

The Triangle Fire: From Industrialism to Progressivism

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Preview

BEFORE going any further, participate in the following opinion poll and save your answers. If this poll is completed in class, take five minutes to discuss your answers with your neighbor or with a small group of students. Which question do you consider most important?

Triangle Fire Student Opinion Poll

1. Employers are entitled to make all decisions regarding company wages and working conditions. Yes__ No__
2. Women should be treated like equals on the job and in labor unions. Yes__ No__
3. Government has a responsibility to protect workers by establishing standards for minimum wages, maximum hours, child labor and workplace safety. Yes__ No__
4. The rich deserve to keep all their money. They should not be taxed on it, but should be trusted to use it wisely. Yes__ No__
5. Labor unions are necessary. Yes__ No__



Fighting the Triangle Fire, March 25, 1911

Overview

Industrialism was a mixed blessing. Technological progress brought the nation increased productivity and an improved standard of living. Population rose and cities grew as foreign immigrants and domestic migrants pursued the American dream. By 1900, the United States produced more manufactured goods than any other country in the world. However, the benefits of industrial progress did not reach everyone equally. In fact, seven-eighths of the nation's wealth was owned by only one eighth of the population.

As big businesses swallowed up small entrepreneurs, huge impersonal factories replaced artisan workshops. Workers toiled twelve hours six days a week for pitifully small wages. Child labor was common and there was no provision for unemployment, injury, sickness or old age. Distressed that "amid the greatest accumulations of wealth, men die of starvation," philosopher Henry George suggested that "this association of poverty with progress is the great enigma of our times."

A variety of reformers tried to address these problems. They exposed reality in photographs, drawings, books and journals. Some established settlement houses; others asked state governments to regulate living and working conditions; a few advocated the radical reorganization of society. One of the most controversial efforts at change came from the workers themselves who organized strikes and formed labor unions in defiance of the law and despite violent repression by company guards, local police and state militias.

However, not even the labor organizations were equitable because unions were dominated by white, male skilled workers. Consequently, it is all the more amazing to learn about the struggles of New York City's unskilled female garment workers who waged a five month strike in 1909 and suffered 146 fatalities during a tragic 1911 factory fire that might not have occurred if their strike demands had been met.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire illuminates the dilemmas created by industrial progress. It raises fundamental questions about the relationship between rich and poor, employer and employee, politicians and reformers. It compels us to think carefully about how capitalism actually works and asks us to decide whether social reform is either necessary or

legitimate.

Activities

Step One: Background Orientation

Read the sections in your textbook that cover late-nineteenth industrialism and early-twentieth century Progressivism. List 3-5 of the major successes and failures of each period. Focus on industrial growth and the efforts to control it.

Look for key words such as industrialization, urbanization, immigration, monopoly, trust, finance capitalism, Social Darwinism, tenement, sweatshop, child labor, labor unions, strikes, muckrakers, trust busters, anti-trust laws, protective tariffs and settlement houses.

Look for key figures such as John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, Samuel Gompers, Henry George, Jacob Riis and Theodore Roosevelt. Does your textbook mention the Triangle Factory Fire?

Step Two: Getting An Overview Of The Triangle Factory Fire

Visit the site on the Triangle Factory Fire.

<http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/>

This is a rich site which contains a wealth of fascinating information about the causes, course and consequences of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. Read the overview narrative for each section of the site. List 2-3 factors that you consider most important for understanding each of the following: the origins of the fire, the drama of the fire and the response to the fire.

What aspect of the fire is most shocking to you? What is the most burning question you have about the fire? Record your answers because they represent your core concerns about the fire and will provide you with a focus for the next two steps of this exercise. Before moving on to Step Three, preview the final project described in Step Eight: Evaluating the Evidence.

Step Three: Investigating The Visual Evidence

Part 1: Gathering the Evidence:

Working in pairs, examine all eight political cartoons in the section labeled "Photos and Illustrations."

What issue does each cartoon emphasize? What point of view does each cartoon reflect? Whom or what does it criticize? How does each cartoon simplify or oversimplify the issues raised by the fire? Which cartoon best helps you resolve your core concerns about the fire? What kind of newspaper or magazine would be most likely to publish these cartoons?

Together, decide which cartoon is most important for understanding the central issues of the Triangle Fire. Draft three to five sentences explaining your choice.

Part 2: Sharing Your Perceptions

Post a brief statement on the course discussion board explaining which cartoon your pair considers most important for understanding the central issues of the Triangle Fire. Post a joint statement agreeing or disagreeing with the choice and explanation offered by at least one other pair of students.

