

**The New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health**

*Commemorates  
the Centennial of the  
Triangle Shirtwaist  
Factory Fire*

**March 25, 1911 – March 25, 2011**

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The Triangle shirtwaist factory fire killed 146 garment workers, most of them young immigrant women, on March 25, 1911, in New York City. It was a critical event in the history of the U.S. labor movement, the New Deal, the development of occupational safety and health standards, and the New York City Fire Department. The New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (NYCOSH) decided to commemorate the centennial of the fire by asking a few dozen labor leaders; federal, state and city officials; academic researchers, professors and authors; elected representatives; health and safety activists; and immigrant rights advocates to write their views of the legacy of the fire. We asked that they also write about where we are now in the movement for safe and healthful workplaces, where we need to get to, and how we can get there. The essays are varied, fascinating and passionate. We offer this collection as both a remembrance to the Triangle victims, and as a call to action to win greater protections for workers who still in this day risk their lives and health at their jobs.

## CONTENTS

William Henning, Jr.	Triangle's victims left loved ones behind – and quite a legacy	3
Denis M. Hughes	Working people will not give up until justice is done	4
Peg Seminario	Even after tragedy, it takes organized action to bring change	5
Linda Rae Murray	Lessons we are still learning	6
David Michaels	We must. We will.	7
John Howard	A pivotal moment	8
Patricia Smith	Best way to remember ... improve health and safety of today's workers	9
New York State Department of Labor and Workers' Compensation Board	statement	10
Chung Wha Hong	Protecting the rights of immigrant workers helps all workers	12
Stuart Appelbaum	100 years after the Triangle fire: So much still to be done	13
Eric Frumin	History can run backwards	14
Edgar Romney	Fighting back for workers' rights	15
Tom O'Connor	The U.S. remains a laggard in worker protections	16
May Y. Chen	Tragedy and hardship can transform movements	17
Stephen J. Cassidy	We must remember now what we learned then	18
Salvatore Cassano	Triangle put focus on preventing fires, not just fighting them	19
Ana Maria Archila	Immigrant workers, continuing the fight	20
Saru Jayaraman	Today's sweatshops are in the service sector	21
Markowitz & Rosner	The revolution in workplace safety	22
Jeanne Stellman	On occupational hazards that don't blaze behind closed doors	23
Rory O'Neill	A world of trouble	24
Michelle de la Uz	Locked-in workers – 1911 or 2011?	25
Pamela Vossenas	Workers, unions ... at forefront of fight for safe workplaces	26
Priscilla Gonzalez	Domestic workers' struggle for rights is built on the Triangle legacy	27
Garrett Brown	The more things change....	28
Jerrold Nadler	The beginning of everything: The Triangle shirtwaist fire	29
Rory I. Lancman	The fire that lit a fire for promoting workplace safety	30
Deborah J. Glick	Protecting workers today and in the future	31
Christine C. Quinn	It changed forever the way people view the workplace	32
Klitzman & Goldberg	Time to reaffirm our commitment to our valuable workforce	33
Kate Bronfenbrenner	A fundamental issue of justice	34
Liz Chong Eun Rhee	A legacy to uphold	34
Ruth Milkman	Rights won are now at risk	35
Joel Shufro	Without unions, we would have many more Triangle fires	36

# Triangle's victims left loved ones behind – and quite a legacy

**WORKERS COMPENSATION.** Building and fire safety codes. Improved firefighting capabilities. Union organizing into the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. International Women's Day. Later, the Occupational Safety and Health Act.

The 146 who died in the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire in Greenwich Village on March 25, 1911, left loved ones behind – and quite a legacy. Of the victims, many were teenagers, some as young as 14, and none older than 39. (Ironically, the oldest was the great aunt of a former Republican New York State senator who opposed most health and safety initiatives that came before the Legislature.)

Only the day before the tragic and preventable catastrophe at Triangle, the New York State Court of Appeals had struck down a new “workmen’s compensation” law as unconstitutional, as it interfered with the “due process” rights of employers to have their liability adjudicated in court. As a result of Triangle and the hue and cry that arose out of the inability of victims’ survivors to receive compensation, the state Constitution was amended and a workers’ compensation law subsequently enacted in 1913. For all the flaws in our current system, can you imagine injured workers having to sue in court every time they were hurt on the job? (Survivors of Triangle victims eventually received \$75 for each dead worker from a civil court case.)

**FRANCES PERKINS STOOD** in the street below that Saturday and watched scores of victims plunge to their deaths. Later, as Secretary of Labor under President Franklin D. Roosevelt she advocated strongly for workers’ rights. Not until 1970, however, during the Nixon administration did we get our first major industrial safety law, the Occupational Safety and Health Act. Despite these significant advances, a fire at Imperial Foods chicken processing plant in Hamlet, N.C., on September 3, 1991, killed 25 workers, and injured 54, as they were trapped behind locked fire doors. In 11 years in operation, the plant had never undergone a single safety inspection. Enactment of regulatory laws rings hollow without resources put into their enforcement, another reason why the budgetary process is so critical.

**THE WORDS OF MARY HARRIS “MOTHER” JONES**, the great American labor and community organizer, ring as true today as when she first said them: “Mourn the dead, but fight like hell for the living.”



By **WILLIAM HENNING, JR.**

Chairperson of the NYCOSH  
Board of Directors and Vice  
President of Communications  
Workers of America, Local 1180





By **DENIS M. HUGHES**

President of the New York State  
AFL-CIO

# Working people will not give up until justice is done

**CERTAIN HISTORICAL EVENTS** stand out in the collective memory of the labor movement. Whether victories, disasters, or drawn battles, they define the times: The Haymarket Massacre in 1886. The CIO sit-down strikes of the 1930s. The PATCO strike in 1981. And today, perhaps, the battle for public sector collective bargaining in state capitals.

One such event, in the dark gloomy sweatshops of an industrial New York City teeming with immigrants, was the Triangle shirtwaist fire in 1911. The disaster took the lives of 146 garment workers, most of them Italian and Jewish immigrants and most young women and girls.

On the heels of the disaster came a wave of reform and the establishment of state workers' compensation systems. It falls principally to state labor federations and their staunchest allies – the occupational safety and health movement – to tackle the endless problems and intricacies of the workers' compensation systems. It is an uphill battle to wrest improvements for workers from such compromised systems. So many private, selfish interests feed off them.

**WE DRAW INSPIRATION** from the Triangle centenary. We stand in awe of the strength, heroism, and tenacity of those who went before us.

The struggle for safety and health in the U.S. workplace has achieved progress. But it will not be finally won as long as our economic system gives employers an incentive to put profit before people, that is, to risk killing, maiming, and sickening workers in the interest of maximum corporate profit.

In this era when workers and unions are on the defensive, we might recall a favorite expression of one of our greatest leaders, Martin Luther King, Jr. Rallying the civil rights movement after a defeat, he used to proclaim, “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” We might add: the arc bends toward justice, not of its own accord, but because working people will not give up until justice is done.

The struggle for safety and health in the U.S. workplace ... will not be finally won as long as **our economic system** gives employers an incentive to put profit before people.

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# Even after tragedy, it takes organized action to bring change

**ON MARCH 25, 1911**, a fire at the Triangle shirtwaist factory claimed the lives of 146 workers, most of them young immigrant women, trapped behind locked doors with no way to escape. That tragic event forced changes in safety protections in New York State and then the nation. Witnessed by Frances Perkins, who would later become Secretary of Labor to President Franklin Roosevelt, the tragedy also served as the moral foundation for wage and hour laws and other labor protections.

Despite the magnitude of the Triangle shirtwaist factory tragedy, comprehensive national workplace safety and health protections were not enacted until decades later, after more needless tragedies and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of workers. But tragedies and deaths alone did not bring change; it took the organized action of workers and their unions.

In 1968, after an explosion at Consol No. 9 coal mine trapped and killed 78 miners, the coal miners in West Virginia went on strike, shut down the mines, demanding stronger safety and health protections. This action led to the passage of the Federal Coal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1969, followed the next year by enactment of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970.

**IN THE FORTY YEARS SINCE** the enactment of these laws, great progress has been made in reducing job injuries and deaths and occupational diseases. Standards have been set limiting exposures to coal dust, asbestos and other toxic substances which have reduced diseases and deaths. Workers have gained important rights to be protected from discrimination for raising job safety concerns and access to information about chemicals and job hazards. But in every case workers and their unions had to fight to win these protections, demanding that the government act to protect their safety and health and guarantee the rights afforded under the mine safety and OSHA laws.

This year as we mark the 100th anniversary of the Triangle fire and the 40th anniversary of the Occupational Safety and Health Act, worker rights and safety and health protections face the most significant threat in decades from attacks by Republicans and corporate interests at the federal and state level. Workers, unions and their allies again must rise up, defend the right to organize and to have a union, and demand the right to dignity, respect and safe jobs.



**By PEG SEMINARIO**  
Safety and Health Director for the  
national AFL-CIO





**By LINDA RAE MURRAY**  
President of the American  
Public Health Association  
and Chief Medical Officer for  
the Cook County Department  
of Public Health

## Lessons we are still learning

**AS WE MARK THIS IMPORTANT ANNIVERSARY** it is natural to contemplate how far we have come in the past century. We mark a day when 146 workers, mostly young immigrant women, died needlessly in this horrific fire. In 1911 the struggle for the right to organize, issues addressing women's suffrage, and immigrant rights were on the front burner. After this tragedy regulations were enacted, organized labor grew, a progressive era was birthed.

There are other important anniversaries this year. This is the 150th year since the start of the American Civil War; the 100th anniversary of a seminal study on Illinois workplaces by Alice Hamilton (the mother of Occupational Health and Safety); and the 40th year since the establishment of OSHA and NIOSH.

