

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire: A Historiography and Its Impact on Labor History and The
History of Workplace Disasters

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The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire was one of the deadliest industrial disasters in the history of the U.S. On March 25, 1911, the 8th, 9th, and 10th floors of the Asch Building in New York City where the factory was located went up in flames. Locked doors to stairwells and exits, inadequate firefighter equipment, and poor general safety standards prevented many garment workers from escaping. 146 workers perished, most of them young immigrant women and girls who were supporting their families. The Triangle fire came after the strike of 1909-1910 known as the “Uprising of Twenty Thousand,” when thousands of immigrant women protested wages and working conditions in garment factories for eleven weeks. The strike resulted in some changes, but not enough to substantially transform the safety standards of the industry. After the fire, however, public opinion was swayed by the horrifying images and stories coming from workers who escaped the factory, bystanders, and leaders in the community who witnessed the tragedy. A Factory Investigating Commission was established by the New York State legislature to investigate safety standards in factories across the state, and the results found in their studies led to the passage of dozens of labor reform bills.

The historiography of the Triangle Fire is young, given the length of time since the event. However, over the last decade, historians have returned to the subject to re-analyze old assumptions and stories and draw new conclusions about the event’s impact on labor movements, particularly those regarding worker safety. New sources have been uncovered, and old sources have been read over again and again to uncover lesser-known stories and voices of the people present during the labor movement of the early 20th century. Early scholarship on the Triangle Fire focused on showcasing the event in all its horrific glory, minute by minute and frame by frame, incorporating many personal testimonies from those who witnessed the event. In the 1980s and mid to late 1990s, historians created pieces with narrower foci such as specific

legislative reforms emerging from the Triangle Fire or a recounting of the events with fewer voices in greater personal detail. Finally, by the 21st century, the historiography shifted to a more comprehensive, detailed approach that combined strategies from the early and middle scholarship periods to share eyewitness stories while also putting the Triangle Fire in context with the labor movements of the time and their results.

The first substantial piece on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire was Leon Stein's *The Triangle Fire*, first published in 1962. Before the publication of this book, many of the narratives about this workplace accident and the aftermath were not being told on a wide scale. Stein started researching the Triangle fire as part of his master's thesis at New York University, but expanded the project greatly by spending over a decade in archives and libraries and utilizing genealogists to track down survivors, witnesses, and labor leaders of the time to hear their stories. Stein tells the history in "brilliant cinematic fashion," writing from different perspectives and angles of the events of the Triangle Fire and centering the narrative around the action similar to a fiction novel.¹ He begins the book during the fire itself, drawing in readers with quotes from survivors and witnesses about the horrors they saw and experienced as the working girls desperately tried to escape the factory. After he sets the scene, he rewinds to focus on the fire and safety regulations of the time and how the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory had never been up to the early 20th century standards in the first place.² When transitioning back to the fire, Stein covers the fates of the workers and administrative staff on the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors that were most affected by the flames in three separate chapters.³ The quotes from survivors and witnesses used in these chapters showcases the sheer panic that many of them felt, and the descriptions of

¹ Leon Stein, William Greider, and Michael Hirsch, *The Triangle Fire* (Ithaca, N.Y: ILR Press, 2011), xi.

² Stein, *The Triangle Fire*, 22-29.

³ Stein, *The Triangle Fire*.

the rooms and sometimes even objects add small details that Stein argues when added together, contributed to the overall problem. For example, he points out the main phone switchboard that malfunctioned on the tenth floor, preventing the eighth floor's call to the ninth floor about the fire from reaching its destination.⁴ Stein concludes the first half of the book by covering the days and weeks that followed the Triangle Fire, from the days after when reporters were allowed to tour the building and survey the damage to the long process at the morgue of getting all the bodies identified. The second half of the book pivots to the aftermath of the Triangle fire where change was demanded. He focuses on the search for who to blame, whether that be the fire department for not flagging the building, the owners for not implementing basic fire safety rules, or labor laws in general. He also writes about how the New York City community came together to help the families affected by the Triangle Fire through donations to various organizations distributing aid to those who needed help and getting involved with later activism. Overall, Stein offers a compelling history that comes alive for readers and sets the stage for future works to be built upon.

