



The Triangle Waist Company Fire

The tragic Triangle Waist Company fire on March 25, 1911 in New York City's Greenwich Village was a major turning point in American history.

One hundred and forty-six workers, mostly teenage Jewish and Italian immigrant girls, perished after the fire broke out on Triangle Company's sweatshop on the 8th and 9th floors of the building. Factory foremen had locked the exit doors to keep workers from taking breaks and stealing scraps of fabric. Other doors only opened inward and were blocked by the stampede of workers struggling to escape. Workers burned or they jumped to their deaths.

Before the Fire

- Fire Commissioner Rhinelander Waldo had ordered sprinklers to be installed in a number of warehouses. Three weeks before the Triangle conflagration, the Protective League of Property Owners held an indignation meeting. The League's counsel, Pendleton Dudley, then issued a statement charging that the Fire Department was seeking to force the use of 'cumbersome and costly' apparatus...

...And the *New York Herald* noted that the owners claimed the order amounted to "'a confiscation of property...'" (Stein, p. 25-26)

- In 1909, Mr. H. F. J. Porter, one of the ablest fire prevention experts in the city was recommended to Triangle, in the wake of a commissioner's visit, to set up a number of fire drills for the firm. In June of 1909, he wrote them to offer his services, but he received no reply to his letter. The *New York Times* later tracked him down, after the fire, and he said: "The neglect of factory owners in the matter of the safety of their employees is absolutely criminal. One man whom I advised to install a fire drill replied to me: 'Let 'em burn. They're a lot of cattle anyway.'" (Stein, p. 29.)

After the Fire

Governor John Alden Dix (D) created the Factory Investigating Commission (FIC) on June 30, 1911. The commission's powers were unprecedented in New York history—the power to subpoena witnesses and documents, to elect its own members, to employ experts, and to change its own rules.

Over two years, the Commissioners interviewed almost 500 witnesses and visited over 3,000 factories in twenty industries. They found buildings that were fire traps and breeding grounds for infectious disease. Some had no fire escapes. They discovered poorly ventilated bakeries with rat droppings. Only 21 percent of the factories even had bathrooms, and most of them were unsanitary. They visited canning factories that employed children, some as young as 5 years old. It was not unusual for women to work 18 hour days.

After the Fire: Support for Reform

- Rabbi Stephen Wise, speaking to middle-to-upper class reformers at the Metropolitan Opera House (at an event organized by JP Morgan's niece, Anne). "We have laws that in a crisis we find are no laws and we have enforcement that when the hour of trial comes we find is no enforcement."

Stein, The Triangle Fire, Page 142-3

- Al Smith, future governor of New York and FIC commissioner, said the following to Frances Perkins. "I can't see what all this talk is about. How is it wrong for the State to intervene with regard to the working conditions of people who work in the factories and mills? I don't see what they mean. What did we set up the government for?"

(Martin. p. 120, Frances Perkins Manuscripts.)

- George M. Price, factory safety expert. “There is a tendency on the many employers to economize not only in matters of legitimate expense, but also in space, light, air, and certain other safeguards to the health and lives of workers.”

[The employers] “must be shown that the health of the workers is of paramount importance to the state, which not only has the right but is bound to take measures that workers be properly safeguarded in the course of employment.”

Second Report of the Factory Investigating Committee, Volume I, pages 227-8; 416

- Recently retired Chief Edward F. Croker: “The majority you go in are unkept; they are dirty; they are unclean; their stock is strewn all over the floor. Where they use machinery there are no passageways whatsoever....In a great many cases there is only about one door on that loft you can get in. Goods are piled up in front of the windows, in front of the doors, and you have got to use a battering ram to get into any of them”

“They pay absolutely no attention to the fire hazard or to the protection of the employees in these buildings. That is their last consideration.”

Preliminary Report of the Factory Investigating Committee, Volume II, page 18.

