

100 Years of International Woman's Day: 1911 – 2011.

IWD and The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

This coming March marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of International Women's Day. In the early years, the day was celebrated toward the end of the month, and not the second Tuesday as we do now. That first IWD was quickly followed by the notorious Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in New York City. The disaster led directly to many improvements in worker safety, and was soon recognized as a symbol of the Women's Movement.

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It seems I have always known about The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire: the locked doors; women and girls screaming; the view of the grim grey building beside the Hudson River. As I grew older, the timing stuck with me too.

By most accounts, the first International Women's Day, held on March 19 1911, was more a European affair than American, and if noted at all was perhaps greeted by male America with a snort of "Those suffragettes at it again, I see!" and a reach for the morning papers. But the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, following mere days later, grabbed their attention. In a single day, over 140 daughters, sisters, mothers and aunts vanished, underscoring with horrid poignancy the theme for the first IWD: We matter. We are relevant. We have rights.

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In New York City, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory relegated the sewing and pressing of garments to the top floors of the 10th storey Asch Building, in Lower Manhattan. A typical sweatshop, the hours were long, working conditions poor and the pay abysmal. The workers, some as young as 15, were primarily immigrants, and except for a handful of male managers and tailors, were female. The Triangle Factory had originally made men's shirts; a "Shirtwaist" was a shirt tailored at the waist, a fitted lady's shirt, and a new fashion statement.

March 25th 1911 was a Saturday. Accounts vary: workers had either been putting in weekend overtime, or were finishing up the regular six day week. At 4.30 pm, the shift had just ended. Management routinely locked the exit doors to discourage bathroom breaks, as women needed to leave the building to use the toilet. Doors were also locked to prevent 'theft'. But as fire broke out, quickly consuming lint, racing up piles of cloth, and spreading along hanging shirts and wooden benches, locked doors turned the sweatshop into a death trap. A fire escape buckled under the weight of fleeing workers; 24 fell to their deaths. Fire fighters arrived and found that ladders could not reach beyond the 6th Floor, and the water hoses faltered by the 7th. Desperate workers began to jump the 80 or more feet from windows.

Once fire fighters entered the building, the fire was under control in about half an hour.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, health reforms that unions had been pressing for were given more attention, and led to many health and safety requirements enforced today: exit doors must be unlocked and open outward; automatic sprinklers must be in use above the reach of fire hoses and rescue ladders; there must be adequate alarms; inspections and safety drills must be performed. All levels of American society were shocked. And suddenly, a very recently observed day of international respect for the rights of women workers no longer seemed irrelevant.

Rose Drew, September 2010

Sources and suggested links:

International Women's Day

<http://www.internationalwomensday.com/about.asp>

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire:

Davis, Hadley. 1996. Reform and the Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire. The Concord Review. <http://www.geneseo.edu/~bennett/decent%7f.pdf>

New York Times, March 26 1911 "141 Men and Girls Die in Waist Factory Fire",

<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/frials/triangle/trianglenyt1.html>

New York Times, Dec 12 1911, "Girls fought vainly at Triangle Doors,"

<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/frials/triangle/trianglenyt1212.html>.

Rosner, David. 2000. When Does a Worker's Death Become Murder? American Journal of Public Health Vol. 90, No. 4, pp 535-540

<http://ajph.aphapublications.org/cgi/reprint/90/4/535.pdf>

Also find out more about International Women's Day, and find out more about the first IWW on: <http://www.internationalwomensday.com/first.asp>