

Remembering the Triangle: Not One More Fire!

100 years ago, 146 workers died in a garment factory fire in Manhattan. Unfortunately, deadly fires are again all too common today in factories making clothing for the U.S. market.



1911

In 1911 manufacturers made our garments in New York City and elsewhere in the United States. Today, they make most clothing in countries all across the globe where labor costs are low and regulations weak. Manufacturers and the brands behind the product are still responsible for the working conditions.

2011

NEW YORK CITY ~ BANGLADESH

New York City was the heart of the U.S. garment industry. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory was the largest blouse manufacturer in the city, with 500 workers. Some were as young as 13 years old. Most were Italian and European Jewish immigrants who had come to the United States with their families seeking a better life.

Bangladesh is a major producer of apparel today. The country employs 3.4 million garment workers in 4,200 factories that produce \$12.6 billion in export earnings, representing 78% of the country's total. Most workers are migrants from the countryside who seek a better life in the cities.

DEADLY WORKING CONDITIONS

On March 25th, in the late afternoon, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory caught fire. Locked factory doors prevented workers from escaping and trapped many inside the building. Some tried to escape the flames using the fire escape, but it collapsed. Others jumped from as high as ten floors off the ground. 146 workers died that day.

People were outraged by the Triangle fire. They knew it could have been prevented with adequate safety regulations, responsible management, and greater respect for labor rights.

Following the Triangle fire, labor and consumer organizing pushed through many new laws to make the workplace safer. Today unsafe working conditions and sweatshops are again the garment industry norm in many places around the world.

Death is a routine workplace hazard in Bangladesh. A fire at That's It Sportswear on December 14, 2010, took 35 workers' lives and injured scores more. Many other fires and building collapses reveal the abject failure of government and industry to enforce safety standards. Between 2006 and 2009 alone, 414 workers died in 213 factory fires.

For those familiar with the Triangle fire tragedy, the stories are all too familiar: Locked doors. Missing fire extinguishers. Callous management. Workers who can't escape the deadly smoke and fire.

As a result, ILRF is working with partner organizations in Bangladesh to demand safer working conditions and respect for labor rights, including the right to organize and bargain collectively for better wages and safe working conditions.

LOW WAGES AND LONG WORKING HOURS

Some Triangle factory workers earned as little as \$3/week. At most they earned \$20/week for a six day workweek. The hours were long: 14 hours a day. The rules were strict: if a worker arrived five minutes late, she was sent home. If a worker's sewing machine needle broke, her pay was docked. The workers were young women, but many were the breadwinners of their families.

The minimum wage in Bangladesh is \$43/month or about \$10/week. This equals 20 cents an hour, the lowest wage, by far, of any major garment producing country today. Studies show that this wage fails to cover the cost of the minimum nutritional needs of even a single worker, let alone her family. Many workers are young mothers, trying to support a family with several children.

“I strongly believe that if you are really serious about preventing future deaths you must immediately start involving workers in monitoring health and safety standards. This can only be done through supporting the right to organize and working directly with trade unions.”

-- Trade Union Leader, Bangladesh

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WORKER ORGANIZING

What have workers done throughout the ages when faced with oppressive conditions on the job? They stand up for their rights and organize!

The 1909 uprising of New York City shirtwaist workers demanded a 52 hour work week and better safety precautions. Triangle factory owners refused to recognize the union and hired thugs to break up the strike. Management started its own company-controlled "union" to undermine the workers' democratic union.

Workers persisted in fighting for their rights. From 1909 to 1913, the number of unionized workers in New York City grew from 30,000 to 250,000. After the Triangle fire, public outrage grew the size and strength of the labor movement, paving the way for increased regulation and stronger fire safety and labor laws, including Workers' Compensation, which continues to help injured workers today. According to Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, who saw the Triangle fire and watched in horror as workers jumped to their deaths, March 25, 1911 was "the day the New Deal began."



Workers in Bangladesh are organizing in large numbers to demand higher wages and better and safer working conditions.

Rather than responding to workers' demands, factories that make apparel for Walmart, Sears, JC Penney and others have brought false charges against peaceful labor rights defenders. In 2010, Kalpona Akter, Babul Akhter and Aminul Islam of the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity were imprisoned and tortured. All they had ever done was educate and organize workers

to insist on respect for legally established human rights and labor rights. Following international outcry and a campaign by ILRF, they were released on bail, but the false charges remain. Advocacy for a just wage, decent working conditions, and freedom to organize continues.

In the United States today, many New Deal policies are under renewed attack. One hundred years after the Triangle fire, U.S. workers must still fight for our rights.

Finding Solutions to Today's Sweatshops: what YOU can do

ACT NOW

- Visit sweatfree.org/bcws to send a letter to Walmart in solidarity with garment workers and labor rights leaders in Bangladesh
- Join upcoming events & be a rapid responder: laborrights.org

SHOP WITH A CONSCIENCE

- Check company ratings: free2work.org
- Ask groups you're part of to buy union-made living-wage clothing: sweatfree.org/shopping

ORGANIZE

- Urge your city or state to join the Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium (buysweatfree.org) to grow the market for decent conditions
- Talk to us about organizing: organize@sweatfree.org

“In many garment factories there are no bathrooms, narrow stairs, and no ventilation. ... There are some fancy well-decorated buildings where they take the auditors. In 2005, a nine-story building burned and collapsed with hundreds of workers. The owner didn't have a building permit, but he got off scot-free because of his connections to government. At the Triangle Shirtwaist factory site in New York at least there is a plaque that says how many workers died in the fire. This helps us show our respect to them. But in Bangladesh, we still don't know the exact number of workers who died when the KTS textile factory burned. We don't know where the workers are. Parents still come and show us photographs, saying: 'This is my daughter. Have you seen her?' Government doesn't care. Companies don't care.”

— Kalpona Akter, Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity. The KTS Textile Factory made prisoners' underwear for U.S. states and counties.