- Rose Sabran, a Triangle worker, said: “If the union had won we would have been safe. Two of our demands were for adequate fire escapes and for open doors from the factories to the streets. But the bosses defeated us and we didn’t get the open doors or better fire escapes. So our friends are dead.” (Stein, Triangle Fire, p. 18, referring to the 1909 garment industry strike)

After the Fire: Continued Opposition to Reform

- The *New York Times* tended to be very pro-business during this period. After the fire, but before the launch of the FIC: “Excited persons rarely accomplish anything...No new laws are needed.” (Von Drehle, p. 185)

Real Estate Industry

- During one executive session, he [Robert Dowling, NYC real estate man, and voice of business on the FIC] referred to statistics on the number of people killed in factory fires. Notwithstanding the catastrophe at the Triangle, he ventured, “It is an infinitesimal proportion of the population.”
FIC Final Report; Von Drehle, p. 215-216.
- “Many owners will be so financially embarrassed by the great expenditure made necessary thereby that great numbers of buildings would be forced into foreclosure or otherwise sacrificed.”
The Realty League inveighs against the FIC fire regulations. “Realty Men Protest. Albany Measures for Fire Prevention Regarded as Oppressive”. NYT, March 19, 1913.
- In response to the changes to the fire code, a spokesman for the Associated Industries of New York insisted that the Wagner-Smith acts would mean “the wiping out of industry in this state.”
FIC Third Report, Vol 1, p. 62; Martin, p. 108
- “To my mind this is all wrong....The experience of the past proves conclusively that the best government is the least possible government, that the unfettered initiative of the individual is the force that makes a country great and that this initiative should never be bound...”
Laurence M. D. McGuire president of the Real Estate Board of NYC. He replaced Dowling on the FIC in July of 1914. FIC Fourth Report, 1915, Vol. 1, p 76-83.
- “The owners of real property are becoming terrified by the number of laws which have been enacted affecting real property in New York City...in each succeeding year there is a law passed...This compels the owner to expend...large sums of money, which...are absolutely needless and useless.”
Op-ed by George W. Olvany, special counsel to the Real Estate Board: “The Fire Hazard in Big Buildings,” NYT. May 3, 1914.

- “It is almost impossible to sell any real property in New York City at the present time at its assessed value.”
Op-ed by George W. Olvany, special counsel to the Real Estate Board: “The Fire Hazard in Big Buildings,” NYT. May 3, 1914.
- “The Real Estate Board of New York is informed that thousands of factories are migrating to New Jersey and Connecticut in order to be freed from the oppressive laws of New York State.”
Op-ed by George W. Olvany, special counsel to the Real Estate Board: “The Fire Hazard in Big Buildings,” NYT. May 3, 1914.
- “You can no longer distinguish the real estate owner by the smile of prosperity, because his property is now a burden and a liability instead of a comfort and a source of income. To own a factory building in New York City is now a calamity.”
Op-ed by George W. Olvany, special counsel to the Real Estate Board: “The Fire Hazard in Big Buildings,” NYT. May 3, 1914.
- “This condition is depreciating the value of real estate, restricting its marketability, and driving manufacturers out of the City and State of New York”
Resolution adopted by The Board of Governors of the Real Estate Board of New York. “Too Much Prevention,” NYT. May 17, 1914.
- You must “relieve [New York’s] real estate from the terrible yolk of oppression which has been throttling it for some years past...”
Charles F. Noyes, president of the Charles F. Noyes (Realty) Company, on the FIC’s new laws. “Public Hearings on Factory Laws,” NYT. June 21, 1914.
- “We are of the opinion that if the present recommendations are insisted upon...factories will be driven from the city, labor will be compelled to accompany them, factories, tenements, and small houses will become tenantless with the final result of demoralization in tax collections by the city. What is wanted is evolution and not revolution.”
Resolution adopted by the United Real Estate Owners Association’s against the FIC laws. “Drastic Changes Demanded in Labor Law,” NYT. June 28, 1914.

Bakeries

- “They are gradually getting better. I do think they are filthy and ought to be stopped, but I do not know where the bread would be baked if it were not in those bakeries.”