What, we need to ask, remains for us to do? Still today hundreds of thousands of workers die each year from occupational injuries and illnesses. One of the reasons there were so many deaths in New York City a century ago was that the owners locked workers in the factory. In the past decade Wal-Mart was sued for routinely locking their night-shift workers in their stores to "prevent theft." Mass tragedies and deaths of workers by the score still regularly happen in our mines, our factories and on the high seas.

The lessons of the last century are clear but apparently not learned. We find ourselves re-fighting battles won by earlier generations. Most American workers have lost ground in wages, have had their pensions stolen and seen defined benefit programs become a thing of the past. As a nation of immigrants, we deny the need for immigration reform that recognizes and respects the contributions of today's immigrant workers. We see the ranks of labor continuing to fall and witness open attacks on public sector workers threatening all gains of organized labor in the last century.

**THE LESSONS HAVE NOT CHANGED.** When we allow ourselves to be divided – men against women, whites against Blacks against Latinos, public sector against private sector, immigrants against citizens – we are weakened and lose ground. When organized labor dips into the single digits, Social Security is threatened and we still cannot provide basic health care – a fundamental human right – to all who reside within our borders, the nation as a whole suffers.

Measuring ourselves against a century ago is an important exercise. But we must measure ourselves against the needs of today and the future. By that measure the struggle must continue.

**When we allow ourselves to be divided ... we are weakened and lose ground.**

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# We must. We will.

**AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY** in America, death in the workplace was an all-too-common occurrence. What set the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire apart and galvanized the city of New York and ultimately the nation was not only the large number of victims, but how this tragedy played out in plain view of thousands of witnesses, in the middle of the day, on a well-traveled city block. Journalists and labor groups ruthlessly pursued the truth, interviewing and publishing the testimonies of survivors, and exposing the indisputable, overwhelming evidence that the fire and the deaths were preventable.

One hundred years after the Triangle fire, we have witnessed great strides in workplace safety and health. Yet far too many preventable worker deaths and serious injuries continue to occur. The anniversary of this tragedy spurs us to fully harness the force of law established in the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970.

**WE NEED TO GIVE WORKERS A STRONGER VOICE** in the workplace, provide better protections for workers who choose to exercise their rights, reach out to educate immigrant workers about their right to a safe and healthful workplace, establish and firmly enforce sensible standards to prevent injuries and illnesses on the job, and help employers comply with their legal responsibility to protect their workers.

The spirits of those Triangle garment workers urge us to do better. We must. We will.



**By DAVID MICHAELS**  
United States Assistant Secretary  
of Labor for Occupational Safety  
and Health

This tragedy played out **in plain view of thousands of witnesses**, in the middle of the day, on a well-traveled city block.

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By **JOHN HOWARD**

Director of the National Institute  
for Occupational Safety and  
Health (NIOSH)

## A pivotal moment

**THE 100TH OBSERVANCE** of the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire reminds us that the nature of work in the United States has changed for the better in many ways since 1911. Our society no longer accepts exploitative conditions and occupational hazards as inevitable costs of doing business.

In an interview many years after the disaster, Rose Cohen remembered the pride she felt in performing her job at the factory. She also remembered that the job involved long hours, low pay, a harsh environment, and physically painful and exhausting tasks. She and her father needed the money to bring her mother and the rest of their family to the U.S. In 2011, we would not tolerate a business that would require an employee to choose between her family's economic security and her own safety and well-being.

Rose survived the catastrophic fire, but 146 of her co-workers did not. Like Rose, most of the victims were young immigrant women, some as young as 15 and 16. The tragedy was one of the pivotal moments that eventually led to the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act and the pledge of safe employment conditions for all working men and women.

Despite this progress, we must remember that the Triangle shirtwaist tragedy still holds many important lessons a century later. People continue to die on the job, and all of us have critical roles to play in reducing this toll.

**NEW IMMIGRANTS CONTINUE TO ARRIVE** in the U.S., seeking better lives for themselves and their families, just as the immigrants of 1911 did. We must be sensitive to factors of culture and language that demand new approaches to meaningful safety training for newly arrived workers.

Thanks in great measure to the reforms that followed Triangle shirtwaist, the children and grandchildren of Rose Cohen's generation were able to realize the American dream and to contribute to the most amazing economic growth in history. We must continue to do our utmost to help today's workers realize the same opportunities of life, health, and prosperity.

All of us have **critical roles to play** in reducing  
the toll [of work-related fatalities.]

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# The best way to remember Triangle victims is to improve the health and safety of today's workers

THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FIRE of 1911 took the lives of 146 garment workers because of the lack of adequate safety precautions in the factory in which they worked in New York City. As we all know, among the people who witnessed the fire was Frances Perkins, who later became the U.S. Secretary of Labor. The fire led to reforms, and many new laws have been enacted since then to better protect the safety and health of workers. But even though most workers today work in safer conditions than those in the early 1900s, there are still many thousands of preventable workplace deaths, illnesses, and injuries each year in this country.

Take for example silicosis, an occupational lung disease caused by breathing in silica dust. As early as 1937, then Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins declared war on silicosis. It is over seventy years later, yet we have not won that war. We still have inadequate regulations to protect workers from this disease, and occupational exposure to silica dust continues to claim the lives of hundreds of workers each year. And we now know that occupational exposure to silica dust is linked to deaths from other diseases as well, such as lung cancer, renal failure, and various nonmalignant respiratory diseases. The federal Department of Labor will soon be issuing proposed rules to provide workers in general industry, construction, and mining with better protections from exposure to silica dust. These rules will help to save the lives of hundreds of workers and prevent thousands of cases of silicosis each year. Silica and many other workplace hazards continue to threaten the well-being of workers, and the best way to remember the victims of the Triangle shirtwaist fire is to continue to improve the safety and health of today's workers.



By **PATRICIA SMITH**

Solicitor of the United States  
Department of Labor and former  
Commissioner of the New York  
State Department of Labor

There are still many thousands of **preventable workplace deaths, illnesses, and injuries** each year in this country ... Take for example **silicosis.**

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# NYS Department of Labor & Workers' Compensation Board honor the legacy of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire

These rules were **born in fire** and remain etched in our conscience.

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**IN 1911, A FIRE IN NEW YORK CITY** started a chain of events leading to progressive reforms and greater protection of the safety and health of workers. The horror began on Saturday afternoon, March 25, when fire broke out in one of the crowded and littered workrooms of the Triangle Waist Company. This manufacturer of shirtwaists for women filled the top 3 floors of the 10-story Asch Building, near Washington Square.

The setting was typical for that time – women and children working long hours under debilitating conditions. They sacrificed their lungs, eyesight and fingers to garner more profits for the owner. He locked the exits so workers wouldn't "rob him blind." That day a scrap bin caught fire and 146 workers paid for his greed with their lives.

Amid the national scandal that followed the Triangle shirtwaist fire and resounding calls for change, New York State enacted many of the first significant worker protection laws.

The tragedy led to fire-prevention legislation, factory inspection laws, and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. Frances Perkins was instrumental in the New York Factory Investigating Commission, which spotlighted the horrific manufacturing conditions. She later became the first woman to be both Commissioner of Labor in New York and Secretary of Labor for the nation.

**PUBLIC OUTRAGE OVER THE FIRE** also pushed the Workers' Compensation Act forward. New York's original workers' compensation laws, passed in 1910, were actually two statutes. One was voluntary, and the other was compulsory for eight "dangerous" occupations. A court quickly ruled the compulsory law violated both the state and federal constitutions. The next day, 146 people perished in the Triangle shirtwaist fire. New York amended its constitution, a new workers' compensation law was adopted in 1914, and the United States Supreme Court upheld it in 1917.

The New York State Department of Labor is committed to ensure that tragedy on this scale never happens again. Our investigators aggressively enforce the State's labor laws that cover safe working conditions for all New Yorkers. These laws were born from fire and remain etched in our conscience. New rules in 2010 protect the rights of domestic staff, construction laborers, workers in the hospitality industry and migrant farm labor. Our education and enforcement efforts extend to people who work in all occupations – from restaurants and hotels to nursing homes to car washes to grocery stores to manufacturing. This applies to all employers from big corporations to small enterprises. We cross language barriers with translations and bilingual staff.

**FURTHER, THE NEW YORK STATE WORKERS' COMPENSATION BOARD** continues to provide necessary support and protection to people hurt at work. At the heart of the workers' compensation system is a covenant between employers and their employees, virtually made in the ruins of that factory, that people who suffer injury or illness from their work promptly receive health care and replacement of lost wages. Because workers

risk their health in their labors, businesses must carry the mandatory insurance that provides these benefits. Failure to follow that law brings significant penalties. Advancements such as the new medical treatment guidelines uphold the covenant by guaranteeing injured workers will receive effective, timely health care.

**WORKERS IN OUR GREAT STATE** are the backbone of our economic, social and cultural life. Today, New Yorkers work in safer conditions and with better pay and benefits than generations past. But, we must never forget that *all* workers deserve to labor in conditions that sustain their dignity and worth as individuals.

This centennial is a time to reflect on the struggles of previous generations that brought us the rights and responsibilities we enjoy today. We honor those who died in the Triangle fire by staying true to our fight for workers' rights and workplace safety.

At the heart of the workers' compensation system is a covenant between employers and their employees, virtually made in the ruins of that factory, that people who suffer injury or illness from their work promptly receive health care and replacement of lost wages.

141 MEN AND GIRLS DIE IN WAIST FACTORY FIRE; TRAPPED HIGH UP IN WASHINGTON PL...  
New York Times 1857-Current; Mar 26, 1911; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2003)  
Pg. 1

# 141 MEN AND GIRLS DIE IN WAIST FACTORY FIRE; TRAPPED HIGH UP IN WASHINGTON PLACE BUILDING; STREET STREWN WITH BODIES; PILES OF DEAD INSIDE

The Flames Spread with Deadly Rapidity Through Flimsy Material Used in the Factory.

