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Workmen’s Circle Executive Director Ann Toback Delivers Remarks at Annual Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Ceremony



(New York, N.Y.) – Ann Toback, Executive Director of the Workmen’s Circle, a progressive Jewish organization rooted in the heart of the labor movement since the early 20th century, today delivered remarks at a poignant ceremony to mark the anniversary of the Shirtwaist Factory fire that killed 146 people on March 25, 1911. You can watch a video of Ann’s [remarks here](#).

“From our founding in 1900, when we served as an immigrant rights organization, through succeeding decades, when we worked to help build the union movement in America, the Workmen’s Circle has been a progressive Jewish social justice organization passionately committed to standing up against intolerance, inequity, and bias.

In 1911, we stood side by side with our brothers and sisters in the labor movement and mourned our members and friends who died in this tragedy—146 workers—mostly young women—Jewish and Italian immigrants—forced to work in sweatshops where their lives were valued less than the shirtwaists they produced.

A tragedy all the more heartbreaking because it could have been prevented – the Triangle Factory owners were viciously anti-union and fought back many attempts by their workers to organize and gain union protections. The owners played a leading role in fighting the 1909 general strike of over 20,000

immigrant women—shirtwaist workers—who walked off their jobs demanding safe working conditions, reasonable hours and a living wage. The Triangle owners hired thugs to physically attack the strikers and continued their anti-union campaign even after the strike successfully concluded with over 85% of all Shirtwaist Factories covered by union contracts. But the Triangle Factory remained unorganized, their owners' greed unchecked. And, 146 workers paid the ultimate price.

Today, over a century after the Uprising of the 20,000 and the Triangle Shirtwaist tragedy, the labor movement finds itself again fighting extraordinary attacks on every angle of union membership and collective engagement. Workplace safety regulations put in place after the 1911 fire are now in jeopardy, the right to collectively bargain, collect union dues, and to organize are all under threat of weakening or outright elimination.

All of us here anxiously await the Supreme Court ruling in JANUS, and so many in our movement right now are hard at work strategizing next steps whatever the ruling holds.

Now is the time for the labor movement to take inspiration from the historic Uprising of the 20,000—and follow the lead of the thousands of historic organizers and immigrant workers, and reclaim its position as a unifier of all working people – immigrants, multicultural, women and men, young and old.

Each year, the advent of the Triangle Commemoration immediately proceeds Passover—one of the greatest historic stories of workers collectively rising up against their oppressors and undertaking an exodus to their “Promised Land.”

Today, we must fight to keep the United States as the 21st century “promised land” for everyone—for workers, for immigrants, and for the people whose diversity make us a country of opportunity for all. Today, as we recite the names of Triangle’s 146 victims, let us remember, commemorate, and commit in their memory to answering the 21st century call to action for immigrant rights, for worker safety, and civil liberties started more than a century ago and make sure that terrible history doesn’t repeat itself again.”

About The Workmen’s Circle

The Workmen’s Circle powers progressive Jewish identity through Jewish cultural engagement, Yiddish language learning, multigenerational education, and social justice activism. For over a century we have provided this 360-degree approach to Jewish identity-building. Through contemporary cultural programs, joyful holiday celebrations, strategic social justice campaigns, vibrant Yiddish language classes, interactive educational experiences and more, we connect Jewish adults, kids and families of all affiliations with their cultural heritage, working to build a better and more beautiful world for all. Learn more at www.circle.org.

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