The conclusions and ideas drawn from Stein's book persisted until 1983 when a new angle emerged in Eric G. Behren's article, "The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of 1911: a Lesson in Legislative Manipulation." In his piece, he analyzed the way that legislative reform usually develops after tragedies such as the Triangle Fire, focusing on the New York legislature's failure to respond to pre-fire attempts for reform and how reformers used the disaster to change their minds.⁵ Behren begins with the defeat of the "Uprising of the Twenty Thousand" and its ultimate failure to create meaningful change in the manufacturing industries.

⁴ Stein, *The Triangle Fire*, 44.

⁵ Behrens, Eric G. "The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of 1911: a Lesson in Legislative Manipulation." *Texas Law Review* 62, no. 2 (1983): 363.

The workers turned to the city and state legislatures for help, but despite the Democratic majority, both groups did not pass adequate safety laws or reform measures.⁶ Behren showcases how the reformers utilized the Triangle Fire to their advantage by mobilizing public opinion. Although the New York Factory Investigating Commission established after the fire took several months to release their first findings, the trial and subsequent acquittal of the two Triangle company owners fueled the public's desire to make real change.⁷ Once the Commission did release their reports, they sent a list of reform legislation for the state legislature to consider. Due to the combination of their efforts and the still fervent public interest, the legislature passed 25 out of 32 recommended bills.⁸ Throughout the article, Behren places all these events in context with his three-part theoretical model that examines how social and legal conditions brought about by disasters play a key role in the enactment of legislation.⁹ He argues that disasters are deviations from the 'rational' system that was in place in society, and society responds by trying to restore order to prevent more deviations.¹⁰ Because disasters cause this disruption, many people disagree and misinterpret signs of an impending event because they do not want to believe that disruption will occur. Once it does, people feel more open to sharing their opinions.¹¹ Finally, because legislators oversee maintaining "order and rationality" in society, the people look to them to respond to disasters by enacting reforms to prevent them.¹²

A few years later in 1995, the historiography was expanded by a woman, Annelise Orleck. In her book, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the*

⁶ Behrens, "a Lesson in Legislative Manipulation," 365.

⁷ Behrens, "a Lesson in Legislative Manipulation," 367-368.

⁸ Behrens, "a Lesson in Legislative Manipulation," 371.

⁹ Behrens, "a Lesson in Legislative Manipulation," 373.

¹⁰ Behrens, "a Lesson in Legislative Manipulation," 373-375.

¹¹ Behrens, "a Lesson in Legislative Manipulation," 377-378.

¹² Behrens, "a Lesson in Legislative Manipulation," 381-382.

United States, 1900-1965, she tells the story of organized labor in the first half of the 20th century, the Triangle Fire, and the modern women's movement through the lives of four immigrant women activists. Rose Schneiderman, Fannia Cohn, Clara Lemlich Shavelson, and Pauline Newman were figures that had only briefly been touched on in previous works; here, Orleck brings them into the protagonist's position in history. Although she focuses a decent portion of the book on their public lives, she incorporates insights into the four women's personal lives that had yet to be showcased. She wanted to share their dreams, their friendships, racial, religious, racial, and ethnic beliefs that influenced their activism; and their family relationships that had to be balanced with their work.¹³ Orleck's major contribution to the field was being the first to bring in adequate context about the history of labor organizing in the factory industries. Part One of the book examines the rise of the working-class women's movement, focusing on immigrant women and daughters and their transition to America¹⁴ as well as the dawning of factory shop floor culture.¹⁵ Part Two then documents the emergence of industrial feminism, covering the "Uprising of Twenty Thousand," other labor strike efforts, and the struggle for women's suffrage afterward. The second half of the book then shifts forward to cover the Triangle Fire, the aftermath, and the decline of the labor movement after World War II in Parts Three and Four.

In the same year, Arthur F. McEvoy returned to the topic of legal reform after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire as part of a larger study on the history of industrial safety law.¹⁶ In his article, "The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911: Social Change, Industrial

¹³ Orleck, Annelise. *Common Sense & a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995, 1.

