

Triangle Shirtwaist Commemoration A Reminder of Struggle Workers Face

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By CRYSTAL LEWIS

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Hundreds of union members, elected officials and students gathered March 25 at the corner of Washington Place and Green Street to honor the 146 workers who lost their lives in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire 108 years earlier.

“Their lives were valued less than the shirtwaists they produced,” said Ann Toback, Executive Director of the Workmen's Circle.

‘Tragedy Brought Reforms’

AFL-CIO New York City Central Labor Council President Vinny Alvarez said that educating employees about workplace safety continued to be an important task.

“So many of the things we take for granted today—exit signs, fire escapes, emergency lighting, unlocked stairwells, doors that push out rather than push in—all of these things were fought for and came about as a result of the advocacy from this tragic event,” he said.

The event is organized each year by Workers United, which grew from the union that was trying to organize the garment workers who died that day. The ceremony was kicked off with a performance by the New York City Labor Chorus, and across the city, each victim's name was written outside of his or her former home.

A central part of the event featured the Fire Department's Ladder 20 raising its ladder to the 10-story building's sixth floor, the highest point the trucks could reach in 1911.

Lock-In Accounted for Toll

FDNY Manhattan Borough Commander Roger Sakowich and City Comptroller Scott Stringer were among those who painted a picture of the chaos that day. The fire, which lasted 30 minutes, killed predominantly young Italian and Jewish women, who were trapped because the doors were locked by their employers to prevent them from taking breaks. Some of the garment workers chose to jump to their deaths.

Within three years, more than 30 laws were passed to improve workplace safety that were fought for by Frances Perkins, then-head of the New York Consumers League, who was across the street from the blaze. She would leave that job a year later to head the city's Committee on Safety, and would later be appointed the state's Industrial Commissioner.

"That is the legacy of those who lost their lives here," said Roberta Reardon, the current Labor Commissioner. (Ms. Perkins went on to become U.S. Labor Secretary under President Franklin D. Roosevelt.)

The exploitation of workers and poor safety conditions were common even among Firefighters, who often worked 100 hours a week, with no overtime, said Uniformed Firefighters Association President Gerard Fitzgerald. His union was formed less than six years after the tragedy.

'A Critical Lesson'

"Though it seems like a far-off, distant history from the world of 2019, this disaster actually still remains a critical lesson on how to fight fires in NYC today, how they may be prevented and how working conditions still must be improved," he said.

U.S. Rep. Jerry Nadler called the blaze a "formative moment in the history of the American labor movement," and spoke of attacks against unions over the past 40 years—including last year's *Janus* ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court that ended public-employee unions' ability to collect agency-fee payments from nonmembers—that have scaled back the power of workers.

"It shouldn't take deaths on that scale, or on any scale, to create workers' rights legislation, to give workers' the rights to work safely and to be compensated fairly," he said. "And that struggle goes on today. It's a struggle we haven't been doing too well in."