600 GIRLS ARE HEMMED IN When Elevators Stop Many Jump to Certain Death and Others Perish in Fire-Filled Lofts.

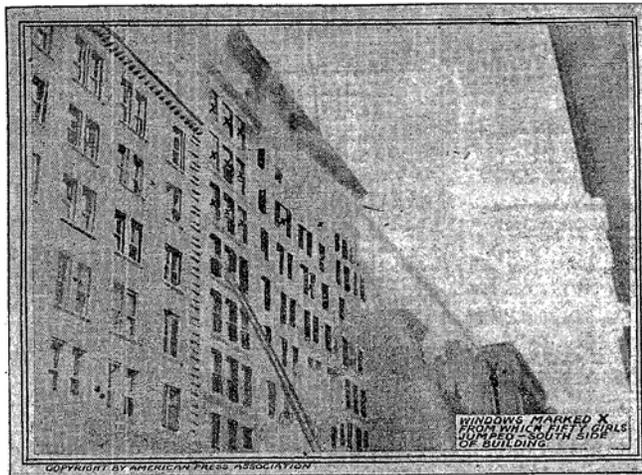
STUDENTS RESCUE SOME Help Them to Roof of New York University Building, Keeping the Panic-Stricken in Check.

ONE MAN TAKEN OUT ALIVE Plunged to Bottom of Elevator Shaft and Lived There Amid Flames for Four Hours.

ONLY ONE FIRE ESCAPE Coroner Declares Building Laws Were Not Enforced—Building Modern—Classed Fireproof.

JUST READY TO GO HOME Victims Would Have Ended Day's Work in a Few Minutes—Pay Envelopes Identify Many.

MOB STORMS THE MORGUE Seeking to Learn Fate of Relatives Employed by the Triangle Waist Company.



The Burning Building at 23 Washington Place.

beyond their aid. When the excitement had subsided to such an extent that some of the firemen and policemen could pay attention to this mass of the supposedly dead they found, about half way down in the pack, a girl who was still breathing. She died two minutes after she was found. The Triangle Waist Company was the only sufferer by the disaster. There are other concerns in the building, but it was Saturday and the other companies had let their people go home. Messrs. Harris and Blauvelt, however, were busy and their girls—and some men—stayed.

**Leaped Out of the Flames.**  
At 4:40 o'clock, nearly five hours after the employes in the rest of the building had gone home, the fire broke out. The one little fire escape in the interior was never resorted to by any of the doomed victims. Some of them escaped by running down the stairs, but in a moment or two this avenue was cut off by flame. The girls rushed to the windows and looked down at Greene Street, 100 feet below them. Then one poor, little creature jumped. There was a plate glass protection over part of the sidewalk, but she crashed through it, wrecking it and breaking her body into a thousand pieces. Then they all began to drop. The crowd yelled "Don't jump!" but it was jump or be burned—the proof of which is found in the fact that fifty burned bodies were taken from the ninth floor alone. They jumped, they crashed through broken glass, they crashed themselves to death on the sidewalk. Of those who stayed behind it is better to say nothing—except what a veteran policeman said as he gazed at a headless and charred trunk

sixth Street was impassable. But in the morning they received the charred remnants with no more emotion than they ever display over anything. Back in Greene Street there was another crowd. At midnight it had not decreased in the least. The police were holding it back to the fire lines, and discussing the tragedy in a tone which those seasoned witnesses of death seldom use. "It's the worse thing I ever saw," said one old policeman.

Chief Croker said it was an outrage. He spoke bitterly of the way in which the Manufacturers' Association had called a meeting in Wall Street to take measures against his proposal for enforcing better methods of protection for employes in cases of fire.

**No Chance to Save Victims.**  
Four alarms were rung in fifteen minutes. The first five girls who jumped did so before the first engine could respond. That fact may not convey much of a picture to the mind of an unimaginative man, but anybody who has ever seen a fire can get from it some idea of the terrific rapidity with which the flames spread. It may convey some idea, too, to say that thirty bodies clogged the elevator shafts. These dead were all girls. They had made their rush their blindly when they discovered that there was no chance to get out by the fire escape. Then they found that the elevator was as hopeless as anything else, and they fell there in their tracks and died.

The Triangle Waist Company employed about 600 women and less than 100 men. One of the saddest features of the thing is the fact that they had almost finished for the day. In five minutes more, if

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.

Girls had begun leaping from the eighth story windows before the firemen arrived. The firemen had trouble bringing their apparatus into position because of the bodies which allowed the pavement and sidewalks. While more bodies crashed down among them, they worked with desperation to run their ladders into position and to spread fire.

One fireman, running ahead of a hose wagon, which halted to avoid running over a body, spread a firenet, and two more seized hold of it. A girl's body, coming end over end, struck on the side of it, and there was hope for an instant that she would be the first one of the score who had already jumped to be saved.

Thousands of people, who had crushed in from Broadway and Washington Squares and were screaming with horror at what they saw, watched closely the work with the firenet. Three other girls, who had leaped for it a moment after the first one, struck it on top of her, and all four rolled out and lay still upon the pavement.

Five girls who stood together at a window close to the Greene Street corner held their places while a fire ladder was worked toward them, but which stopped at its full length two stories lower down. They leaped together, clinging to each other, with fire streaming back from their hair and dresses. They struck a glass sidewalk cover and crashed through it to the basement. There was no time to agh them. With water pouring in upon them from a dozen hose nozzles the bodies lay for two hours where they struck, as did the many others who leaped to their deaths.

One girl, who waved a handkerchief at the crowd, leaped from a window adjoining the New York University Building on the westward. Her dress caught on a wire, and the crowd watched her hang



By **CHUNG WHA HONG**

Executive Director of the  
New York Immigration Coalition

# Protecting the rights of immigrant workers helps all workers

**SINCE 1911, THERE HAVE BEEN MAJOR STRIDES** to protect workers, regardless of immigration status: Standards for basic minimum wage and overtime pay have been enacted as well as prohibitions against discrimination. However, this does not mean workplace exploitation is a thing of the past. Widespread labor law violations in low-wage industries including pay below minimum wage, unpaid overtime, and a lack of any breaks are as common today as they were over 100 years ago.

Immigrant workers, then and now, are vulnerable in the workplace due to their immigration status and limited English proficiency. Immigrant workers – the backbone of many industries in the U.S. economy – face some of the harshest working conditions, toil the longest hours, and are concentrated in jobs that do not pay a living wage. Failure to protect the rights of immigrant workers threatens the rights of all workers, driving down wages and working conditions for the labor force as a whole. The vulnerability of immigrant workers also directly affects their families and creates significant challenges for them to fully contribute to American society.

**TO SYSTEMATICALLY ADDRESS THE CRISIS** of worker abuse, the U.S. needs commonsense reforms to protect workers. Our vision of reform includes all workers advocating together for better wages, working conditions, and other protections. America needs to increase enforcement of its existing labor laws to protect workers. Equally as important, we must address the 11 million undocumented immigrants living and working in this country by creating a registration process that leads to lawful permanent resident status and eventual citizenship. Any employment-based immigration program must include provision for full labor rights; the right to change jobs; and a path to permanent residency and citizenship. The new system must facilitate and enforce equal rights for all workers and minimize the opportunities for abuse by unscrupulous employers.

Everyone has a stake in addressing labor violations. We applaud NYCOSH for being a leading voice on worker safety and health. Uniting to advocate for worker rights, we can achieve fairness and opportunity for all.

Widespread labor law violations in low-wage industries ... are as **common today** as they were over 100 years ago.

# 100 Years after the Triangle fire: So much still to be done

**THE DEPTH OF THE** Triangle shirtwaist factory tragedy is profound. It was a preventable event literally fueled by greed and incredible disregard for basic human rights. 146 innocent young workers perished, victims of negligent homicide.

Unfortunately, our history shows that it takes disasters to secure much needed protective measures in the workplace. In the fire's aftermath, important legislation and regulations were passed, especially in relation to fire and building safety and compensation for work-related injuries. These significant victories did not happen in a vacuum. They were driven by a tremendous outpouring of anger over the callous disregard for peoples' rights in the workplace, and the absence of appropriate penalties for employer misconduct.

Union membership in New York also grew dramatically after the fire. Workers realized that to win better and safer working conditions, they had to stand together in a union. The United Hebrew Trades, which became the New York division of the Jewish Labor Committee, was very active in these struggles.

**SO MUCH NEEDS TO BE DONE.** Women still earn much less than their male counterparts. Immigrant workers are highly exploited: They disproportionately toil in the most hazardous jobs and despite the desire of many to join unions, numerous obstacles remain. Union membership is painfully low.

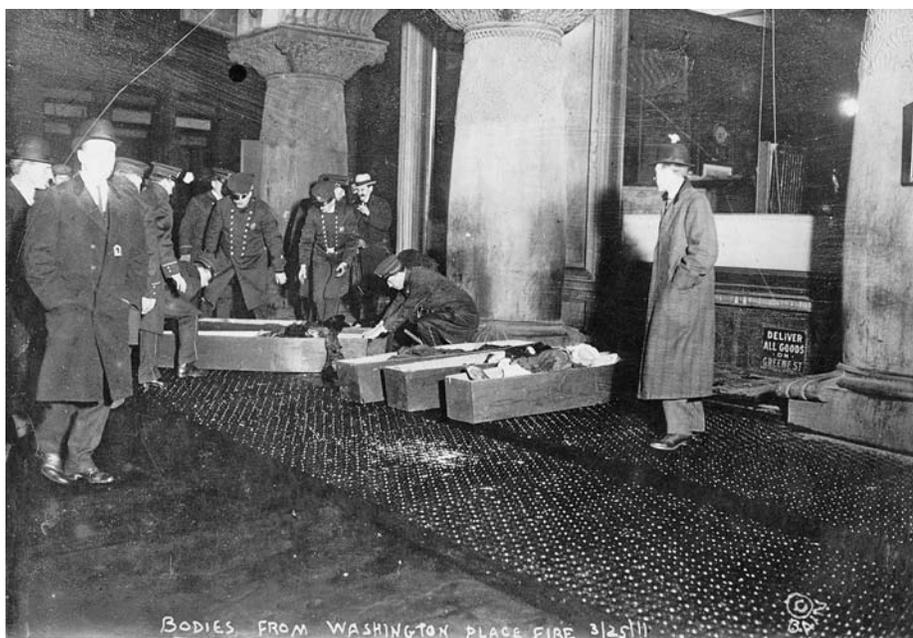
As long as workers are too afraid for their jobs to raise health and safety issues, we need strengthened workplace protections. If workers don't have the strength and protection of a union to fight to reduce hazards at the workplace, we need rigorous workplace enforcement. OSHA regulations have directly contributed to the significant decrease in workplace fatalities. The agency, severely underfunded and understaffed from the outset, has been a life saver, and not as detractors claim, a job killer.