“You are putting a lot of people out of business and perhaps raising the price of bread....things are getting a little bit better [without “drastic” reforms], slowly, and I am not certain whether or not that would not be a pretty drastic remedy, not against the worst ones, but against the best of that class.”
P. Tecumseh Sherman. Attorney, and previously held the position of Commissioner of the Labor Department of New York, from 1905 to 1907. FIC, Preliminary report, Volume II, p. 554.
- “I want to say that a bakery that conducts their business in what you term a cellar can keep it just as clean as though they were in any other part of the building. I believe it entirely depends upon the person who is running the place.”
Leslie A. Ware, a baker. FIC, Preliminary report, Volume II, p. 739.
- “The rent is very high, and you can’t recent a place above ground in New York city to establish a bakery. If you can’t have a bake shop in a basement in New York City, you can’t have a bake shop here, that is all, unless people will pay prohibitive prices for bread; And we hear a great deal now about the high cost of living.”
Mr. Frank P. Hill, another baker. FIC, Preliminary report, Volume II, p. 741.
- “We would consider it a grave injustice to ourselves as well as to the bakers and the public at large if the bakers in our city were unfairly discriminated against in their struggle for existence either by conditions such as they could not reasonably hope to contend against, or by making it possible for

bakers of other localities to determine their business here in their home market by more favorable terms. This, we believe, will be the effect of section 116 of the proposed law, which prohibits the establishment of future cellar bakeries.

“Such [sanitary] certificates will give a possible opportunity for an unfair person to make demands for graft on the small baker, who is always reluctant to go into the courts to force recognition of his rights. We believe either or both of these sections would have the effect of gradually reducing rather than increasing the number of small bakeries.”

J.C. Bogart, New York Flour Club (they represented over 80 percent of firms in the flour business). FIC, Second Report, Volume IV, p. 2302-2303.

- “If you eliminate further bakeshops in the cellar...the poor man is going to suffer, and we are crying now for the high cost of living. If you will wipe out the cellar bakeries, the poor man will get a smaller loaf of bread.”
Dr. Abraham Korn, president of the United Real Estate Owners’ Association. FIC, Second Report, Volume IV p. 2298.
- “If you pass this bill, it will not be ten years certainly; I believe it will not be five years until practically every cellar bakery in New York city will be out of business.” [Senator Griffin: “Isn’t that a good thing?”] I don’t think the public is going to gain anything by forcing the small baker out of business.”
Frank P. Hill, representative of the New York Retail Bakers’ Association. FIC, Second Report, Volume IV, p. 2299.
- [This package of bills is] “superfluous and entirely unnecessary and is a menace to our business”.
Charles E. Abbott, representing the Wholesale Bakers’ Association. FIC, Second Report, Volume IV p. 2300.
- “If in the candy business, people engaged in this line in other states who come to New York for their product are unable to receive it, they will take their trade away from the State of New York and give it to other states where this work can be produced in greater volume possibly at a reduced price.”
Alfred J. Talley of the Confectioners Association for the State of New York. He is asking for an exemption for candy manufacturers from the shorter day laws. Specifically, he wants an exemption of “of ten hours per week additional overtime work.” And a similar sixty day period around Easter, allowing for 64 hours a week. FIC, Second Report, Volume IV p. 1641.
- “This bill will make it difficult for the poor baker to continue to exist, thereby making it easier for the large baker to combine with his larger brother and increase the price of bread or lower the size of the loaf, why, that is a very strong point in opposition to this bill, because the very people you are going to aid—the poor have got to be taken into consideration.”
Harold M. Phillips, of the United States Real Estate Owners Association. FIC, Second Report, Volume IV, p. 1297

Canneries

- “There really is a close competition between the canned good industry of this state and that of other states, and that while the canners of other states are operating under general exemptions from the labor law provisions, it will produce a harsh, if not destructive, competition to compel the New York canner to attempt to operate under strict regulation as to the hours of employment.”
“Conditions in Canneries”, Memorandum of the New York State Cannery Association. By John F. Connor, attorney for the cannery association. FIC, Second Report, Appendix X, II, p. 1300.
- “I wonder do the American people ever stop to realize that these social uplifters are one of the chief causes of the high cost of living. If they had their way a can of tomatoes instead of costing 12 cents would cost at least 50 cents. This is the inevitable result of their endeavors.”
Director of the largest canning company in the state responds to minimum wage and FIC efforts in general. Second Report of the Factory Investigating Commission, Appendix V. P. 873.

