

## **Labor Union, Safety, and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire**

*By Ed Leavy, SVFT Executive Union Representative*

The SVFT, through AFT-CT, over the past few years has sponsored a number of OSHA trainings to improve safety practices in shops. The SVFT also works in conjunction with the CTHSS to have monthly Health and Safety visits to look at the safety concerns in the schools. These actions are in the long-standing practice of labor unions taking action to protect their workers. Experience and tragedy has taught us that unless unions take steps to protect their workers, management is unlikely to do so.

One especially horrific tragedy that brought long-overdue attention to the lack of safety practices by management was the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire in New York City in 1911. The International Ladies' Garment Workers Union had led strikes in 1909 and 1910 to protest not only low wages, but in particular the unsafe and unsanitary conditions of the workplaces. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company was able to break the strikes through the use of scab workers and intimidation, and the shop remained nonunion. In March of 1911, a small fire broke out on the ninth floor from an improperly discarded cigarette. Between 600 and 700 workers were working for Triangle that day; even though it was a Saturday, Triangle did not recognize the weekend as days off. The company was on the top three floors of a building on the corner of Greene Street and Washington Place.

Though the fire started small, it soon grew out of control. The executives on the top floor were able to climb the stairs to the roof, step over a narrow passage between buildings, and walk down the stairs of the adjoining building. The workers on the eighth and ninth floors were not as lucky. The owners of the company had locked all the doors from the outside to prevent unauthorized breaks. There was only one elevator, and as panic set in it became difficult to close the door. The elevator never reached the ninth floor. The workers, nearly all young women, began leaping out of the windows. The streets below were littered with charred and broken bodies. When the fire was finally put out, the bodies inside were often impossible to identify. One reporter wrote, "I looked upon the heap of dead bodies... and I remembered... these same girls had demanded more sanitary conditions and more safety precautions in the shops. These dead bodies were their answer."

The tragedy finally allowed the ILGWA to make inroads on the government requiring factory safety for garment workers. It is this movement that led to the formation of OSHA. Obviously, working conditions today are considerably improved over the past century, but some similarities exist between the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire and today's world. Worker safety is still often a contention between labor and management. It still too often requires tragedy to get action on unsafe conditions. And unfortunately, the same sense of justice still too often prevails: the owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, who locked the doors to prevent breaks and thus condemned their workers to death, were found innocent of all charges against them.

*Most of the information for this article is from the book There is Power in a Union by Philip Dray.*