The new forces in Congress are clear that they want to turn the clock back to 1911. That is outrageous and we will not let them. We, the public, value safety and want workplaces where workers earn a fair wage and are treated with dignity and respect. We cannot entrust our lives to those employers whose predominant concern is the immediate bottom line.



By **STUART APPELBAUM**

President of the Jewish Labor Committee



The Triangle fire was a preventable event literally **fueled by greed** and incredible disregard for basic human rights.



By **ERIC FRUMIN**

Director of Occupational Safety and Health for Change to Win\*

# History can run backwards

IN HIS BOOK, *Triangle: The Fire that Changed America*, author David Von Drehle wrote about “fundamental reforms” sparked by the fire. But in a review, CUNY history professor Mike Wallace noted that:

*[The “fundamental change” von Drehle reported], while inspiring, overlooks the fact that history can run backward, and that gains won can be lost again – and have been, repeatedly. Many of the initial post-Triangle reforms were strenuously opposed by conservative businessmen...who were soon back in the saddle and able to halt, hamstring or reverse liberal initiatives....*

*The New Deal expanded the terrain of social democracy; but by the late 1930’s, opponents ... dismantled many of its signature programs. In the 1960s and 70s, reformers won health and safety and pollution regulations. Today’s free marketeers are whittling these away. And sweatshops that exploit vulnerable, unorganized immigrant workers are again alive and malignantly well in New York City.*

**HOW FAR BACK HAS HISTORY** taken the movement, and what are our current challenges? Our most pressing task is to take collective action, and get the power only collective action produces. As people today confront corporate elites and their political allies in state capitals across the country, and national capitals around the world, we should follow the instructions of legendary organizer Mother Jones: “Mourn for the Dead, and Fight Like Hell For the Living!” We must fight to:

**Put America back to work.** No real reforms are possible when workers are desperate for jobs. Corporate America must spend its horde of cash rehiring the millions of Americans it recently laid off.

**Adopt a fair system for worker representation,** and stop rampant employer abuse of National Labor Relations Act loopholes.

**Pass the Protecting America’s Workers Act (PAWA) and Byrd Mine Safety Act,** to expand coverage and enforcement authority for OSHA and MSHA.

**Update critical safety and health standards,** so that workers and employers in all economic sectors can finally stop the ongoing toll of death, injury and disease in the workplace.

A century after the Triangle bosses committed wholesale manslaughter, then walked away unpunished, America confronts again the question: Whose interest is paramount, that of working people or the wealthy few? We only know one answer to pass on to our children and grandchildren: *Si Se Puede. Another world is possible.*

Our most pressing task is to take **collective action**, and get the power only collective action produces.



Ha-Meem clothing factory fire in Bangladesh in 2010 killed 28 workers and injured dozens.

## Fighting back for workers' rights

**LAST YEAR, YOUNG GARMENT WORKERS** in Ashulia, Bangladesh, jumped to their deaths from the 10th and 11th floors when a fire overtook the Ha-Meem factory.

This horrible story was a mirror image of what happened at the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire. Locked doors, once again.

While Triangle spurred a nation to action, we must not slip back. Workers are still being killed in workplaces not only in Bangladesh, but here at home. Calls for less regulation continue to put workers in jeopardy.

One year ago, 29 workers died in Massey Energy's underground mine in Montcoal, West Virginia. Despite an unprecedented response by the U.S. Labor Department, Congress has yet to act. A party-line vote engineered by Republicans in Congress blocked legislation for stronger enforcement mechanisms to protect miners and stop rogue employers like Massey.

But workers and our allies are fighting back.

In Bangladesh today, where the garment and textile industry is now the nation's largest industry sector, workers are actively fighting for a better life. We need to push for stronger global standards for workers, so that labor rights and workers' safety rules are enforced domestically and globally no matter where the work is being done.

In this hemisphere, unions joined by allies like the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) and the Worker Rights Consortium have had successes. Student pressure made the University of Wisconsin-Madison cancel its contract with Nike last spring due to labor violations in Nike's Honduran plants.

Meanwhile, SweatFree Communities has gotten municipalities to join a SweatFree Procurement Consortium and sign SweatFree Procurement Ordinances.

**THE WORKERS I HAVE THE PRIVILEGE** of representing go to work every day with the legacy of Triangle workers providing the wind on their backs. They know that they are protected thanks to the heroism of these brave women and men.

But, we must keep the flame burning. We must redouble our own efforts to empower workers everywhere.



By **EDGAR ROMNEY**

Secretary/Treasurer of Workers  
United/SEIU

We need  
to **push for**  
**stronger global**  
**standards for**  
**workers.**

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By **TOM O'CONNOR**

Executive Director of the  
National Council for Occupational  
Safety and Health

# The U.S. remains a laggard in worker protections

**IN THE BAD OLD DAYS OF THE TRIANGLE FIRE**, life was cheap; a hundred workers a day sacrificed on the altar of industrial progress. We've come a long way since then.

Or have we?

We have made great progress in some respects – a federal law to protect workers' safety and health and great leaps in the technology to protect workers' lives. But the reality is that we have made much greater advances in technology than in actually ensuring that every worker returns home safe at the end of the day. Some 15 workers still lose their lives every day on the job from injuries – and many more from long-latent illnesses. Worse, many, if not most, of these deaths are from easily preventable causes.

In the past year, the U.S. public's attention was caught by the dramatic workplace tragedies that followed one after another – the Upper Big Branch mine explosion in West Virginia, the Deepwater Horizon disaster, the Tesoro refinery explosion in Washington State. These multiple-fatality tragedies garner headlines and cause politicians in Congress to bang their fists on tables, demanding action. But our country suffers from a silent epidemic of workplace deaths that elicit little or no outrage. The construction worker with no harness who falls to his death from an unguarded roof. The sanitation worker with no protection or training who enters a confined space permeated with deadly chemical fumes. The 18-year-old kid in his first week on the job who is buried alive in a collapsed trench.

**THESE INCIDENTS HAPPEN DAILY** across the U.S., and each one is the sort of hazard that we have known about since the days of the Triangle fire, for which simple preventive measures are easily available. Yet they keep happening, day after day, year after year.

We have made progress, yes. But the U.S. remains a laggard among the industrialized nations in worker protections. A recent study ranked the U.S. number 29 out of the 30 OECD countries in worker safety and health protections, managing to beat out only Turkey, a country with a per capita GDP one-third of the U.S.'s. With conservatives in Congress decrying the supposedly "job-killing" effects of OSHA protections, we could be on our way to becoming a first-world economy with third-world working conditions.

America's workers deserve better and surely, 100 years after the Triangle Fire, we are capable of doing better by them – much better.

Our country suffers from a **silent epidemic of workplace deaths** that elicit little or no outrage

# Tragedy and hardship can transform movements

**ORGANIZE! ORGANIZE! ORGANIZE!** That is the most important lesson and legacy of the Triangle factory fire.

Immigrant female garment workers were actively organizing before the fire. They continued to organize after it. Broad groups of allies also organized in response, and unions, artists, families, communities and activists still organize today, while remembering the struggles of those who came before. Triangle and its aftermath showed that tragedy and hardship can be transformed into movements for progress and change. Today's immigrants and unions need to take this to heart: Don't give up. Don't give in to exploitation and hatred, or to apathy and inaction.

I have participated for at least 25 years in the annual commemoration of the Triangle fire. Each year has brought new and relevant messages and images of solidarity and struggles:

- the spunky “rebel women” sewing workers who founded Local 25 – my union family for so many years;
- the Chinatown garment strikers of 1982 who were determined to learn and teach fire safety. Many, now retired, lay down flowers every March 25;
- brave workers from “right to work” states in the American South and global sweatshops in Central America, Africa, Asia;
- students against sweatshops;
- so many fires, flames of destruction and death, igniting flames of action and mobilization; and
- fire trucks, bagpipes, the tolling bell.

Women, immigrants and workers have come a long way. But there is still a long way to go. In 2011, there needs to be more compassion and respect for workers in both public and private sectors. We need to fight the growing disparities in income, benefits and workplace rights in New York City, across the U.S., and globally. We really need to ORGANIZE!



By **MAY Y. CHEN**

Consultant to Workers United/  
SEIU and President of the New  
York State Immigrant Action Fund

Today's immigrants and unions need to take this to heart: **Don't give up.** Don't give in to exploitation and hatred, or to apathy and inaction.

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By **STEPHEN J. CASSIDY**

President of the Uniformed  
Firefighters Association of  
New York City

# We must remember now what we learned then

**SADLY, TRAGEDIES ARE OFTEN THE CATALYSTS** resulting in safeguards and measures of justice that otherwise would never exist. As we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Triangle shirtwaist fire, it is important to reflect on how this tragedy galvanized public opinion in New York and throughout the industrializing world.

The Triangle fire focused a spotlight on inhumane and dangerous conditions prevalent in sweatshops where immigrants worked unthinkably long days for unspeakably low wages. It showed America that unions, and unionizing, were necessary to force business owners and landlords to comply with minimum safety standards. Fire precautions and inspections were almost nonexistent at the time, so escape routes and secondary means of egress could be blocked or locked. Shortly after Triangle, building and fire codes such as the Fire Prevention Act of 1911 were enacted to ensure that a tragedy of this magnitude would never happen again.

