

The Triangle Fire of 1911

John M. Hoenig, Ph.D. describes one of the most notorious fires in US history that resulted in major political and economic changes

AT THE TIME, it was the worst work-place fire in the history of New York City, and it retained that record for 90 years — until September 11, 2001.

On 25 March 1911, on a warm spring Saturday afternoon, just before quitting time, a fire broke out on the 8th floor of the Asch Building, off Washington Square in lower Manhattan. The fire was at the Triangle Waist Company, a large factory occupying the eighth, ninth and tenth floors. Triangle manufactured some ten to twelve thousand shirtwaists, or ladies' blouses, each week. The factory had large waste bins under the long work benches, filled with loose scraps of thin cotton material and paper patterns. Someone must have thrown a cigarette butt or match into a bin. Because loosely packed cotton is explosive, the fire spread rapidly, upward to the ninth and tenth floors. Due to confusion within the factory, factory personnel were slow to report the fire to the Fire Department. But a passerby on the street used the fire callbox to alert the firemen, whose horse-pulled fire truck arrived on the scene in under five minutes. The fire was

extinguished within half an hour of its start. But that half hour was deadly.

There were only a few ways out of the building: a staircase and elevator at each end of the building, a fire escape and, on the tenth floor, a ladder to the roof. The fire escape was partially blocked. It was rickety, and it collapsed killing two dozen workers. One stairway became blocked by smoke and fire. That left one stairway, the elevators, and the skylight to the roof. The elevator operators were heroes, especially Joseph Zito. They repeatedly went up for more people as the fire raged. The losses wouldn't have been so bad if the door to the stairwell on the ninth floor hadn't been locked. Some on the ninth floor succumbed to smoke inhalation, some were burned, some were pushed back against the windows and exited that way. Horrified passersby watched the bodies fall.

In those few minutes, 146 people died. Six of the victims were never identified. Shortly after the fire, 100,000 mourners marched in a funeral procession in the cold rain through the streets of Manhattan as 250,000 people watched in silence.

That 146 people met a gruesome death was shocking. But, the fact that an exit door was locked to prevent employees from stealing — that was appalling. And possibly criminal. The socialist newspaper *Call* indicted the owners, saying "It was these two bosses who made haste to save their own precious hides by escaping to the roof while the human beings who piled up profits for them died in burned, crushed and mutilated heaps." The district attorney, Charles Whitman, charged the owners — Max Blanck and Isaac Harris — with manslaughter.

Blank and Harris had a top-

notch — even legendary — lawyer named Max Steuer. Steuer needed to find a way to counter a star witness for the prosecution, a level-headed, serious young woman named Kate Alterman, who testified she saw her friend trying to leave, being stopped by the locked door, and succumbing to the fire. She was in tears when she finished testifying, and the jury was clearly moved. Steuer had to counter this devastating testimony. In a brilliant, if desperate, move he had her repeat her testimony again and again, then pointed out she used the same phrases each time. He thus made it look like her testimony was memorized and coached, and insinuated the unions were behind it. The lock from the infamous locked door was produced as evidence. But, it hadn't been found until 16 days after the fire. The prosecution was able to prove it came from the allegedly locked door on the ninth floor. But Steuer raised the question of whether someone could have tampered with it in the 16 days it took to retrieve it from the fire site, again insinuating the unions were behind a conspiracy. [FIGURE 7]



The fire at the Triangle Waist Company.



Joseph Zito, an elevator operator, made heroic efforts to rescue workers.

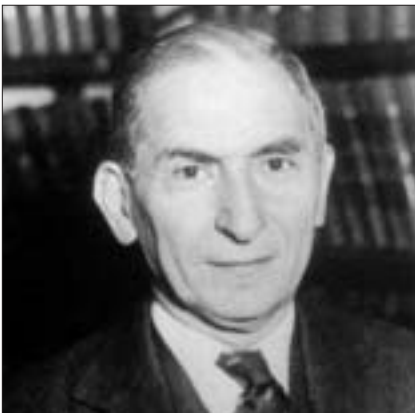
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Max Blanck (left) and Isaac Harris (right), the owners of the Triangle Waist Company, were tried and acquitted of manslaughter.