Factories: Garment and other

- “‘I don’t believe we are under any obligation,’ said one manufacturer, ‘to work and force spiritual and mental improvement on the men because they work for us.’ Another simply said: ‘This is not a charitable business.’”
FIC Second Report; Vol. III, p 845; p 1213 (note: The individuals quoted in the FIC document are often not named. They are only described as a manufacturer, a foreman, a business owner, etc.)
- “I have seen children working in factories, and I have seen them working at home and they were perfectly happy.”
Mabel A. Clark, of the W.N. Clark Company. Superintendent, vice president, and stockholder. FIC, Second Report, Volume IV
- [Against the bill recommending occupancy limits depending on the number of exits provided and the number of floors] “While we are in favor of a restricted occupancy... we believe that the bill in the form proposed will work great disadvantage to our trades, requiring manufacturers almost to double their area capacity in order to employ the usual amount of people that their business demands. We respectfully submit that any such procedure would not only be of great injury to the trade, but to the state, by forcing a number of these establishments to remove their factories to other states.”
From a memorandum submitted by the Needle Trades Associations to the FIC. FIC, Second Report, Appendix X, VII, p. 1336.
- “The chief cause [of lead poisoning among color workers] used to be the careless habits of the men, in not properly washing themselves after handling the lead materials, eating their lunches with their hands covered with the stuff...”

“They are not over-intelligent... They formed habits of living that they carried with them to their work, and that made it very difficult indeed to correct them.”

“The only tendency toward illness comes to men who are intemperate in their habits. In every case of poisoning I have heard of, the man was an exceedingly hard drinker.... Where the men are temperate in their habits I never found a case...”
Arthur S. Summers, a manufacturer of dry colors. (He provided buckets filled with water for his workers to wash their hands after handling lead or arsenic, which was something the FIC later mandated. In retrospect it was an inadequate step, but at the time it represented an unprecedented interference by the government in business affairs.) Preliminary Report, Volume III. p. 1672-1675.
- On why they don’t have medical inspections of their workers: “In every case where the men have claimed to have been infected or affected by the lead they were intemperate men... [Meaning:] A man that drank a good deal of beer. ...the other men who worked longer at it, who don’t drink, are not affected by it.”
Clarence F. Shipman, foreman at the Splitdorf Magneto Company (lead). Preliminary Report, Volume III. (p. 1703-5).
- “The hardship entailed on a certain proportion of the home workers, without means of support, the distress they will suffer, their loss will be greater than the benefit coming to the public through the elimination of that work.”
Max Adler, owner of a garment factory. FIC, Second Report, Volume IV, p. 1994.
- “Not only is this against the principal of home rule, but such legislation transfers the enforcement of the law to an unknown and untried body of men and takes it out of the hands of the Fire Department....one of the most efficient departments of the City of New York.”
Charles F. Noyes “who represents owners of many store and loft buildings in Manhattan”. “Factory Law Amendments: Realty Interests to Make Vigorous Protest Against Proposed Law,” NYT, March 23, 1913.

- “This night work has been rendered necessary largely because of the Government’s perfectly unreasonable attitude towards large corporations, which has made it impossible for managers of large concerns to know whether....they could expand their plans to keep up with increasing demands or not.”
George W. Perkins, director of the Harvester Company. The FIC investigated a Harvester plant where women worked all night long, while suffering through atrocious conditions including dust caked everything leading to chronic lung troubles for many workers. The women earned (at most) \$7 a week or around \$150 in today’s dollars. From “Finds Women Driven By Harvester Trust,” NYT, August 22, 1912.
- “We have been legislated to death.”
James T. Hoyle, Secretary of the Manufacturers’ Association, speaking against the FIC. “City Needs Simpler Factory Inspection,” NYT. May 19, 1914.
- “In Utica no one ever bothers the factories about these things. Why are we bothered this way? No, we do not keep the names and addresses of our homeworkers. Women wanting such work come in and get it and that’s all there is about it.”
The manager of a felt shoe factory, where the employees were overworked, the conditions were unsanitary, and the wages low. The commissioners noted that the factory was “full of vermin”. Second Report of the Factory Investigating Commission, Appendix IV. P. 717.
- “I do not believe in legislation so radical that it means an attack on the valuation of real estate or driving out of our state manufacturing concerns or other large business enterprises.”
Governor Martin Glynn (D) sides with the business interests, signaling the FIC’s declining power. “For Easier Factory Laws,” NYT. July 1, 1914.
- “Labor commissions, factory commissions and investigations, commissions on every subject in the Business Directory, have chilled capital; and when capital catches cold, labor freezes to death....Is the main cause of the lack of work hard to seek? Is it not that business has had too much interference from the state...too many everlasting commissions first prying into every man’s affairs, and then telling him how to run them?”
State Superintendent of Banks Eugene Lamb Richards addressing the New York State Bankers’ Association. “Wants Agitation Stopped,” NYT. Jan. 31 1915.
- “The business men of this country who have made and saved money should no longer be supervised, criticized, or controlled by men who have neither made nor saved it.”
State Superintendent of Banks Eugene Lamb Richards addressing the New York State Bankers’ Association. “Wants Agitation Stopped,” NYT. Jan. 31 1915.

