

This Date in Safety History: Triangle Shirtwaist Fire



This month will mark the 114th anniversary of one of the most infamous workplace tragedies in history but also one of the most impactful in a positive way.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire

It happened in New York City. The Triangle Shirtwaist factory was the consummate sweatshop—3 floors of female immigrant workers crowded together in appalling conditions. Late in the afternoon of March 25, 1911, a fire broke out on the eighth floor and, feeding on the flammable cloth strewn around the workplace, quickly spread to floors 9 and 10.

The workers were trapped. The building had no fire escapes and the exits were locked from the outside. They were basically sealed in a pressure cooker.

“It was all nice young Jewish girls who were engaged to be married,” one of the few survivors recounts. “[They] threw themselves from the window. What the hell did they close the door for? What did they think we were gonna do—steal a shirtwaist?”

By the time it was over, 146 workers had perished.

The Aftermath of the Tragedy

Sadly, in the realm of workplace safety, tragedy is often the engine of progress. The pattern:

- Workers are exposed to horrifying conditions and hazards.
- The situation leads inevitably to terrible tragedy, which brings public attention to situation.
- Public outcry leads to adoption of laws and reforms.

The Triangle Shirtwaist fire is one of the purest examples of this dynamic. In 1911, fire and building codes didn't exist. Thus, even though the building owners were tried for manslaughter, they were found not guilty. The public outrage furnished the impetus for the development of modern fire codes and safety laws. Today, the [workplace fire prevention plan](#) is also a staple of OHS regulations.