¹⁴ Orleck, *Common Sense & a Little Fire*, 23-30.

¹⁵ Orleck, *Common Sense & a Little Fire*, 35-41.

¹⁶ McEvoy, Arthur F. "The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911: Social Change, Industrial Accidents, and the Evolution of Common-Sense Causality." *Law & Social Inquiry* 20, no. 2 (1995): 621.

Accidents, and the Evolution of Common-Sense Causality,” he explores the event as a catalyst for Progressive Era reform, one that created a change in the “legal culture’s ‘common sense’ of why and how industrial injuries took place.¹⁷ McEvoy starts by explaining causality and how it applies to the legal system and connects into the natural and social worlds surrounding it. For example, before punishing someone for a crime or enacting a fine to compensate someone else for damages, the law “must prove to ordinary people that a defendant did, in fact, *cause* harm at issue.”¹⁸ Common-sense causality, developed after the Triangle Fire, essentially serves to establish that any relevant harm would not have occurred if not for the defendant’s misconduct. Before the Triangle Fire, industrial accidents were vastly shielded from the public. Although they were pervasive, U.S. labor law had created a system where employers’ rights to property and contract superseded law enforcement’s abilities to punish them for workplace injuries caused by their negligence.¹⁹ To the general community, these accidents were simply a part of daily life. But because the Triangle Factory Fire was such a public incident and the deaths were so visually horrifying, the public demanded action. When the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory owners were taken to civil and criminal courts over the fire incident, McEvoy details how the legal definitions of causality at the time prevented owners, Harris and Blanck, from being convicted because there was no way for the state to prove that “the employers’ failure to comply with the safety laws had caused the deaths rather than the victims’ own panic.”²⁰ The verdict prompted more public outcry, and state and federal legislatures began to take control over safety enforcement, increasing protection for workers significantly.

¹⁷ McEvoy, “Social Change, Industrial Accidents,” 621-622.

¹⁸ McEvoy, “Social Change, Industrial Accidents,” 622.

¹⁹ McEvoy, “Social Change, Industrial Accidents,” 629-630.

²⁰ McEvoy, “Social Change, Industrial Accidents,” 639.

The next major work on the Triangle Fire to emerge was John F. McClymer's *The Triangle Strike and Fire* in 1998. For the first time, McClymer highlighted the culture of the "working girl" in New York in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This allowed him to place this new economic and social class into the broader context of how the conditions of the Triangle Fire existed and how the image of that class motivated reformers to push for better working conditions before the Fire and afterward. The book begins with Charles Dana Gibson's drawings of the ideal woman during this time. She was depicted wearing a shirtwaist, a women's blouse that was designed like a men's shirt with buttons down the front and a tailored collar. Shirtwaists were a fashion statement, but they were also a symbol of the working woman who was now no longer solely dependent on men and who could seek new privileges at work and at home.²¹ Gibson's drawings caused the shirtwaist to explode in popularity, creating the conditions for the construction of many textile factories, including the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. McClymer notes that as the shirtwaist's popularity grew, the interest in the women who created them grew as well. As women's roles expanded into the workplace, particularly dangerous workplaces, "who will protect the working girl?" became a new question for the United States.²² Before 1909, students began to do studies on women workers, analyzing their work environments, the households they lived in, their diets, and the budgets they maintained with what meager pay they had.²³ McClymer then pivots to the "Uprising of the Twenty Thousand," focusing on how women organized the strike and maintained strict rules for themselves to help sway public opinion.²⁴ The author includes detailed timelines, news accounts of the strike and the court cases of the women protestors arrested, and a "Rules for Pickets" document that had

²¹ McClymer, John F. *The Triangle Strike and Fire*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998.

²² McClymer, *The Triangle Strike and Fire*, 2-3.

²³ McClymer, *The Triangle Strike and Fire*, 3.

²⁴ McClymer, *The Triangle Strike and Fire*, 25.

not been showcased in previous works about the Triangle Fire. Finally, in part 3 of the book, McClymer reaches the Triangle Fire itself. He adds drawings and photos from the fire and its aftermath as well as another timeline. The aftermath of the fire and the legal reform efforts are condensed into this final section, a reduction in content from previous scholarship.