Part 3: Assessing Additional Visual Evidence

Working in pairs or individually, in class or at home, examine the photographs, newspaper clippings and other items in the "Photos and Illustrations" section. How do they supplement the cartoons? Which item is most shocking? Which item is most informative? Which item deepens or helps you resolve your core concerns about the fire?

Step Four: Investigating The Printed Evidence

Part 1: Gathering the Evidence:

Read at least one document in each of the following sections for a minimum of four documents. The more documents you consult, the richer your understanding of the fire will be. The documents can be accessed by highlighting the relevant sections listed on the left side of the home page and at the end of each section. They also appear in the section labeled "Documents" along with other interesting material available for your use. If you work in pairs or in groups, you can divide up the labor.

Take notes on each document you read. Identify the author's point of view and the two most important points the author makes about the causes, course or consequences of the fire.

In the section, "Sweatshops and Strikes Before 1911," choose at least one of the following:

- Pauline Newman's Letter
- Life in the Shop, by Clara Lemich
- The Cooper Union Meeting, The Call
- Song: The Uprising of the Twenty Thousand

In the section, "Fire!," choose at least one of the following:

- 141 Men and Girls, New York Times, March 26, 1911
- NY Fire Kills 148, Chicago Sunday Tribune, March 26, 1911
- Eyewitness at the Triangle, by William Shepherd
- Notice of Fire, Ladies' Garment Workers, April, 1911

In the section, "Mourning and Protest," choose at least one of the following:

- What is to be Done? by Martha Bensley Bruere
- We Have Found You Wanting, by Rose Scheiderman
- Hostile Employers, American Federationist, May 1911

In the section, "Investigation, Trial and Reform," choose at least one of the following:

- Blame Shifted, New York Times, March 28, 1911
- Indictments in the Asch Fire Case, Outlook, April 22, 1911
- Placing the Responsibility, Outlook, April 29, 1911
- Frances Perkins lecture, September 30, 1964

Part 2: Sharing Your Perceptions

Pose one question that you would like answered about either the causes, the course or the consequences of the fire. Post your question on the class discussion board. Answer at least one of your classmate's questions and explain why he/she should read one of the documents you consulted.

Step Five: Extra Document: The Owners Speak (Strongly Recommended)

Because most of the evidence about the fire criticizes the owners, it is important to try to understand their version of the event. Fortunately, they granted an interview to a *New York Times* reporter on the night of the fire. It was the first and last time that they discussed the fire without legal counsel present. The fact that they said very little during the subsequent investigations and trials makes this interview particularly significant as an historical document.

After reading the following excerpts from the interview, write a paragraph stating whether or not

- the employers cared about their employees
- the employers felt responsible for the fire
- the employers met their obligations to their employees in the context of contemporary law, business practice and business ethics.

“Partners' Account of the Disaster,” *New York Times*, March 26, 1911

Source: John F. McClymer, *The Triangle Strike and Fire* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1998), 90-93 excerpted.

Max Blanck went to the home of his partner Isaac Harris...and there told his story of what happened. Two of his six children and their governess had come to visit him at the factory... (There were also) thirty bookkeepers, clerks, and operators who shared the tenth floor with the offices of the partners....(The men) managed to squeeze about ten women into the passenger elevator and get the door closed....The smoke and heat were becoming suffocating... Harris shouted... “The roof! Follow me to the roof!”...Blanck kept his children out of the crush and sent the remaining office force and clerks up a stairway before he went himself...On the roof, Harris took the lead and marshalled the women, pushing them towards the northeast corner of the building (where the men placed a ladder so that the workers could climb to an adjoining building). All escaped.....

Blanck was asked what precautions he had taken about fire and what were the means of escape. He said the Building Department and factory Inspectors had all passed his lofts, and the only requirements in recent years had been certain guards....on the machines...and an additional window in the woman's dressing room. He said he had already installed the guards and other safety devices before the orders came from the authorities.... He explained that he and his partners had been tenants in the building for twelve years.... He had kept pace with improvements ever since and in many respects, he said, had gone ahead of the requirements.

Nine years ago, while the factory occupied but one floor of the building, there was a fire at night. Since then, Blanck said, he had employed a watchman night and day to look out for violations of the rules.....The eighth floor is the main cutting room, and Mr. Blanck... seemed to think that it was here that the fire might easily have started....(among the piles of material which) was of a highly inflammable nature...

The halls were fireproof, Mr. Blanck said, and the stairways iron and stone. The elevator shafts were cut off from the factory premises by fireproof wire glass partitions, and the doors leading into the halls were sheathed with iron. He repeated over and over again that he knew the doors into the hallway were always unlocked. He said that the keys were tied to the knobs and that he made it his personal duty every morning to go to each door and see that it was open.

