

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire and International Women's Day: 100 years on

The first International Women's Day commemorated a demonstration by women workers in New York in 1857. But what established the modern celebration of International Women's Day in history, was the fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York on 25 March 1911 that killed 146 young women workers, most of whom were immigrants. From the ashes of that tragic event, the pursuit of social justice for women and men ignited that day continues to be felt around the world 100 years on. From New York, ILO On-line reports on the fire that changed everything.

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FTR/100th International Women's Day and Triangle Fire

NEW YORK – On a biting cold winter's day here recently, the shops and boutiques lining Green Street could not obscure a single plaque commemorating one of the most tragic events in the history of the world of work or silence what hauntingly sounded like distant sirens.

"I saw lots of well-dressed young people, lots of clothing stores, and to come across the plaque on the building saying this is where 146 women were burnt or jumped to their deaths, stopped me in my tracks," said Jane Hodges, Director of the Gender Bureau of the International Labour Organization (ILO) on a recent mission to New York to attend the 55th Session of the Committee on the Status of Women.

"Listening to the bitter winter wind howl through the back streets, I could almost hear the sirens wailing so long ago."

The plaque that caught Ms. Hodges' imagination marks the spot where a fire killed 146 mostly Southern and Eastern European young immigrant women workers in just 20 minutes on Saturday, 25 March 1911 at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, where they sewed "shirtwaists," as women's blouses were called in those days.

Trapped behind locked doors and just out of reach of the firefighters' ladders, the young women either burned to death or died desperately trying to escape the heat and flames by leaping from the ninth floor windows of the factory to the pavement below. The factory's only fire escape, a flimsy contraption, collapsed under the weight of the fleeing, terrified young women.

Only the year before, there had been an unsuccessful strike across the garment district - including at the Triangle factory -- in an attempt to get union recognition and better wages and conditions. The Triangle's owners had refused to concede.

Today, the impact of the Triangle fire is still being felt around the world. It gave emphasis to the newly declared International Women's Day. It strongly influenced the founding ideals of the ILO, and continues to inspire the Organization's pursuit of social justice and improved working conditions, wherever and whenever it can.

And it continues to haunt the building that is now part of the New York University campus, and is hosting a series of commemorative exhibitions and activities this year for International Women's Day.

"These women could not go up and talk to the owner, they had to smoke on the sly because they could not eat," Ms. Hodges said. "They were underpaid, working long hours, on a Saturday in this case, and the doors were locked. They had no rights, no legislative protection, no representation. It was a classic sweatshop, one stop away from slavery."

In part inspired by tragedy, she says, "The ILO is out there delivering the message that we need decent work for all to help prevent such catastrophic events from happening again."

"What if they had had decent work back then," Ms. Hodges mused. "What if they had the right to organize? They wouldn't have died because of the lack of the rights. That's why decent work isn't just a concept, it's real and it's relevant. The ILO will continue to fight for decent work and rights at work, wherever we can. Just remember the Triangle Fire."