**TO THIS DAY**, no one really knows what started the Triangle fire. We can postulate, however, that it most likely started as a small fire on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor and quickly turned into an incendiary nightmare. Reports indicate the fire was extinguished after 20 minutes, but the carnage was devastating.

Today, the FDNY is still in the business of trying to extinguish fires and perform search and rescues as quickly as possible. The last five years have been the busiest in its history; last year alone the FDNY responded to more emergencies than ever before. As Triangle showed, every moment is critical in fighting fires. Mere seconds can mean the difference between life and death, between whether property is salvaged or destroyed.

The safety of citizenry, firefighters, and property should not be negotiable or sacrificed on the altar of budgetary considerations. If we have learned anything, if we are to honor the struggles of men and women in the labor movement, and to maintain improvements in working and living conditions, we cannot allow our elected leaders to put lives and property at risk. As we remember the 146 victims of the Triangle fire, let us vow that we will not allow political posturing to diminish the strength of the FDNY and its ability to protect the people of New York City.

**If we have learned anything ... we cannot allow our elected leaders to put lives and property at risk.**

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## Triangle put focus on preventing fires, not just fighting them

ON DECEMBER 28, 1910, Chief Edward F. Croker of the New York City Fire Department testified in front the New York State Assembly Investigation Committee about the safety of workers in the factories springing up all over lower Manhattan. “You will find it very interesting,” he told the committee, “to see the number of people in one of these buildings with absolutely no fire protection, without any means of escape in case of fire.”

Chief Croker’s warnings went unheeded, and three months later, disaster struck in the Asch building where hundreds of workers were trapped, just as he had predicted, with no protection and no means of escape.

The Triangle shirtwaist factory fire was one of the most defining moments in the history of the FDNY. It changed the way we thought about our job. No longer was it good enough for the Fire Department to merely respond to fires. We realized we had to take a robust approach to preventing them as well.

**ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHANGES** to come in the wake of the tragedy at the Triangle factory was the founding of the Bureau of Fire Prevention, which came into existence on May 1, 1913. In its 98-year history, the bureau has saved countless lives by regulating and enforcing fire safety codes, and it is the driving force behind new initiatives that make sure we stay abreast of a constantly changing building and engineering environment.

One hundred years later it has become axiomatic to say that the best way to fight fires is to prevent fires. And by following that mantra – putting it into action with regulations, inspections and the promulgation of safer building practices – we have brought fires down to the lowest levels since recordkeeping began.

But sadly, that was a lesson learned at the expense of 146 young lives.



By **SALVATORE CASSANO**  
Commissioner of the New York  
City Fire Department.

The Triangle shirtwaist factory fire was one of the most **defining moments** in the history of the FDNY.

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By **ANA MARIA ARCHILA**

Co-Executive Director of Make the Road New York

# Immigrant workers, continuing the fight

**A HUNDRED YEARS AGO**, the tragic deaths of 146 workers, most of them young immigrant women, in a Manhattan sweatshop awoke a nation to the dire need to protect workers' most basic rights to work free from dangerous and unsafe conditions. On this anniversary of the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire, we can celebrate the strides we've made: passing critical legislation to protect workers' health and safety; advocating for enforcement of laws across our city; and educating workers and employers about how best to ensure that workplaces are free from undue hazards.

But so too, we must recognize that thousands of immigrant workers continue to endure 19th century working conditions: no safety equipment, little training, and pressure to work faster and cut corners by employers concerned only about profit. With little knowledge of their legal rights and fearful of seeking help from the government due to their

immigration status, these workers are the invisible, exploited engine of New York City.

At Make the Road New York, a community organization with a membership of more than 8,200 low-income immigrants, we hear daily from workers who confront dramatically unsafe conditions. And the stories are shocking: car wash workers with severe chemical burns; a factory worker with kidney failure from exposure to hazards; another worker crushed to death by a mixing machine. Statistics back up these stories, showing that Latino immigrant workers face substantially higher risks than the population as a whole of injury and death on the job.

**THIS ANNIVERSARY GIVES US A MOMENT** to remember our sisters and brothers who died one hundred years ago, and to say again: their deaths, and the deaths and injuries suffered by thousands of workers in the years since, will not be in vain. With community organizations, labor, and groups like NYCOSH we will continue to fight to ensure *all* workers, regardless of immigration status, can safely work to support their families.



We hear daily from workers who confront dramatically unsafe conditions ... car wash workers with severe chemical burns; **a factory worker with kidney failure from exposure to hazards;** another worker crushed to death by a mixing machine.



## Today's sweatshops are in the service sector

AS THE NATION'S LEADING restaurant worker organization, we at the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United (ROC-United) honor the workers, mostly young women, who lost their lives in the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire, and also all the thousands of young and immigrant women involved in labor struggle from that time until the present day. Their struggles have not been in vain – much has been accomplished – but we still have so far to go.

The deaths of these young women led to the beginnings of a movement that ultimately transformed those sweatshop factory jobs into good manufacturing jobs in the United States. But as the economy changed, and those jobs were shipped abroad, the sweatshop moved from the factory to the service sector. With over 10 million workers, the restaurant industry is one of the nation's largest private sector industries. But it is less than .01% unionized. That is why we relate so strongly to the young women of the Triangle Waist Company – we see ourselves in the same place, beginning a movement to transform the sweatshop conditions of the largest sector of the economy, and thereby set the standards for the economy overall.

**EVEN THE ORIGINS** of our movement are similar. We were founded by displaced restaurant workers from Windows on the World, the restaurant at the top of the World Trade Center, where 73 workers died as they attempted to exit the restaurant to the rooftop via a locked door that should not have been locked. In honor of those immigrant workers, the women and men of Triangle shirtwaist, and all the immigrant workers before them, we continue to struggle for racial, economic, and social justice, no matter how strong the opposition!



By **SARU JAYARAMAN**

Co-Founder and Co-Director,  
Restaurant Opportunities Centers  
United



By **GERALD MARKOWITZ**  
and **DAVID ROSNER**

Markowitz is Distinguished Professor of History, John Jay College and Graduate Center, CUNY; Rosner is Ronald H. Lauterstein Professor of Sociomedical Sciences and History, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University.

# The revolution in workplace safety

**THE TRIANGLE FIRE OCCURRED** in the midst of a growing and vibrant movement for safety and health in America’s mines, mills, factories and sweatshops. Speed-ups; monotonous tasks; exposure to chemical toxins and metallic and organic dusts; and unprotected machinery made the American workplace among the most dangerous in the world.

Labor and social activists at the beginning of the twentieth century warned that the enormous wealth produced by the new industrial plants was achieved at an inordinate social cost. Labor’s anger at such conditions was frequently expressed in strikes at unhealthy and dangerous shops. In one year the cloak makers union called 28 successful “sanitary” strikes in New York, and set the stage for the public outcry that followed the tragic deaths of 146 workers, mostly young women, in the Triangle fire.

The horrible conditions that many workers faced every day led some socialists to call for revolution. “When I read such records as this: ‘Helper flooring factory – age 19 – clothing caught by setscrews in shafting; both arms and legs torn off; death ensued in five hours,’ my spirit revolts,” declared Crystal Eastman, the famous socialist and feminist spokeswoman in 1911. “And when the dead bodies of girls are found piled up against locked doors ... after a factory fire ... who wants to hear about a great relief fund? What we want is to start a revolution.”



**OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH** was part and parcel of a larger movement to reform American society, and it produced results. In little more than two decades after the fire, we saw the establishment of a meaningful federal Department of Labor, active women’s and children’s bureaus, reinforcement and subsidies for state factory-inspection systems, and the beginnings of local health departments assuming responsibility for occupational safety and health. We also saw passage of the first significant children’s and women’s labor legislation and a host of specific state acts regulating working conditions in tanneries, bakeries, and other industries. Also, for the first time, there was a serious attempt to organize a more reliable method for collecting statistics on occupational injuries and deaths. Finally, it must be pointed out that in 1900 no state in the Union had a workers’ compensation law. By 1915 every highly industrialized state had passed an act for some form of compensation.

# On occupational hazards that don't blaze behind chained doors

IN COMMEMORATING THE TRIANGLE FIRE, I reread the first chapter of *Work is Dangerous to Your Health*, first published 40 years ago. Today, in the United States, there are fewer deaths and injuries – and fewer manufacturing jobs. In 1971, it would have taken 243 years for OSHA inspectors to visit every regulated workplace. By 1998 OSHA had quadrupled its inspectorate and estimated a mere 66-year inspection wait-time. Progress, though hardly enough.

*Work is Dangerous* was the first occupational health and safety book written for workers. It was technical and accurate but pierced the jargon and elitism of the medical world. I co-authored it with Susan Daum, using a manual that a small group of us developed for the first course on health and safety for workers, held in 1970 at the Rutgers Labor Education Center, sponsored by the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, with a smattering of workers from other New Jersey local unions in attendance. Slowly the right-to-know movement grew and with it the COSH movement. Across the country thousands of workers began to understand the relationship between their jobs and their health. Health and safety became part of collective bargaining. That was progress.

FOLLOWING THE HISTORIC CREATION of OSHA, MSHA and NIOSH, we have witnessed an enormous growth in trained professionals – and trained workers – who understand much about hazards at work and what to do to minimize them. But our 40-year-old comment about how little training physicians get in occupational medicine still rings true. “A person who visits a doctor is not usually asked about his or her occupation or what kind of work is performed. The relationship between work and disease is rarely brought out.”

With fewer brutal deaths at work and more insidious hard-to-recognize chronic diseases at play, the need for continuing training and improved recordkeeping is greater than ever. Cancers don't leap from burning windows – they smolder silently. Repetitive stress injuries don't kill – they just debilitate and rarely make headlines. The best homage we can pay to the young women and men who died in the Triangle fire is to redouble efforts to prevent the needless toll of occupational hazards that don't blaze behind chained doors but plague the lives of working men and women every day.