Step Six: Extra Document (Optional)

Triangle Fire Poem by Morris Rosenfeld, 1911

Jewish poet, Morris Rosenfeld, wrote this poignant poem four days after the Triangle Shirtwaist fire. Why do you think he was called the “poet laureate of the slum and the sweatshop?” Use the following questions to analyze the poem individually, in pairs or in groups:

- What words and metaphors best convey the tragedy of the fire?
- Which 3 phrases tell you whom and what Rosenfeld blames for the fire?
- What emotions does Rosenfeld express through his poetry?
- Which of those emotions does he arouse in you, the reader?
- Do you have to be Jewish to appreciate this poem?
- Does Rosenfeld have a social conscience?
- Does Rosenfeld advocate that capitalism be overthrown or reformed? What key words support your conclusion?
- Do you find his interpretation of the fire to be convincing? Why? Why not? Post your answer on the course discussion board and respond to at least one other post.

*Neither battle nor fiendish pogrom
Fill this great city with sorrow;
Nor does the earth shudder or lightning rend the heavens,
No clouds darken, no cannon's roar shatters the air.
Only hell's fire engulfs these slave stalls
And Mammon devours our sons and daughters.
Wrapt in scarlet flames, they drop to death from his maw
And death receives them all.
Sisters mine, oh my sisters; brethren
Hear my sorrow:
See where the dead are hidden in dark corners,
Where life is choked from those who labor.
Oh, woe is me, and woe is to the world
On this Sabbath
When an avalanche of red blood and fire
Pours forth from the god of gold on high
As now my tears stream forth unceasingly.
Damned be the rich!
Damned be the system!
Damned be the world!
Over whom should we weep first?
Over the burned ones?
Over those beyond recognition?
Over those who have been crippled?
Or driven senseless?
Or smashed?
I weep for them all.
Now let us light the holy candles
And mark the sorrow
Of Jewish masses in darkness and poverty.
This is our funeral,
These our graves,
Our children,
The beautiful, beautiful flowers destroyed,*

*Our lovely ones burned,
Their ashes buried under a mountain of caskets.
There will come a time
When your time will end, you golden princes.
Meanwhile, let this haunt your consciences:
Let the burning building, our daughters in flame
Be the nightmare that destroys your sleep,
The poison that embitters your lives,
The horror that kills your joy.
And in the midst of celebrations for your children,
May you be struck blind with fear over the Memory
Of this red avalanche
Until time erases you.*

Step Seven: Broadening Your Understanding Of The Fire (Optional)

The following websites provide information on people, issues, events and circumstances related to the fire. They are worth visiting a) for the fun of it, b) to broaden and deepen your understanding of the fire and c) to acquire more evidence for Step Eight.

<http://womhist.alexanderstreet.com/> Contains images and text about women and social movements in the United States, 1830-1930.

<http://museumofnyc.doetech.net/voyager.cfm> Contains 172 photographs of life in 19th century New York City.

<http://www.chicagohistory.org/dramas/overview/over.htm> Contains a lively examination of the famous 1886 Haymarket strike.

<http://www.ashp.cuny.edu/video/heaven/index.html> Contains text and images about the 1909 NYC garment workers' strike. The section on Links provides ready access to seven useful sites dealing with immigration, urban life and tenements in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Step Eight: Evaluating The Evidence

Part 1

Take the Student Opinion Poll from the Preview again. Discuss in pairs, groups or as a whole class whether studying about the fire changed or confirmed the opinions you expressed earlier? Why?

Part 2: (This project can be done individually or in groups.)

Every year on March 25, the day of the fire, there is a ceremony at the old Triangle Shirtwaist Factory which is now part of New York University (the Brown Building at Greene Street and Waverly Place). Imagine that for the centennial observance in 2011, a time capsule will be buried under the existing commemorative plaque. A contest is being conducted to decide how best to memorialize the fire. Submit an entry which consists of the following items:

- An overview on the causes, course and consequences of the fire
- Two cartoons about the fire with brief explanations of why they should be included
- At least four documents about the fire with brief explanations of why they should be included
- A brief statement about the lessons to be learned from the fire concerning the relationships between rich and poor, or employer and employee, or politicians and reformers.
- A brief statement on whether and how these relationships changed after the fire and whether you think further change is desirable.
- A brief explanation of how learning about the Triangle Fire helped you understand the complexity of industrialization at the beginning of the 20th century.
- A burning question that the fire still ignites in your soul

Instructor's Annotations

Note that this exercise is designed to take more than one single session class period. Alternately, the preview, Steps One and Two could be assigned as homework in preparation for doing Step Three in class. Steps Four through Seven could be done in or out of class. Step Eight can either be used for individual essays written out of class or for in-class collaborative learning.