In the end, Blanck and Harris were acquitted. They avoided the angry crowd at the courthouse by ducking into the subway to make their escape.

People, especially in the fledgling garment workers unions, swore the victims of the fire at the Triangle Waist Factory would never be forgotten, but forgotten they nearly were. The newspapers of the day made no systematic effort to list the victims. The coroner's report on the fire was not saved by the city of New York. And the court transcript of the



Max D. Steuer was a legendary legal talent who got Blanck and Harris acquitted of manslaughter charges stemming from the Triangle fire. He also helped them to profit from the fire by defending insurance claims in excess of known losses.



Headlines and a cartoon from the March 28, 1911, extra edition of the New York Evening Journal. The demand to determine responsibility for the fire was growing, especially as reports of the locked door emerged.

criminal trial against the factory's owners was lost by the city's Municipal Archives. The defense lawyer for Blanck and Harris saved his copy of the transcript and donated it to a law society's library — but the society lost or misplaced one of the three volumes. It wasn't until 2003 that writer David von Drehle finally combed through period newspapers and other documents matching records with individuals and published an almost complete list of victims (six people were never identified).

Blanck and Harris in the Aftermath

With historical hindsight, we can see that Blanck and Harris were not decent businessmen. They were dishonest, vicious, cheap and unrepentant. To begin, one can ask why Triangle didn't have fire sprinklers. In the 1880s, cotton mills in New England installed sprinklers, firewalls, and fireproof doors. But in New York City, such were nearly nonexistent. The premiums charged by insurance companies were linked to insurance risks. Lower risks didn't necessarily imply higher profits because premiums were lower. Blanck and Harris were rotten risks and paid high premiums. Insurance agents

made commissions based on the premiums so Blanck and Harris were valuable customers. The agents distributed the risk across several companies; the insurance companies accepted pieces of risky policies in order to avoid being precluded from obtaining better policies from the agents.

Why were Blanck and Harris rotten risks? They repeatedly had early morning fires when no one was in the factory. There were two fires at their Triangle factory in 1901 (shortly after it opened) and two at their new factory, the Diamond Waist Factory, in 1907. The shirtwaist business had two peak periods in the year. Having a large inventory at the end of the peak period was not good business. Blanck and Harris were able to get rid of the leftover inventory and be reimbursed by the insurance company. Their policies covered all of their losses, or more.

Although Blanck and Harris were never charged with arson or insurance fraud, the circumstantial evidence of repeated early morning fires at the end of the busy seasons with full reimbursement from the insurance companies speaks for itself. Too bad this did not come out during their trial.

Blanck and Harris were leaders of the anti-union struggle. Dur-

ing the general garment-workers strike of 1909, when over 20,000 workers walked off the job, Blanck and Harris responded viciously, paying hoodlums to attack workers and pushing the police to arrest picketers. They hired prostitutes as replacement workers to show their contempt for the strikers. The prostitutes attacked the strikers and their pimps joined in. After the strike, and before the fire, the Jewish daily *Forward* wrote about the Triangle Waist Company on January 10, 1910:

“With blood this name will be written in the history of the American workers’ movement, and with feeling will this history recall the names of the strikers of this shop — of the crusaders.”

During the manslaughter trial, Isaac Harris was asked why it was important for all the employees to leave the factory each day by the Greene Street exit (rather than through the Washington Street exit, which is the exit which was locked on the day of the fire). Harris replied it was to avoid employee theft and proceeded to describe how they had caught six workers stealing two or three dozen waists apiece in 1908. Furthermore, shortly before the fire, they caught a woman with two shirtwaists hidden in her hair which was piled up on top of her head. The prosecutor asked Harris the magnitude of the losses and in a quiet voice he admitted it would not exceed \$25 in a year.