By **JEANNE STELLMAN**

Professor Emerita and  
Special Lecturer at the Mailman  
School of Public Health,  
Columbia University

**Cancers don't leap from burning windows – they smolder silently. Repetitive stress injuries don't kill – they just debilitate and rarely make headlines.**



By **RORY O'NEILL**

Editor of Hazards magazine and  
Professor, Occupational  
and Environmental Health  
Research Group, University of  
Stirling, Scotland

## A world of trouble

**DOZENS OF ORDINARY WORKERS DIE IN A FIRE**, making the shirts ordinary Americans will wear on their backs.

Doors were locked. Some succumbed to smoke. Others jumped several stories to their deaths in a desperate, inevitably fatal, bid to evade the flames.

But this wasn't New York, 1911. This was Bangladesh, 2010.

Ha-Meem Group, which owns the That's It Sportswear factory outside Dhaka where 28 workers died in December 2010, supplies household names including Gap, Wal-Mart, H&M, JC Penney, Kohl's, Sears and Target.

In a shrinking consumer world, production and exploitation know no borders. The question of who gets consumed by the hazards of work may depend on conditions and decisions a world away.

In 2010, British oil multinational BP, operating in U.S. waters, saw its reputation torn to shreds as a result of its thirst for deep sea oil dollars. Eleven workers died and the Gulf of Mexico was coated in a toxic smear.

In 1988, U.S. oil multinational Occidental, operating in British waters, was the villain behind the Piper Alpha rig explosion. While 167 workers died, Occidental escaped unscathed.

Poor regulation and a low price on human lives mean workers die.

It might be the immigrants working for U.S. companies that bake to death in California's pesticide-soaked fields, or U.S. workers having their fates determined in distant, foreign boardrooms.

Swedish furniture multinational IKEA is packaged as a model of employment and environmental probity.

On its European doorstep, maybe.

**BUT FACTORIES IN CHINA**, safely out of sight, are the biggest producers of its furniture. And if conditions are anything like those at IKEA's Swedwood plant in Danville, Virginia, there's real reason for concern.

When in 2010 the firm was found by both Virginia OSHA and the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) to be abusing safety laws, it responded quickly. IKEA hired an anti-union law firm to undermine IAM.

In Manhattan 100 years ago, it was a union that emerged to give workers a collective voice and the strength to challenge desperate abuses. It is the same story in Danville.

You think your jobs are undercut and your conditions undermined by poor pay and safety standards in sweatshops abroad? They are.

But all our working fates are intertwined. The only way to challenge effectively workplace hazards at home is to unite and fight for better conditions everywhere.

# Locked-in workers – 1911 or 2011?

**MARCH 25, 2011, MARKS THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY** of the deadliest industrial disaster in the history of the City of New York. The Triangle shirtwaist factory fire caused the death of 146 garment workers, most of them women, who died either from fire or from jumping to their deaths because managers had locked the doors of the stairwells and exits to keep the workers from leaving early. The fire led to legislation requiring improved factory safety standards.

Nearly a century later, Fifth Avenue Committee (FAC), a South Brooklyn-based non-profit community development corporation, identified at least three dozen supermarkets in New York City where janitors, mostly recent immigrants from Latin America, said that they were locked in against their will overnight while they cleaned. Reportedly, managers of subcontractors hired by the supermarkets engaged in this dangerous practice to keep the workers from leaving early or possibly taking merchandise. FAC's *Locked-In Workers Campaign* came on the heels of Wal-Mart being in the national headlines for the same practice and received national media attention.

**AROUND THE SAME TIME**, MFY Legal Services filed suit against two C-Town supermarkets in the Bronx on behalf of three janitors. The suit claimed the stores put the lives of janitors at risk while they cleaned at night by locking exit doors and possible emergency escape routes. The suit together with FAC's campaign led to groundbreaking legislation proposed by former Brooklyn Council Member David Yassky and backed by a coalition of unions and activist groups. The local law that was passed in October of 2005 (Intro. 629 B) protects workers, many of them new immigrants, from the dangerous practice of overnight lock-ins by increasing inspections, fines and enforcement.

The goal is to prevent the recurrence of the Triangle shirtwaist tragedy of workers being unable to escape in an emergency because they are trapped behind locked doors. The New York City law is also intended to raise awareness that workers have a basic right to safety while at work. This law became a reality because of the leadership of workers and immigrant and labor organizations demanding assurance that history not be repeated and that no more working people die while trying to make a living.



By **MICHELLE DE LA UZ**

Executive Director of the Fifth Avenue Committee

Nearly a century after Triangle, dozens of **New York City supermarkets** were reportedly **locking in janitors overnight against their will.**



By **PAMELA VOSSNAS**

Workplace Safety and  
Health Coordinator and Staff  
Epidemiologist for UNITE HERE

# Workers, unions, and their allies at forefront of fight for safe workplaces

**UNITE HERE, A SUCCESSOR UNION** of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, honors the brave women, children and men of Local 25 (ILGWU affiliate) who so bravely fought for improved working conditions during the 1909 strike in New York City. We also honor those who perished just two years later in the horrific Triangle shirtwaist fire of 1911, and pay homage to their families for the legacy of their loved ones.

Today, with about 80% of the U.S. workforce employed in the service sector, women, immigrants and workers of color are still the workers at increased risk for many workplace injuries and illnesses. For many industries and occupations within the service sector, the process of assessing the leading workplace hazards and how to control them remains in the early stages. As in the early 20th century, these same groups of workers remain at the forefront, courageously demanding safe jobs from employers and government agencies alike. Whether it's UNITE HERE hotel housekeepers demanding fitted sheets and mops, or airline catering workers fighting for safe kitchens, it is workers, their unions and community allies at the forefront taking action for safe workplaces.



**NOT ONLY IS 2011 THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY** of the Triangle shirtwaist fire tragedy but it is also the 40th anniversary of the enactment of the Occupational Safety and Health Act. While these two key events were turning points in the history of improved worker rights and worker protections, today in 2011, workers face serious challenges in this area. All workers need increased enforcement of established health and safety regulations, an increase in the promulgation of new ones, and expanded funding of government agencies that are responsible for making workplaces and communities safe, e.g. OSHA, MSHA, EPA. Unfortunately, as we speak, a deregulation agenda is unfolding in Congress and across corporate America.

# Domestic workers' struggle for rights is built on Triangle legacy

**SEVEN YEARS AGO**, domestic workers in New York State set out to win recognition, rights, and protection under the state labor law. Hundreds of nannies, housekeepers, and elder caregivers gathered at a conference to share their stories and discuss what it would take to change the industry. They envisioned a comprehensive set of standards – including a living wage, paid leave, and a requirement for notice prior to termination – that would guarantee safety and security on the job and put this workforce of over 200,000 on equal footing with most other sectors. Standing on the shoulders of workers who had previously waged historic battles for dignity and respect, domestic workers began what would become a six-year campaign to pass the nation's first Domestic Workers Bill of Rights.

The struggle of domestic workers is part of a long legacy to value and protect workers' human rights, and ensure dignified working and living conditions. The Triangle shirtwaist factory fire that claimed the lives of 146 workers – most of them young, female immigrants – exposed a pervasive disregard for certain types of workers that continues to this day in the form of discrimination based on gender, race, and socioeconomic and immigration status. At the 100-year mark, we honor those who perished and recognize their sacrifices for a higher quality of life that countless people now enjoy. But we have a long way still to go.

**REVISITING THE LAWS GOVERNING** our workplaces is long overdue. Labor laws must be reshaped to go beyond mere inclusion in order to reflect the evolving structures of our workplaces and the composition of the workforce today. With the current global economy, any framework for workers' rights must also be international in scope, ensuring the protection of human rights and accountability among all types of employers.

An invigorated labor movement rose to the challenge of honoring the legacy of the workers who died in the Triangle fire. Similarly, the victory of domestic workers and their allies – including unions, clergy, employers, students, community groups – is a testament to the power of organizing, the leadership of women workers, and a burgeoning movement for a new economy that values all forms of work. This movement is creating the conditions for us to see our interconnectedness, and to implement policies that prioritize the real needs of workers, our families, and communities.

The victory of domestic workers is a testament to the power of organizing, **the leadership of women workers**, and a burgeoning movement for a new economy that values all forms of work.

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By **PRISCILLA GONZALEZ**

Director of Domestic Workers United





By **GARRETT BROWN**

Certified Industrial Hygienist who conducts workplace safety inspections for the State of California and is the Coordinator of the Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network

## The more things change....

**THE WORST PART ABOUT IT** is that the 146 workers killed in New York City on March 25, 2011, were just the tip of the iceberg. Literally thousands of workers – foreign- and native-born alike – were dying each year from mangled bodies and deadly illness.

But following the fire, and for the next 60 years, local, state and national governments in the United States enacted a series of ever-more protective regulations to reduce the death toll. Beginning in the 1980s, however, with the decline of independent social movements and the rise of right-wing, anti-worker politicians, these hard-won protections began to be eroded, undermined and reversed.

Now, in 2011, with near-total corporate control of both the Democratic and Republican parties, the House of Representatives is proposing budget cuts for OSHA and blocking new safety and health regulations. If they have their way, we could return to the days of the Triangle fire when workers' lives and their health were a distant second to the goal of maximum corporate profits.

**ELSEWHERE IN THE WORLD IN 2011**, the death toll of the Triangle fire is repeated daily. Since 1990 in Bangladesh, there have been more than 200 factory fires that have killed over 450 workers and injured more than 5,000.

The latest major fire in Bangladesh was in December 2010. Twenty-eight garment workers died and dozens were injured from the blaze that broke out on the 9th and 10th floors of the Ha-Meem Group factory outside Dhaka. At least two of the six exit doors were locked, leaving workers trapped, just like those in the Triangle fire a century ago. Retailers with orders at the deadly factory include Wal-Mart, H&M, JC Penney, Kohl's, Sears and Target.

