

# Fight Continues, 108 Yrs. After 'Triangle' Fire

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By ANN TOBACK

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March 25 will mark the 108th anniversary of one of the great tragedies in United States worker's history: the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, in which employers' greed and callous disregard for their workers' safety caused the death of 146 people.

These workers were mostly young women—Jewish and Italian immigrants—forced by circumstance to work in a sweatshop where their lives were valued less than the shirtwaists they produced.

This tragedy is 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 health-and-safety protections the workers sought could have helped prevent the great loss of life in the fire, where locked doors to keep employees inside barred life-saving egress for the workers as the fire quickly spread.

Two years earlier, in 1909, the Triangle Factory owners played a leading role in fighting the 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, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, were once known as “the shirtwaist kings” in the garment world. Their poor pay and treatment of their immigrant women workforce were legendary even in an industry where harsh conditions were the rule. In 1909, Triangle Factory workers were among the first to walk off their jobs and strike for better pay and working conditions. Harris and Blanck responded by hiring thugs to physically attack the strikers and continued their anti-union campaign even after the strike successfully concluded with over 85 percent 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. In 2018, the terrible Supreme Court ruling in *Janus* overturned 40 years of precedent and ended the collection of agency fees for public-sector unions, attacking the unions' ability to represent their workers. 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.

Now is the time for United States workers to take inspiration from the Uprising of the 20,000—and follow the lead of the thousands of historic organizers and immigrant workers and commit to collectivism to regain their lost power in the workplace, to demand health-and-safety protections be strengthened for all. It is the time to create an empowered labor movement that serves as a unifier of all working people—immigrants, multicultural, women and men, young

and old. With renewed commitment and strength, United States workers can successfully fight back the attacks that would dial back the protections that were hard-fought and came at such a terrible price 118 years ago.

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. Today, in their name, we are recommitted to fighting for workers' rights and economic justice for all.

*Ann Toback is the Executive Director of the Workmen's Circle.*

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