

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire: 1911

Defendants: Max Blanck and Isaac Harris	Crime Charged: Manslaughter
Chief Defense Lawyer: Max D. Steuer	Chief Prosecutors: Charles S. Bostwick and J. Robert Rubin
Judge: Thomas C. Crain	Place: New York, New York
Date of Decision: December 4, 1911	Verdict: Not guilty
Significance: The Triangle Shirtwaist fire spurred the efforts of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) to organize garment workers, and increased support for the vote among wage-earning women. Politicians passed legislation to improve sweatshop conditions in the garment industry.	

At the turn of the 20th century, poor working conditions and long hours were standard for most factory employees — especially for female workers. Male unions and employers kept women out of better-paying jobs, forcing them into industries such as garment-making, where sweatshop conditions prevailed, pay was low, and employees had to pay for their cutting and sewing supplies.

Factories had few fire-prevention regulations — no sprinklers, poor ventilation, and almost no usable emergency exits.

The Uprising of the 20,000

The first major strike by working women took place among the shirtwaist makers of New York and Philadelphia on November 22, 1909, and continued until February 15, 1910. Called the Uprising of the 20,000, the walk-out was an important demonstration of women's beginning labor movement.

New York's Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, a maker of women's clothing, became one of the targets. That winter women and girls in their teens left their cramped and filthy work rooms, and Marched to Union Square to protest their poor working conditions at a meeting called by the ILGWU. Although the intent of the meeting was not to call a strike, remarks made by teenager Clara Lemlich stirred up members of the group and motivated them to walk out.

She interrupted the speeches of Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and Margaret Dreier Robins of the New York Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) — an organization that joined women factory workers with women from the upper and middle classes — to yell: "I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in general terms. What we are here for is to decide whether or not we shall strike. I offer a resolution that a general strike be declared now!" The following day, the women walked out.

Pauline Newman, remembering the day, recalled:

Thousands upon thousands left the factories from every side, all of them walking down toward Union Square. It was November, the cold winter was just around the corner, we had no fur coats to keep warm, and yet there was the spirit that led us out of the cold at least for the time being.

Esther Lobetkin was arrested during the strike:

The officer wouldn't let us girls sit down on the [police] benches because we were strikers. . . . One of our girls got so tired she went to crouch down to rest herself, when one of the officers came over and poked her with his club and says, "Here, stand up. Where do you think you are? In Russia?"

The WTUL aided the strikers. Well-known society leaders Anne Morgan, Alva Belmont, Mrs. Henry Morgenthau, and Helen Taft (President William Howard Taft's daughter) were active members. They joined the picket lines, faced arrest, raised bail money for the factory workers, monitored the courts, and brought charges against police — despite resentment and harassment from policemen.

One policeman yelled at the WTUL's Helen Marot, "You uptown scum, keep out of this or you'll find yourself in jail." A judge told the arrested women, "You are striking against God and Nature, whose prime law is that man shall earn his bread with the sweat of his brow."

Thirteen weeks after it began, the protest against the Triangle Shirtwaist Company ended, but that year also saw 404,000 women petition Congress for the vote. Of 339 shops involved, over 300 settled with the workers. These women won a 52-hour work week, a promise that employers would provide supplies, no punishment for striking, and an equal division of work in slack seasons. (The latter discouraged bosses from firing workers during slow times.)

The Triangle Fire

Located on the ninth floor of a building that overlooked Washington Place on one side and Greene Street on the other, Triangle's workrooms had inadequate fire escapes and no sprinklers — conditions the workers had been protesting. Worse, supervisors locked the doors to the workplace from the outside to prevent the women and girls, crowded next to each other on benches, from taking breaks during working hours or removing materials. Only one stairway led to the roof.

On March 25, 1911, a fire broke out on the eighth floor, rising to the ninth through the Greene Street stairwell. As smoke and flames filled the air, the women rushed to the Washington Place exit. It was locked. About 500 women were trapped; many clung to the breaking fire escapes. Firefighters tried to reach them, but their ladders stopped at the sixth floor. Women jumped hand-in-hand from the windows, crashing through the nets, and smashing on the sidewalk. Other women, caught inside, died of burns or suffocation. That night, the Twenty-sixth Street pier held 146 corpses. Two thousand people searched for their loved ones' bodies.

It took one week to identify the dead; seven were unknown. The enraged members of the ILGWU and New York WTUL planned a funeral for the unnamed women. New York's grieving population turned out in full on the rainy, cold April day. Throughout the steady downpour, they Marched. The Washington Square Arch was the agreed point of merger for the Marchers coming from all across the city to form one parade. There were so many people at that spot by 3:30 p.m. that the last one waited until 6 p.m. to pass below the arch.

On December 4, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, the owners of the company, went on trial for manslaughter. Max D. Steuer was their attorney. Assistant district attorneys Charles S. Bostwick and J. Robert Rubin prosecuted the defendants in the three-week trial.

There were more than 150 witnesses. Kate Alderman told how both she and Margaret Schwartz tried and failed to open the door. Alderman ultimately escaped by covering herself with dresses and a coat and leapt through the flames to where firemen rescued her. Schwartz died.

Despite the dramatic testimony, Judge Thomas C. T. Crain instructed the jury that the key to the case was whether the defendants knew the door was locked:

If so, was it locked under circumstances importing knowledge on the part of these defendants that it was locked? If so, and Margaret Schwartz died because she was unable to pass through, would she have lived if the door had not been locked . . . ?

On December 27, 1911, the jury acquitted both defendants of manslaughter. One jury member said, "I believed the door was locked at the time of the fire. But we couldn't find them guilty unless we believed they knew the door was locked." Another member of the all-male jury remarked that the women — whom they did not believe were as intelligent as those in other occupations — probably panicked, causing their deaths. The court denied a prosecution demand for a retrial so Blanck and Harris went free.

Out of the Ashes

The tragedy galvanized working women. Despite arrests and beatings, strikes across the nation increased, and the membership of the ILGWU surged. In 1912, women were among 20,000 textile workers to strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. One of them explained her continued support: "It is not only bread we give our children. . . . We live by freedom, and I will fight till I die to give it to my children."

Female labor leaders such as Leonora O'Reilly demanded the vote for women so they could protect themselves by electing politicians who would pass laws to change the sweatshop conditions under which they worked. In 1912, when the next New York City suffrage parade took place, 20,000 people Marched and another half million lined the sidewalks.

Out of public outrage, officials imposed new laws — requiring strict building codes and inspections on sweatshops, for example. New York City created a Bureau of Fire Prevention that established and enforced stricter safety regulations. Other cities and states did the same during the following years. Finally, the federal government, under the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, developed workplace safety measures — forerunners to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

For Further Reading

Frost, Elizabeth, and Kathryn Cullen-DuPont. *Women's Suffrage in America: An Eyewitness History*. New York: Facts on File, 1992.

Frost-Knappman, Elizabeth. *The ABC-CLIO Companion to Women's Progress in America*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 1994.

Knappman, Edward W., ed. *Great American Trials*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994.

Wertheimer, Barbara Mayer. *We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

Source: [*Women's Rights on Trial*](#), 1st Ed., Gale, 1997, p.312.