The causes of these fires are well known to everyone involved – and studiously ignored by international brands, contract manufacturers, and corrupt, compliant governments.

Now is the moment to rebuild the social movements sparked by the Triangle fire – both at home and abroad – to defend the workplace safety protections under immediate threat, and, better yet, to update them all for genuine worker protection in the 21st century.

The **causes** of [the numerous factory fires in Bangladesh] are **well known to everyone** involved – and studiously ignored by international brands, contract manufacturers, and corrupt, compliant governments.

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# The beginning of everything: The Triangle shirtwaist fire

**THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FIRE** was a terrible tragedy that took the lives of 146 factory employees working in the Asch building near Washington Square on March 25, 1911, in what is now my U.S. Congressional district. Young immigrant women and men were working in appalling conditions, and died as a result of a fire that swept through the factory in half an hour.

This disaster, which set off a storm of press and public outrage about the terrible factory conditions, was the beginning of the creation of an entire body of laws promoting social welfare and social responsibility – it was the beginning of everything.

As a result of the public outcry following the fire, then New York State Assemblyman Al Smith (and future four-time Governor of New York) joined New York State Senate Majority Leader Robert F. Wagner (and future U.S. Senator) to create a statewide Factory Investigating Commission in June 1911.

**THE PUBLIC HEARINGS AND INVESTIGATIONS** carried out by the Commission had a far-reaching impact. They provided the basis for a new state labor code with significant worker protections. Additionally, many of the findings of the Commission influenced the eventual actions of the U.S. Department of Labor, created in 1913, two years after the Triangle shirtwaist fire and the Commission's inception. The work of the Commission also served as an awakening to many deplorable social conditions, both for the powerful lawmakers involved and the public.

Today, one hundred years after the Triangle tragedy, we have a duty to remember the critical lessons learned at the expense of so many lives, and to keep fighting for worker safety. We have some worker protection laws in place – however, we still must battle to keep workers safe from dangerous conditions and to make certain that those hard-won laws are enforced. Those who toiled on the pile at Ground Zero, and cleaned up the Gulf oil spill, who are sick or at risk because their government failed them, know firsthand how important it is to enforce occupational safety and health laws. We must all continue to fight for worker protections in the memory of the Triangle shirtwaist factory victims.



By the Honorable  
**JERROLD NADLER**

U.S. Congressional  
Representative for the 8th  
District of New York

The work of  
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Investigating  
Commission  
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**By the Honorable  
RORY I. LANCMAN**

New York State Assembly  
Member for District 25 in  
Queens, Chairman of the  
Assembly Subcommittee on  
Workplace Safety

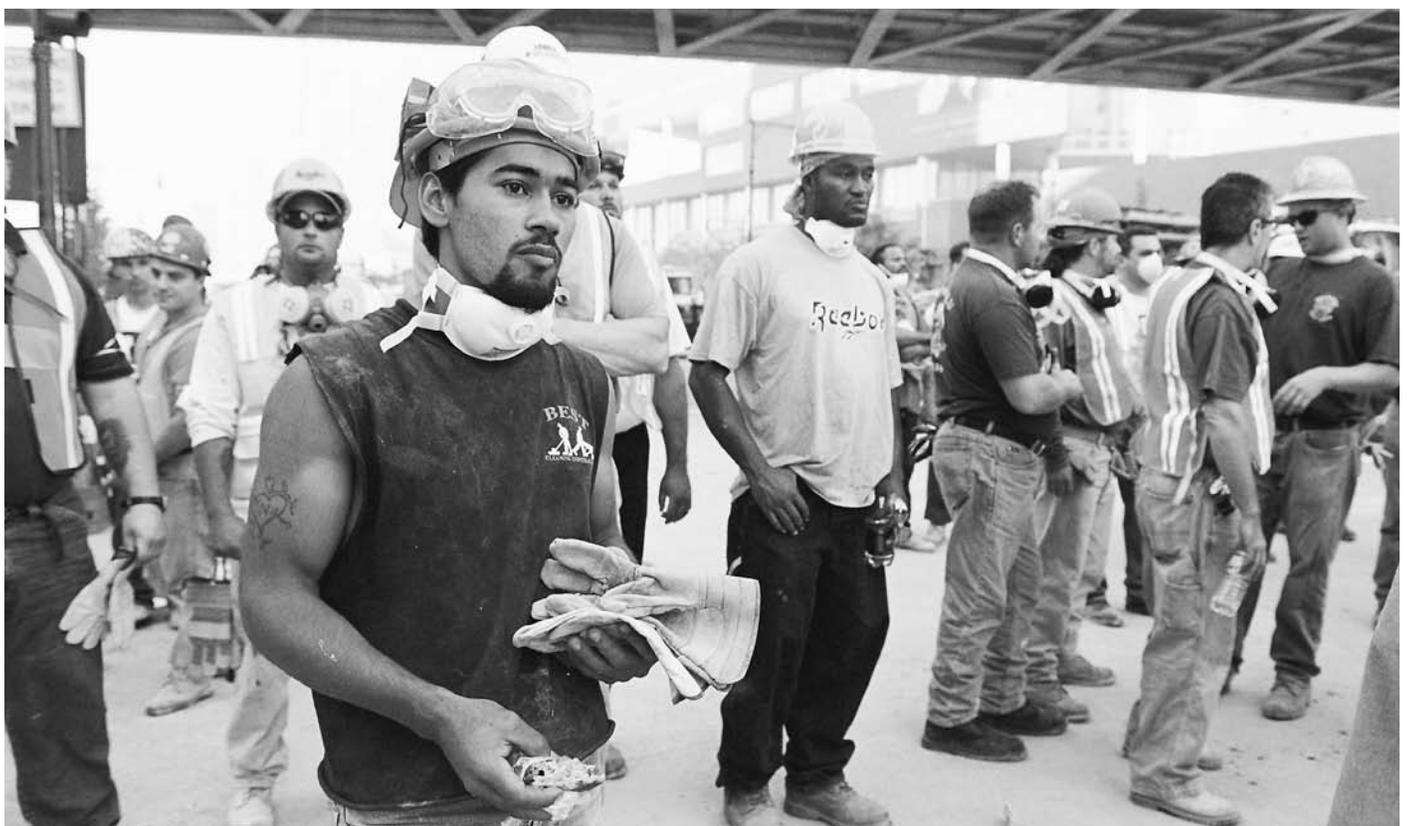
## The fire that lit a fire for promoting workplace safety

**FROM THE ASHES OF THE FIRE** which stole the innocent lives of 146 workers – most of them young, female and recent immigrants – one hundred years ago, rose a labor movement fighting for one common cause: to gain needed reform to improve the lives of working people. Following the fire, labor organizations led an effort to force policy makers to establish the New York State Department of Labor, while at the same time employees were realizing the benefits of labor representation and forming and joining unions. Both the Department of Labor and the tradition of commitment to unionization in New York help keep workers safe on the job to this day.

The Subcommittee on Workplace Safety collaborates with worker advocates and government agencies to make sure that laws and regulations regarding workplace safety are up to date and followed. Our purpose is to help ensure that all workers return home to their families safe and healthy at the end of each day.

**TODAY WORKPLACE SAFETY** is properly understood to mean more than just not locking employees into the factory floor, but includes preventing workplace violence, providing health care employees with proper equipment to avoid injuries while lifting and maneuvering patients, implementing controls to impede the spread of infectious diseases, offering safety training to young people before entering the workforce, and ensuring that Broadway actors receive the training and equipment to safely perform their dazzling stunts on stage.

We do all this with the memory of the Triangle shirtwaist factory victims as a constant presence in our minds.



# Protecting workers today, and in the future

**THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FACTORY FIRE** provided the newly industrializing City of New York with a terrible example of what unchecked greed can do. The factory's owner, looking to prevent his employees from leaving even one minute before the end of their nine-hour shifts, locked the factory exits. More than 100 employees were locked inside when flames broke out in the workroom that day, causing the greatest industrial accident in New York history at the cost of 146 workers' lives.

One hundred years after this tragedy, many changes have been made to New York State laws to ensure that we never allow working-class members of society to be vulnerable to hazardous conditions like those at the Triangle Waist Company in 1911.

Changes to the building codes requiring a secondary means of egress; the development of child labor laws; minimum wage requirements; and stipulations regarding the maximum number of hours one can work without garnering additional compensation were all an outgrowth of the labor activism generated by the truly horrific treatment of workers that was presumed acceptable prior to the events of March 25th, 1911.

**AND WHILE WE HOPE** we have made the circumstances of the Triangle fire a thing of the past, there will invariably be those who operate without regard to regulations in place to protect workers, particularly undocumented workers who are afraid to report violations for fear of losing their jobs. Among undocumented immigrant workers, some find themselves exposed to toxic materials such as asbestos; others are day laborers whom employers hire specifically to avoid paying overtime; and some are put in dangerous situations without appropriate training, protective materials or gear.

Beyond ensuring workplace safety, we also find ourselves still needing to improve the quality of life of working-class New Yorkers, be they documented or undocumented. Most service jobs have few if any benefits; even getting paid leave for sick days or holidays is still a struggle for those at the lowest end of the economic scale who are the most in need of these protections. It is for these reasons that I continue to advocate for legislation that improves the lives of our very valuable working-class citizens in New York, and why I am so grateful to organizations like NYCOSH and others like it who work tirelessly to ensure that the workers of the next century will not be subject to the mistakes of the past.

While we hope we have made the circumstances of the Triangle fire a thing of the past, **there will invariably be those who operate without regard to regulations to protect workers, particularly undocumented workers.**



By the Honorable  
**DEBORAH J. GLICK**

New York State Assembly  
Member representing District 66  
in Manhattan



By the Honorable  
**CHRISTINE C. QUINN**

Speaker of the  
New York City Council

# It changed forever the way people view the workplace

**ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO**, on March 25, 2011, New York City bore witness to a terrible tragedy, one that would forever change the way people viewed the workplace.

