And all who jumped died: The Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire

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Patricia Lanier Pence (Southeast Missouri State at Cape Girardeau, Missouri, USA)
Paula Phillips Carson (University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, Louisiana, USA)
Kerry D. Carson (University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, Louisiana, USA)
J. Brooke Hamilton III (University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, Louisiana, USA)
Betsy Birkenmeier (University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, Louisiana, USA)

Abstract

Suggests that the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in New York City in 1911 was the veritable genesis of laws safeguarding workers. The events of the 18-minute inferno which killed 146 young, immigrant garment workers are summarized, as are the factory owners' responses to the fire, along with the rationalizations they used to defend their lethal actions, which included moral justification, accusing the accuser, blaming the victim, advantageous comparison, responsibility displacement, responsibility diffusion, dehumanization, and blame attribution. Reviews workplace reforms initiated as a direct result of this fire and discusses why such historical disasters are unlikely to re-occur if three simple lessons are heeded: first, it is unfortunate that it has required major trauma or carnage to awaken the public to the realities of existing dangers; second, mere compliance with existing statutes is often insufficient for protecting workers; and third, organizations which fail to self-monitor will often be subjected to external control and regulation.

Keywords

Business ethics | Fire | Safety | Health and Safety | Legislation | Factories

Citation


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City in 1911 was the veritable genesis of laws safeguarding workers. The events of the 18-minute inferno which killed 146 young, immigrant garment workers are summarized. Reviews workplace reforms initiated as a direct result of this fire and discusses why such historical disasters are unlikely to re-occur if three simple lessons are heeded: first, it is unfortunate that it has required major trauma or carnage to awaken the public to the realities of existing dangers; second, mere compliance with existing statutes is often insufficient for protecting workers; and, The 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire—which killed 146 garment workers—shocked the public and galvanized the labor movement. Fire hoses spray the upper floors of the Asch Building—headquarters to the Triangle Shirtwaist Company—during the 1911 fire in New York City that shocked the U.S. into developing new worker safety standards. Photograph by Keystone, Getty.

How a tragedy transformed protections for American workers. Then, they began to jump. Firefighters who attempted to catch them used netting that fell apart with the impact; their ladders only reached up to the sixth floor. Inside the building, others jumped down the elevator shaft in an attempt to escape suffocation and death. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City on March 25, 1911 was the deadliest industrial disaster in the history of the city, and one of the deadliest in US history.[1] The fire caused the deaths of 146 garment workers — 123 women and 23 men[2] — who died from the fire, smoke inhalation, or falling or jumping to their deaths. The fire led to legislation requiring improved factory safety standards and helped spur the growth of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), which fought for better working conditions for sweatshop workers. The building has been designated a National Historic Landmark and a New York City landmark.[9].