

From Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire to current labor law protections enforced by Labor Department

On March 25, 1911, New York City experienced the deadliest industrial disaster which today ranks as the fourth highest loss of life from an industrial accident in U.S. history. Near the close of the workday, a fire flared up at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, killing 146 and injuring 71. Those who were employed were mostly women and children between the ages of 13 to 23.

The only safety measures that were in place included 27 buckets of water and a fire escape plan that collapsed when put to use. The Fire Marshal concluded that the fire was caused by the disposal of an unextinguished match or cigarette butt in the scrap bin under one of the cutters' table on the eighth floor.

When the workers tried to escape, most of the doors to the stairwells and exits had been locked forcing people to jump from the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors. Sadly, the doors that were not locked only opened inwards and were effectively held shut by the onrush of workers escaping the fire.

When the fire engines arrived, water streams from their hoses were only able to reach the seventh floor. Furthermore, ladders could only reach between the sixth and seventh floors.

March 25, 2011 marks the 100 anniversary of what still remains as one of the most vivid and horrid tragedies that led to labor law protections. In 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act was enacted to place restrictions on youth employment regarding legal age, hours and times standards, and permitted/prohibited occupations for teens under 18. In 1970, Congress passed the Occupational and Safety Health Act to ensure worker and workplace safety.

Today, fire departments have a Fire Prevention division. Restrictions are now in place to prevent fires from happening and to prevent the blockage of escape routes. In addition, fire sprinkler systems must be installed if a company employs more than 25 people above ground level and firefighting equipment must be maintained in the building. Workplaces are also required to educate employees on proper use of a fire extinguisher as well as escape routes and fire drills.

Prior to the tragedy, government had mostly stayed away from businesses feeling it had no power to regulate it. After the fire, government could not avoid enacting laws to protect the workers, especially teen workers. New laws now require employers to have an emergency evacuation plan in writing and posted at the workplace.

For more information on workplace safety and the youth employment laws, contact the Oklahoma Department of Labor at www.labor.ok.gov or 1-888-269-5353.