Although it claimed the lives of 146 men, women, and children, most of them immigrants, the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire helped draw attention to the extremely dangerous conditions in which many immigrants were being forced to work.

As a result, critical changes were implemented to protect the safety of workers and to enforce fire regulations, making the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire one of the most important events in the history of the United States labor movement.

**WHILE WE HAVE CERTAINLY MADE GREAT PROGRESS** in workplace conditions over the past 100 years, thanks to groups like the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health, the fact is that many immigrant workers in our city still face unfair treatment, with many being forced to work in hazardous conditions without health insurance.

The NYC Council and I have been working hard for immigrants' rights here in the city, and look forward to the day when all New Yorkers can go to work knowing that they will be safe and secure.

The NYC Council and I have been working hard for **immigrants' rights here in the city**, and look forward to the day when all New Yorkers can go to work knowing that they will be safe and secure.

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# Time to reaffirm our commitment to our valuable workforce

THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY of the Triangle Waist Company factory fire is an opportune time for the public health community to reflect upon its accomplishments and remaining challenges. “Triangle” was “the fire that changed America”. The tragic, yet preventable deaths of 146 mostly young, immigrant workers galvanized progressives – from public health activists, to social reformers, trade unionists and suffragists – to advocate for important workplace, fire and other safety protections. In October 1911, the American Society of Safety Engineers was founded. But it took another 60 years – and several more workplace tragedies – for the federal government to establish the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

There is no question that labor and occupational safety and health protections enacted over the past century have led to dramatic reductions in injuries, illnesses and fatalities. Still, new generations of low-wage and immigrant workers continue to face dangerous working conditions. Yesterday’s sweatshops and manufacturing plants have become today’s restaurants, nursing homes and construction sites. Construction workers, grocery workers and taxi drivers in New York are killed on the job in disproportionate numbers. Hispanic workers have the highest rates of workplace injury and illness and the fewest protections. And although infectious diseases, so prevalent among previous generations of immigrants have been largely eradicated, many immigrant workers now suffer from chronic diseases, such as certain cancers, diabetes, and heart disease in disproportionate numbers, and are less likely to have employer-sponsored health insurance and access to high-quality preventive health care.

**SO AS WE COMMEMORATE THE TRIANGLE VICTIMS**, let’s not forget about workers who still fall to their deaths from unstable scaffolds, are buried alive in trench cave-ins or are exposed to dangerous chemicals. And let’s reaffirm our commitment to the most vulnerable and disenfranchised members of our valuable workforce and to creating the conditions under which all workers can lead healthy, safe and productive lives.

**Yesterday’s sweatshops** and manufacturing plants have become **today’s** restaurants, **nursing homes** and construction sites.

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By **SUSAN KLITZMAN** and **MARK GOLDBERG**

Klitzman is Acting Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Goldberg is Associate Professor Emeritus at the CUNY School of Public Health at Hunter College.



By **KATE BRONFENBRENNER**

Director of Labor Education  
Research at Cornell University

## A fundamental issue of justice

**THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FACTORY FIRE** represents the historical juncture when as a nation we recognized the existence of American sweatshops and began the struggle for regulation of safety and health standards at the workplace. But, our collective memory is short. We have needed other horrific events – Kerr McGee, Hamlet, Massey – to remind us that occupational health and safety is still a problem, and to get any kind of new regulation or law and to keep existing regulations funded and enforced.

The Triangle fire helped to show that workplace safety and health is linked to fundamental issues of justice, dignity and power, and that link is why safety and health issues have sparked organizing campaigns and strikes throughout labor history. Today many of the strongest global union networks – in rubber, oil, building services, and telecommunications industries – were in significant part seeded by a push back against the worldwide race to the bottom in health and safety standards that has been engendered by neo-liberal trade and investment policies.

It is also important to recognize that the Triangle victims were at the nexus of the shifting role of women in early 20th century America. Had they lived, they likely would have been right there with their sisters building an industrial union in their industry. Today, women workers are the majority of workers organizing not just in the U.S., but around the world. All too many of them work in 21st century sweatshops right here at home, something the public does not yet want to see. They face sweatshop conditions in call centers, restaurant kitchens, food processing plants, retail warehouses, and their own homes. The challenges they face in fighting for occupational safety and health are greater than ever but their strength as always is in their willingness to reach across ethnic and racial divides, stand up for their rights, build community, and build a global labor movement.



By **LIZ CHONG EUN RHEE**

Worker Organizer for the MinKwon  
Center for Community Action

## A legacy to uphold

**THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FIRE** of 1911 and workers' struggles before and after the fire to ensure better health and safety conditions in the workplace left a legacy that we, as community organizers and advocates, have a responsibility to uphold.

Immigrant workers at the time of the fire faced unbearable and often fatal conditions which led to an outcry for federal and state reform of health and safety laws. However, we see that today's immigrant workers often face the same challenges of poor workplace conditions, lack of knowledge of one's rights, further exploitation due to immigration status, and language and cultural barriers. In our communities, we meet with many Korean American and Asian American workers who are limited English proficient and who are often denied their right to access information on basic rights such as health and safety or wage and hour laws. This has led to serious illnesses and even fatalities in the workplace.

To continue the Triangle shirtwaist legacy of reform, we need to continue to push for more stringent language access laws that are enforced to benefit our workers. As an advocate and as a resource on behalf of our community, the MinKwon Center strives to provide the education and training necessary for workers to fully comprehend and exercise their rights in the workplace.

# Rights won are now at risk

**THE GARMENT SWEATSHOP** – the iconic low-wage workplace of the early 20th century – has nearly vanished from the New York City landscape, although it still flourishes in other parts of the world. The sweatshops of Gotham today are mainly in the service sector, where domestic workers, restaurant workers, day laborers, taxi drivers and others struggle to eke out a meager living.

Today's low-wage workers are immigrants from Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa who come in search of a better life for themselves and their families. Apart from the color of their skin and the fact that they tend to work in service jobs rather than factories, they closely resemble their early 20th century Eastern and Southern European counterparts. Low-wage employers today, like those of that bygone era, seek out immigrant workers for their energy and eagerness to work. And now as in the past, these very characteristics can open the door to abuse and exploitation.

The Triangle Fire was the product of exactly this set of circumstances. Yet, the 146 victims did not die in vain: The fire was a catalytic event that paved the way for landmark labor and employment legislation in New York and, two decades later, at the national level. It led to the New Deal standards for wages, hours and working conditions, and the right to organize and bargain collectively – still the law of the land.

**IN RECENT YEARS, HOWEVER,** those standards have been honored increasingly in the breach rather than the observance. Not only are more and more workers excluded from coverage because they are classified (or misclassified) as “independent contractors,” even workers who *are* indisputably covered by the laws suffer violations on a regular basis. A recent study I helped conduct found that one-fifth of low-wage workers in New York City in 2008 were paid less than the minimum wage, while three-quarters of those who worked overtime were not paid the legally required time-and-a-half for the extra hours. Immigrant women workers, the 21st century counterparts of the Triangle victims, had even higher violation rates.

The best way to honor their memory is to recommit ourselves to ensuring that existing labor standards are enforced, and to update and strengthen those standards to reflect the realities of the 21st century economy.



By **RUTH MILKMAN**

Professor of Sociology and  
Academic Director of the  
Murphy Labor Institute at the  
City University of New York  
Graduate Center

Low-wage employers today, like those of that bygone era, seek out **immigrant workers for their energy and eagerness to work....** these very characteristics can open the door to abuse and exploitation.

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Two views of cooker vat where fire started in chicken processing plant in Hamlet, N.C., in 1991, killing 25 workers.



By **JOEL SHUFRO**

Executive Director of the  
New York Committee for  
Occupational Safety and Health

# Without unions, we would have many more triangle fires

**NOTHING BETTER ILLUMINATES** the conflict between safe and healthful jobs and corporate profit than the Triangle shirtwaist fire. There are many other examples – Gauley Bridge, W. Va.; Hamlet, N.C.; and more recently the Massey mine disaster and BP oil spill. History is also replete with examples of employers who knowingly exposed workers to toxic substances that could lead to illness and death. And, unlike the Triangle owners who were tried for their crimes – although not convicted – those responsible for the murder of literally tens of thousands of workers have never faced charges.

The safety net of laws and regulations which were enacted after the Triangle fire arose out of the demands that workers and their unions had made for decades, and reflected a new vision of government. As Francis Perkins, an eyewitness to the fire who went on to become New York State’s Commissioner of Labor and then Secretary of Labor under Franklin Roosevelt, observed, “the New Deal was born that day, the day the Triangle burned.”

**BUT IT WASN’T UNTIL CONGRESS PASSED** the OSH Act of 1970, its last piece of major labor legislation, that the federal government required employers to provide workers with a safe and healthful workplace. Although standards were promulgated which dramatically reduced workers’ exposure to safety hazards and toxic substances, OSHA has never been given the tools or resources to enforce the law. That has meant that unscrupulous employers, such as those who owned the Triangle factory, operate at a competitive advantage over those who comply with the law. The rapid export of industry into the developing world has also fundamentally undercut any ability to protect workers. The consequence has been the export of hazards abroad and a race to the bottom here.

The struggle in Wisconsin and in other states throughout the country has been an attempt to destroy the underpinnings of the New Deal and the social safety net for which labor fought. Corporate interests are hell bent on eliminating any interference with maximizing their profit margins. They are going after the major institution which has defended the interests of working people – the labor movement. If they succeed, we will witness many more Triangle fires, here and abroad. We must stop them, and demand an economy that puts human life and health before profit.

The **struggle in Wisconsin** and other states has been an attempt to destroy the underpinnings of the New Deal and the social safety net for which labor fought.

