

Women's History

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Of Sweatshops Past

The clothing industry has always been a place where poor women could find work. At the turn of the 20th century, New York City was an entry port to millions of poor, immigrant workers. Eighty percent of the garment shop workers were women, of these, 70% were between the ages of 16 and 25 who could not speak English. Most were Italian, Polish, Russian, Hungarian, German, or Jewish.

Working conditions were unsafe and unsanitary. Work days were long. Wages were low. Work was monotonous. Talking was not allowed. Sexual malevolence domineered. When male bosses paid the women, 'mistakes' were made regularly. Scared of losing their jobs, the women who knew they had made ten or fifteen more than the pieces for which they were paid, could not object. Factories were rarely inspected for safety and fire laws were lax.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory occupied the top two floors of an eight-story wooden building in NYC. It had two elevators and two narrow escape staircases, one with a door kept locked. Doors on each floor also were kept locked to keep workers in, as well as to prevent employee theft. Sewing machines were crowded close together. Aisles to fire escapes were blocked or nonexistent. On March 25, 1911 a fire broke out. Workers were trapped behind these locked doors. In minutes, 140 of some 600 workers, mostly young women, were dead. Many jumped down elevator shafts or out of windows. Bodies burned dead, lay over sewing machines.

The building was up to date for the time and said to be fireproof. What burned so quickly was the fabric of the shirtwaists hung on lines immediately above the heads of the women, as well as the trimmings and cuttings below, strewn about their feet on the floor. It was not the first time girls were burned alive while at work. But, with so many for so few jobs, it mattered little. It had been stated that the fire was started for insurance purposes.

The owners, Black and Harris, were tried on manslaughter charges. These two men testified that the door to the fire escape was open. But according to the workers, it was never unlocked. The jury of men who decided whether the owners knew that the doors were locked at the time of the fire acquitted the owners of any wrong doing.

The Women's Trade Union League led a campaign to probe working conditions. In response, the governor of New York State appointed an investigating commission. Important factory-safety legislation followed. Frances Perkins, executive secretary of the

New York Committee on Safety, who had watched the building burn, assisted in the investigation and become a lifelong advocate for workers. Perkins later served as Secretary of Labor under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Sweatshops continue to be a place where poor women....

Sources

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