In 2003, David Von Drehle's book, *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*, returned to the narrative style of writing that Leon Stein's book had been well known for. Von Drehle begins by covering the strike of 1909-1910, bringing in personal stories and quotes from those who participated and those who observed. The fire unfolds over several chapters where Von Drehle captures the escape attempts by individuals and small groups of workers. He stretches out each minute into pages and pages of emotional upheaval in a way that extended Stein's work and possibly even surpassed it. One of the most important advancements that Von Drehle made in this book was the coverage of the Triangle Factory owners' trial. The original transcribed testimony from the trial was believed to have been lost for over thirty years. The last known copy was supposed to be transferred to microfilm in the 1960s, but the transcript was lost. When Von Drehle reached out to the New York County Lawyers' Association about Triangle Fire records, however, the librarian was able to rediscover personal leather-bound copies of the testimony donated by the defense lawyer for the owners upon his death.²⁵ Coupled with Leon Stein's original notes from the complete transcript, which he may have been the last person alive to read, Von Drehle was able to bring the trial to life for readers.²⁶ Drehle also became the author to

²⁵ Von Drehle, David. *Triangle: the Fire That Changed America*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003, 318.

²⁶ Von Drehle, *Triangle: the Fire That Changed America*, 318-319.

research and compile the first complete list of Triangle fire victims, all 140 that were known at the time.²⁷ The final six were not discovered until 2011.²⁸

2011 was also the year of the next major book on the Triangle fire. Albert Marrin's *Flesh & blood so cheap: the Triangle fire and its legacy* brought something unique to the historiography by focusing on the immigrant people who were affected the most by it, both in life and in death. He captured the Triangle Fire as a part of a larger story of mass immigration where the people who came to America to create new lives would do whatever it took to survive and eventually thrive there. He opens the book by exploring the immigrant populations who worked at the Triangle factory and why they moved to New York. By 1910, most of the immigrants entering the United States through New York City were Italians and Jews from Russia. Many of the Italians were from Southern Italy, peasants and farmers who were driven from their homes by poverty, natural disasters, and discrimination from Northern Italy. The Russian Jews fled for similar reasons, though they also faced religious discrimination on a national scale, as "Russia was the only country where anti-Semitism ... was official government policy."²⁹ Marrin details the experience of entering America through Ellis Island and the transition into New York City. He describes the living conditions as harsh with a lack of light, a lack of space, and a lack of toilets. Most Italians and Russian Jews chose to stay in neighborhoods with their communities, which in turn, built new communities that acted as their personal bubbles.³⁰ When he transitions to the world of factory work, Marrin is the first to walk readers through the clothing manufacturer's production line. He starts at the cotton plantations in

²⁷ Von Drehle, *Triangle: the Fire That Changed America*, 269-283.

²⁸ "Final Six Victims Identified In 2011." Remembering The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire, 2018. <https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/victimsWitnesses/unidentifiedVictims.html>.

²⁹ Marrin, Albert. *Flesh & Blood so Cheap: the Triangle Fire and Its Legacy*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011, 17.

³⁰ Marrin, *Flesh & Blood so Cheap*, 34.

southern states, moving through the children textile workers who turned the thread into cloth, the cutters and basters who created each piece by hand, and concluding with the people who finish off the pieces by adding decoration and buttons and pressing the wrinkles from the clothing. These chapters provide crucial context to the later discussion of the “Uprising of the Twenty Thousand” and the Triangle Fire itself. In the chapters on the fire, Marrin utilizes lots of direct quotes and stories from girls in the fire and bystanders watching the scene outside.³¹ To conclude, he becomes the first to write substantially about the exit of the clothing industry from the Northeast after new safety standards were enacted.

