in many parts of the world, The Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire isn’t just an anniversary marking a bygone era.