One would hope that Blanck and Harris would have been mortified by what had happened, not to mention by what they had



The ninth floor of the Asch Building after the fire. The building was fireproof and was subsequently renovated. The contents, however, were not fireproof. The remains of two of Triangle’s long work benches can be seen, revealing how closely the workers were packed together on the shop floor. The long drive shaft that simultaneously powered all the sewing machines on the bench can be seen under the closer bench.

done. But in the summer of 1913, Max Blanck was arrested once again. He was charged with locking a door during working hours at his factory on Fifth Avenue. At his trial, Blanck admitted locking the door and said his workers’ thefts would ruin him if he didn’t. But, in the end, Blanck was found guilty and the judge, apologetically, fined him \$20, the minimum amount.

The aftermath of the fire was unpleasant for Blanck and Harris, as they surely didn’t enjoy being tried for manslaughter. They claimed financial ruin although

they were able to afford high priced legal help. Their lawyer Steuer not only got them acquitted of the manslaughter charges, he also helped them realize a profit from the fire. Blanck and Harris filed insurance claims far exceeding their losses. Faced with a fight with Steuer, the insurance companies caved in and paid out \$60,000 above the documented losses. That amounted to a profit of \$400 per fire victim. The good fortune of Blanck and Harris did not lead to generosity towards the victims’

families. Steuer prevented anyone from collecting anything from Blanck and Harris. So much for having regrets about the 146 workers.

Although Blanck and Harris would be considered loathsome by today’s standards, and certainly workers around 1911 felt that way, it’s clear that vicious union-busting, hazardous working conditions, and even fire insurance fraud and arson were commonplace at the time.

Industrial Reform in the Wake of the Triangle Fire

Cynics of the day thought this tragedy, like so many others, would bring a series of consequences: shock, grief, anger, resolve and posturing, exhaustion, business as usual, and faded memories. [FIGURES 8 AND 9 NEAR HERE] But change did occur. To begin with, the labor movement had momentum and union ranks swelled from 30,000 in 1909 to 250,000 in 1913. The socialist political movement was also gaining strength. The



Expressions of mourning for the victims were followed by protests against working conditions and demands for fundamental change in business practices.



One of a set of lantern slides discovered recently in a museum in British Columbia. The slides clearly pertain to the Triangle Fire but their history is unknown. This slide shows the makeshift morgue that was set up on the Charities Pier on the East River. Some 100,000 people lined up to view the bodies. They passed by the two rows of coffins at a rate of 6,000 people per hour.

Triangle fire was an opportunity for District Attorney Charles Whitman. It was his “big break” case and afterwards he successfully ran for Governor of New York. The fire was also an opportunity for William Randolph Hearst, the publisher of the *American*, who also had political ambitions. Hearst used the pages of the *American* to campaign for new laws, and even commissioned his own experts to propose such legislation. The wealthy activists in the progressive movement in New York created a blue-ribbon panel called the Committee on Safety to develop and lobby for new legislation to improve working conditions.

In the end, however, it was the entrenched political machine that orchestrated change. After the Democratic wins in the 1910 election, Tammany Hall’s Charles Murphy picked Al Smith and Robert Wagner to be the leaders of the State Assembly and State Senate. With Murphy’s approval, Smith and Wagner established a legislative commission under their direction called the Factory Investigating Commission and gave it broad, long-term powers. Tammany Hall had, for years, used patronage and other means to garner support from workers as well as factory owners. Now, Murphy

sensed the future lay with the rapidly growing working class which was also rapidly organizing and gaining political strength. The Factory Investigating Commission spearheaded the revamping of the state’s labor laws and this served as the model for the rest of the nation.

Although the names of the victims slipped from the public consciousness, the fire was not forgotten and had a major influence on American politics, policy, law, and economics. In the aftermath of the fire, one might imagine the socialist movement would have gotten a tremendous boost. But, it was time for change, and the ruling Tammany Hall machine recognized this. Thus, the socialist agenda was co-opted by the dominant political party.

Further Reading:

- Von Drehle, David. *Triangle — the fire that changed America* (New York: Grove Press, 2003).
- Stein, Louis. *The Triangle Fire* (New York: J.R. Lipincott & Co., 1962)
- The Kheel Center at Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations has put extensive materials pertaining to the fire on its website www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/