In the same year, Marcia L. McCormick released an article called “Consensus, dissensus, and enforcement: legal protection of working women from the time of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire to today.” Although the Triangle Fire had been cited many times in legal literature as an important event for the workplace safety movement, McCormick argued that the “gendered nature of the tragedy” and its place in the development of laws protecting women specifically rather than all workers had not yet been as fully explored.³² She sought to expand on the topic with her piece. Part One of her article situates the Triangle Fire at the “intersection of the labor movement and other progressive causes championed by women.” The progressive movement was a common way that middle- and upper-class women could engage in politics without confronting society’s standards of having gendered spheres.³³ Labor issues focused on by the movement included the improvement of wages, hours, and working conditions for all workers. Unfortunately, successfully passing legislation was a heavily segmented process with acts being

³¹ Marrin, *Flesh & Blood so Cheap*.

³² McCormick, Marcia L. “Consensus, Dissensus, and Enforcement: Legal Protection of Working Women from the Time of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire to Today.” *New York University Journal of Legislation and Public Policy* 14, no. 3 (2011): 646-647.

³³ McCormick, “Consensus, Dissensus, and Enforcement,” 648-649.

passed “by industry, sex, or age of the worker.”³⁴ McCormick then details the shift in the law from “protecting women workers as workers to protecting women workers as women” in Part Two.³⁵ After the Triangle Fire, New York enacted a total of thirty-six laws between 1912 and 1915 to improve safety and sanitation standards, make changes to wages and hours, and exclude women and children from certain industries entirely.³⁶ However, McCormick argues that it was not until the 1960s that women started to be viewed as a class that ended to be protected in different ways. It was a complicated issue for women seeking reform: while women often lacked the bargaining or political influence needed to obtain better working conditions, pushing for legislation that specifically protected them risked reinforcing patriarchal beliefs about female subordination.³⁷ In discussing sex discrimination legislation, McCormick uses examples from the Cold War and the late 1980s and early 1990s. Finally, in Part Three, McCormick brings examples of the modern-day enforcement of gender-protective legislation to show that while changing the law is a strong first step, the bills fall flat without enough people supporting the changes.

In *Out of Sight: The Long Disturbing Story of Corporations Outsourcing Catastrophe*, published in 2015, Erik Loomis follows the history of workplace catastrophes to prove that modern systems of industrial production have not improved since the Industrial Revolution. He argues that the only difference between the harsh conditions of that era and the working conditions seen today is that the worst culprits now hide their production overseas where workers cannot stand up for themselves against them. In Chapter Two of the book, “Workplace Catastrophes,” Loomis introduces readers to the history of the modern factory and the dangers of

³⁴ McCormick, “Consensus, Dissensus, and Enforcement,” 650-651.

³⁵ McCormick, “Consensus, Dissensus, and Enforcement,” 646-647.

³⁶ McCormick, “Consensus, Dissensus, and Enforcement,” 658-659.

³⁷ McCormick, “Consensus, Dissensus, and Enforcement,” 660-661.

industrial work. He shows that a case before the Massachusetts Supreme Court in 1842, *Farwell v. Boston and Worcester Railroad Corporation*, began the doctrine of workplace risk after determining that “the railroad company had no liability because the worker agreed to take on the risk when he took the job.”³⁸ Because of this, corporations did not bear legal responsibility to their employees, and if conditions were unsafe to those workers, the expectation was that they put up with it or go work somewhere else. As there were few places to turn that did not have these types of issues, many workers stayed where they were. Loomis elevates the clothing industry as the premier example of the history of “worker struggle and capital mobility.”³⁹ Factories like the Triangle factory employed women in droves to take advantage of gender inequality making these workers have less perceived power. But they soon found that the women they employed were prepared to fight back. Women workers formed unions like the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) and led the “Uprising of the Twenty Thousand.” Although that strike was not successful, once the Triangle Fire tragedy occurred, women reformers and workers allied to launch wide-scale protests and legislative pushes to enact real change.⁴⁰ While the northern factories celebrated their big victory, Loomis details how factories simply moved their production down to the South, to Mexico, and eventually overseas where they could exploit new workers with less ability to fight for better conditions. He makes comparisons between the Triangle Fire and the Kader toy factory fire in Thailand in 2013 and shows that American corporations made no significant changes afterward.⁴¹ He concludes this chapter by arguing that

³⁸ Loomis, Erik. *Out of Sight: The Long and Disturbing Story of Corporations Outsourcing Catastrophe*. New York: The New Press, 2015, 59.

