The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire & Immigrant Workers



On March 25, 1911, a fire broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company's factory located in New York City one block east of Washington Square Park. There were over 500 employees—mostly young women and recent Italian and Jewish immigrants. The workers ran to the fire escape. But it collapsed, dropping them to their deaths.

On the 9th floor, a critical exit was locked. People on the street watched as the workers began to jump out the windows.

Fire trucks arrived but their ladders only reached the 6th floor. The elevators ran as long as they could, workers pressed into the cars; some tumbled down the elevator shaft.

By the time it was over, 146 workers had died. (For additional information on this tragedy, see the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition.)

Legacy for Immigrant Workers

The Triangle fire had a lasting legacy in several ways. First, at the time of the fire, there weren't any fire or building codes. So even though the building owners were tried for manslaughter, they were acquitted. The resulting public outrage led to the development of modern fire codes and safety

laws.

The tragedy also inspired the nascent labour union movement and led to the creation of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union.

And it highlighted the vulnerability of immigrant workers. But are things better for immigrant workers now'

At the 100th anniversary of the tragedy last year, US immigrant workers protested. While they acknowledged that some progress had been made since the Triangle fire, more protections for immigrant workers were still needed—especially in the construction industry.

The situation isn't much different in Canada. The Institute for Work & Health (IWH) has long documented the safety hazards faced by recent immigrants, particularly men. For example, a study by IWH researchers found that recent immigrant men are **twice as likely** to sustain workplace injuries that require medical attention compared with Canadian-born men.

And the Dean Panel in Ontario called immigrant and young workers two of the most vulnerable groups in the workplace.

So what can you do to better protect immigrant workers'

One key obstacle immigrants often face is the inability to understand the language spoken in the workplace. As a result, they don't understand their safety training and can't read labels or MSDSs and thus are at risk of getting hurt—or worse.

Click here for information on how to deal with language barriers in the workplace. Our sister website, SafetySmart.com, also has some tips on lifting language barriers.