

The Triangle Legacy

Alice Bonvicini (March 28, 2011)



March 25, 2011 marks the Centennial of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. A day of remembrance and at the same time a day for celebrating the progress that workers have made since then

During an uncannily rigid, yet sunny, March morning, the heart of the West Village was warmed up by the embrace of a city that has not forgotten the price paid by the 146 garment workers who perished 100 year ago in the deadly Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. Many of the rights that workers enjoy today, in fact, were sparked by that horrific event, which paved the way for worker protection laws.

On the eighth floor of what was once called the Asch building, purple banners were hanging from the windowsills. Those were the windows from which dozens of female workers, aged 14 to 25, mostly



Italian and Jewish immigrants, were forced to jump out of in order to escape the gruesome fire. Those who weren't crushed onto the sidewalk died charred against the locked doors of the factory where the flames had started. A century later, family members, union leaders, activists, students and common citizens flooded the streets below to remember the 146 innocent victims, but also to recommit to a safe, decorous and protected future for all workers.

The morning began with a procession from Union Square to the site of the fire, the corner between Green Street and Washington Place. A somber drum roll and the chant, in Italian, Yiddish and English "open the door," hinting at the disgraceful cause of the women's death- the locked exits- accompanied the stream of people. Most compelling were the 146 handmade blouses with the names of the young workers who perished in the fire, which attached on long bamboo sticks waved in the cold New York wind. "I wish you could see what we see from up here," said [Mary Kay Henry](#) [2], President of the [Service Employees International Union](#) [3], who acknowledged the beauty of the shirtwaists swirling in the wind. She spoke of the owners of the factory who escaped to safety without notifying anybody in the building about the fire, and who later were also able to dribble the manslaughter charges. "As I look at those shirtwaists I feel sorrow but most of all indignation for the injustice of those women jumping to their deaths when they could have been saved." She continued, "these women changed the face of the city and our nation by demanding the type of dignity that goes by one name: unions." And before leaving the stage, Henry read the [Proclamation of the United States President Barack Obama in honor of the Triangle workers](#) [4].

Despite the enormous progress made since the Triangle factory fire, we are still fighting to provide adequate working conditions for all women and men on the job, ensure no person within our borders is exploited for their labor, and uphold collective bargaining as a tool to give workers a seat at the tables of power. Working Americans are the backbone of our communities and power the engine of our economy. As we mark the anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, let us resolve to renew the urgency that tragedy inspired and recommit to our shared responsibility to provide a safe environment for all American workers.

[Excerpt from the Proclamation of the United States President Barack Obama]

The long and warm embrace to the families of the 146 young victims of the worst work place- related catastrophe in New York history was enlarged to include workers who are fighting today for their own rights and future generations' accross America. Every speaker hinted at the perilous siege that laborers and unions are undergoing in recent days. Many acknowledged directly the disgraceful [ransack of collective bargaining rights from Wisconsin](#) [5] public workers at the hands of [Governor Scott Walker](#) [6]. Moreover, many participants were seen carrying a red banner with the inscription "We are Wisconsin."

"Today we commemorate the workers who died in Triangle but we must also remember the 29 coal miners who died in West Virginia almost a year ago, the 11 workers killed in the Gulf coast disaster, or the construction workers who risk their lives every day" echoed Secretary of Labor of the United States of America, California Democrat [Hilda Solis](#) [7], appointed by Barack Obama on December 2008. Daughter of an immigrant shop steward and a toy factory worker, Solis stressed how the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire opened America's eyes onto the tragic consequences of inhuman working conditions. "As the smoke settled in that day, it revealed a work place unfit for any human being, one absent of security dignity and respect for those female workers" she said. "We honor them for the high price they paid for the protection that you and I enjoy today," Solis added. But she also underlined how the 146 young women who died in the fire must be a "reminder of the work we still have to do. The very reason we can't stop fighting" for the most vulnerable workers.

Senior Senator of the State of New York, Democrat [Chuck Schumer](#) [8], a leading voice for the rights of working people on the national stage, recalled how the year before the deadly blaze those same women had marched for their rights, joining fellow garment workers in a city wide strike. America, however, was not ready to listen. But the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire "awoke the nation's conscience, created a possibility for common purpose and supercharged the American labor movement, galvanizing lawmakers and labor activist to push forward with landmark workplace safety laws, labor laws and, above all, collective bargaining rights." The women of the Triangle defied the notion that exploitation was acceptable and necessary for economic progress. "Their tragic faith revealed that dictatorship in the workplace is not only unhealthy and unjust," he added



"it is un-American." He finally galvanized the excitement of those present when he insisted upon the importance of not reverting the status of workers back to 1911. Referring to those on the far right seeking to pry the social safety net "under the false pretense of fiscal austerity," he pledged to the families of the Triangle victims, "we will not let right wing ideologues and Scott Walker Republicans undo the legacy of your loved ones." Loud cheers followed.

The crowd present did not offer an equal welcome to City Mayor [Michael Bloomberg](#) [9] who was hassled during his entire speech, his voice overpowered by chorus such as "tax the rich" and "don't touch our teachers." The multi-millionaire politician's recent plan to curb pensions and lay off thousands of teachers certainly did not encourage a warmer reception.

Long was the list of union leaders and activists who spoke to the crowd gathered in the heart of the West Village: Bruce Raynor, President of [Workers United/SEIU](#) [10]; John Delgado Business Manager of Local 79 and Richard Campoverde of Lettire Construction; George Gresham, President of [1199/SEIU](#) [11]; Stuart Appelbaum, President of RWDSU/UFCW; Michael Mulgrew, President of the [United Federation of Teachers](#) [12]; Mary Bell, President of the [Wisconsin Education Association Council](#) [13], who received a truly encouraging round of applause; and the students from 17 public schools of the city.

After Suzanne Pred Bass, great niece of Rosie and Katie Weiner, the former a survivor of the blazing inferno of Triangle, the latter a victim, [Salvatore J. Cassano](#) [14], NYC Fire Commissioner, took the stage. He acknowledged the importance of this year as the Centennial of Triangle and the decennial of 9/11 coincide. He spoke of the remarkable and continuous sacrifice of the most committed civil servants of the city, fire fighters. His speech culminated with the calling of the 21 Fire Divisions, Battalions, Engines, and Ladder Companies that first responded to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. An FDNY truck slowly raised its ladder to the 6th floor, the highest point it could reach in 1911. Family members, students, and workers read the victims' names aloud and laid white carnations below the plaque that remembers the Fire. A bell tolled after each name. Red carnations were also laid to homage the 27 workers who died last December in a [deadly fire in a Gap Factory in Bangladesh](#) [15].

It was a beautiful day at the corner of Greene Street and Washington Place. A day in which to remember those whose death we all owe so much to. But it was also a day of re-commitment to justice since the fight for what is right is not over yet. Those young workers back in 1911 spoke Italian and Yiddish. Today, since we still live in a sweatshop economy, they speak Chinese, Spanish, Bangla. However it was also a day of hope because those working against greed and exploitation are numerous and, as this cold March morning proved, more combative than ever.

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- [4] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/24/presidential-proclamation-100th-anniversary-triangle-shirtwaist-factory->
- [5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/02/us/02wisconsin.html>
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[14] <http://www.nyc.gov/html/fdny/html/general/commissioner/32/biography.shtml>

[15] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/14/bangladesh-clothes-factory-workers-jump-to-death>