³⁹ Loomis, *Out of Sight*, 63.

⁴⁰ Loomis, *Out of Sight*, 64.

⁴¹ Loomis, *Out of Sight*, 76-78.

historical memory preserves the famous, large-scale workplace tragedies that kill over a hundred people or more while the true danger of the day-to-day violence slowly gets pushed aside. This piece is one of the first major connections to present-day labor movements.

In 2016, a new book on the Triangle Fire emerged from the Bedford Series in History and Culture that took a different approach to teaching the history of the event. Each book in this series is designed for students and readers to study the past like historians, incorporating a wide variety of historical documents that allow for interpretation and discussion individually or as a set. *The Triangle Fire: a brief history with documents* brings the stories of the Triangle factory workers, the reformers, the factory and city leaders, and the legislature together to show how this tragedy transformed the political and economic history of New York State and the broader United States.⁴² The introduction to the book intertwines a basic overview of the Triangle Fire, the factors leading to it, and the aftermath with personal quotes and memories shared by those present at the time. It explains the contracting system as it pertains to clothing production, similar to Marin's book only five years earlier, and gives more details about the trial than many of the other works discussed in this paper. However, this book's strength lies in its compilation of documents that offer fresh insights to the average reader. Each document has an introduction that summarizes the writer, the publication, and the main points of the work to help students of history feel more comfortable with the primary sources.

The documents are divided into four sections. "The Garment Industry and Its Workers" focuses on the production of shirtwaists by "factory girls" and their work and social lives in New York City. It includes an early social work study into the economics and business practices of the

⁴² *Triangle Fire: a Brief History with Documents*, ed. Jo Ann E. Argersinger. Boston: Bedford/St Martin's, 2016, vii-viii.

garment industry, a study of the home and working lives of 1095 working women, the story of Sadie Frowne, a sweatshop girl first included in a series of *The Independent's* "lifelets;" and the complete speech of Clara Lemlich and her call for a general strike in 1909.⁴³ "Triangle and the 'Uprising of Twenty Thousand'" transitions to the strike of 1909-1910 and the alliances between women workers and women reformers in the upper classes. Readers can see how the press reported on the strike and subsequent arrests, read essays highlighting the unionization of the women strikers, and a song dedicated to the strikers.⁴⁴ "The Triangle Tragedy: Grief and Outrage" narrows in on the fire itself and provides accounts of reporters present at the fire, personal stories from girls in the factory who made it out, and press coverage of the immediate aftermath of the fire including the fire victims' funerals. One of the most important documents in this section is the Triangle Factory owners' account of the disaster printed in the New York Times on March 26th, 1911, as no other book up to this point had covered these two perspectives in such detail. Finally, "The 'Fire That Lit the Nation': Investigations and Reform" showcases the arrest and trial of the Triangle Factory owners and the outcomes of Progressive efforts. This section includes press coverage of the trial and the public reaction to the owners' acquittal and a preliminary report of the New York Factory Investigating Commission that led to legislation being passed and enacted. Sharing the documents in their original form was a first for Triangle historiography, and the book was received well.

In 2017, Kate Lynn Beasley published her graduate thesis that uniquely narrowed the focus of labor policies enacted after the Triangle Fire. In "'Who will protect the working girl?': The Effect of the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike and Triangle Factory Fire on early 20th century labor