Industry’s Dire Warnings Never Came to Pass

- “Contrary to the predictions of the canners, the next year there was no shortage of canned vegetables or fruits.” (Martin, p. 113).
- “That same threat was made when the child labor law was passed and not one of the manufacturers moved out.”
Abram I. Elkus, counsel for the commission. State Labor Commissioner Lynch said he hadn’t heard of a single manufacturer who had actually moved because of FIC activities. “City Needs Simpler Factory Inspection,” NYT. May 19, 1914.
- “Notwithstanding all the talk of a probable exodus of manufacturing interests the commission has not found a single case of a manufacturer intending to leave the State because of the enforcement of the factory laws.”
From “Seeks To Simplify Building Inspection,” NYT, July 27, 1914.

What the FIC Reformers Accomplished

The legislative accomplishments of the Factory Investigating Commission were unprecedented in New York State. In 1913 alone, State Senator Robert Wagner and Assemblyman Al Smith passed 25 FIC bills through their respective houses, basically creating the state labor and fire codes from scratch. The FIC existed between from 1911 until 1915. In first phase, 1911-1913 the commission focused on fire safety, workplace sanitation, and other occupational health and safety issues. In its later, more ambitious phase, from 1913 through 1915, the FIC turned its attention to welfare issues. They were remarkably successful in restricting child labor and granting women workers a reasonable workday (for political and legal reasons it was harder to advocate for male workers). The FIC even tried to institute a minimum wage for New York, but their political opponents stifled the policy proposal, and quickly dismantled the commission.

Below you will find some of the principal accomplishments of the FIC. This is not a complete list of the reforms passed.

Fire safety bills:

- Fire drills became mandatory for firms of 25 or more employees.
- Automatic sprinklers became mandatory in buildings seven stories or higher and factories of 200 or more employees.
- Factory doors had to be unlocked during work hours, and they were required to swing outwards.
- Exits and aisles could not be obstructed.
- A building construction code requiring that new buildings include multiple enclosed fireproof stairways and fire escapes.

Other workplace safety and sanitation laws:

- Cellar bakeries banned, meaning no new bakeries could be opened in cellars, but those still in operation could remain.
- Employers are required to provide clean drinking water, washrooms, and toilets for their employees.
- If poisons or gases were used in production, hot water had to be provided for employee use. (As completely ineffectual as this provision may appear today, it was the first instance of the American state regulating hazardous workplaces.)
- Employers were required to provide seats with backs for their female employees.

Labor and social welfare laws:

- Before the FIC the New York Department of Labor (NY DoL) didn't even keep track of new factories. FIC mandated that new factories register with the NY DoL within 30 days of beginning operation.
- Before the FIC the number of NY DoL inspectors was miniscule: 85 inspectors for 30,699 factories. FIC forced the hire of more inspectors and raised the inspector salaries to attract more qualified professionals to the job.
- Women could work no more than a 54 hour work week and a nine hour day.
- Night work was declared illegal for women between 10:00 PM and 6:00 AM. (Many women were spending all day caring for home and family, and then working all night at a sweatshop.)
- Children ages 18 and under were banned from work that could injure their health and well-being.
- Children under 18 had to go to medical boards to get work permits.
- New York had previously passed a law mandating a maximum-eight hour work week for children. Mercantile establishments had been exempted from the old law, but the FIC negated that distinction.

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