⁴³ *Triangle Fire: a Brief History with Documents.*

⁴⁴ *Triangle Fire: a Brief History with Documents.*

organizations,” she focused on the specific policies of the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) and the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWY) before and after the strike and fire events. She hoped to showcase how these organizations were affected by them and what policies changed as a result. Beasley first provides background for the WTUL and the ILGWY, examining how both organizations have their roots in the American Federation of Labor (AFL) founded in 1996. The Federation’s primary causes included demanding higher wages, cleaner work environments, and fewer hours.⁴⁵ While the AFL recognized the presence of women workers in the labor force, they never truly fought for their causes and easily refused equal representation to women in the leadership.⁴⁶ Because of this, women laborers split off and formed unions such as the WTUL and the ILGWY to better fight for their own causes. Beasley argues that one of both organizations’ major flaws in their labor policies was ignoring the differences between classes and political ideologies among the women workers. Instead, they chose to “maintain a united facade for the public rather than mend the mistrustful feelings broiling among participants.”⁴⁷ Before the Triangle fire, both unions relied on mass strikes to gain collective bargaining for their members. The “Uprising of Twenty Thousand” was their biggest test of whether their “united front” policies would work in practice. The women strikers and picketers followed the rules provided to them by their unions about not shouting at or touching anyone, staying in small groups, and walking with a strikebreaker to speak rather than stopping. But it did nothing to help them against the law enforcement who had been bribed to arrest them anyway.⁴⁸ Conversely, upper-class women supporting the strike were praised for

⁴⁵ Kate Lynn Beasley, ““Who Will Protect the Working Girl?: the Effect of the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike and Triangle Factory Fire on Early Twentieth Century Labor Organizations” (M.A. Thesis: University of Central Oklahoma, 2017).

⁴⁶ Beasley, “Who Will Protect the Working Girl?,” 11-12.

⁴⁷ Beasley, “Who Will Protect the Working Girl?,” 34.

⁴⁸ Beasley, “Who Will Protect the Working Girl?,” 42.

their efforts, further dividing the people. While the “Uprising of Twenty Thousand” was a milestone for the women’s labor movement, many of the women involved in the strike were killed only a year later, dying from the lack of safety standards that they tried to correct in their activism efforts.⁴⁹ After the fire, the same leaders who believed that all their union policies would work out in the end found themselves doubting the usefulness of strikes. Because of this, the WTUL began to change its strategy toward advocating for legislation. They organized a committee to investigate factories and “mutually decide how to bring needed change to them.”⁵⁰ That committee was later renamed the Committee on Safety, and it ended up successfully sending more bills to the legislation and having them passed than any other effort previously.

The most recent work that substantially covered the Triangle Fire was Heather Pool’s dissertation-turned-book in 2021, *Political Mourning: Identity and Responsibility in the Wake of Tragedy*. In this work, Pool examines the factors and reasons that certain tragedies cause people to respond politically while others do not through four tragedies in American history: the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, the lynching of Emmett Till, the September 11 attacks, and the Black Lives Matter movement. She argues that conceptions of personal and political identity have a strong impact on people’s ability to see certain tragedies and deaths as “politically salient” and something that they should get involved in to prevent those events in the future.⁵¹ In her second chapter, Pool uses the Triangle Fire as one of her primary evidential events. She asserts that the strike of 1909-1910 had far less of an impact than the Triangle Fire on meaningful change for labor because of the ability of the public to turn away from the issues

⁴⁹ Beasley, “Who Will Protect the Working Girl?,” 7.

⁵⁰ Beasley, “Who Will Protect the Working Girl?,” 86.

⁵¹ Pool, Heather. *Political Mourning: Identity and Responsibility in the Wake of Tragedy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2021, 4.

when confronted with different races or certain concessions from factory owners.⁵² Factory owners perpetuated this by promoting “race antagonism” on the job to keep these women from bonding.⁵³ Pool also notes that while the strike and the press surrounding it portrayed women as “rough and unladylike,” the Triangle Fire created a homogenous victimhood where the same women were now delicate and broken in the eyes of the public.⁵⁴ The changes that women workers were fighting for were no longer abstract as proven by the tragedy.

While each of these works mentioned above has moved the historiography of the Triangle fire forward, scholarship has been few and far between. Outside of these writings, The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire is often a small portion noted in a book chapter or a singular event in reformers’ lives that pushed them to do greater things. There is still more to be discovered about the similarities between working conditions at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory and other garment factories in New York City, connections between the Triangle Fire and other workplace disasters at the same time across the country, and the personal stories of the victims and their families before and after the tragedy. Future scholarship should explore these areas, bringing in new or ‘remastered’ personal testimonies, and show more clear links between the Triangle Fire and workplace disasters in the modern day.

⁵² Pool, Heather, *Political Mourning*.

⁵³ Pool, Heather, *Political Mourning*, 54.

⁵⁴ Pool, Heather, *Political Mourning*, 56.

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