

The Triangle Factory Fire

A century ago this month, a deadly fire in New York killed 146 people—many of them teens—and led to reform of the nation's labor laws

Characters

- *Ellie Weiss, 14, an immigrant from Austria
- Clara Lemlich, 23, an immigrant from Russia
- Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL)
- Surka Brenman, 17, an immigrant from Russia
- Joseph Brenman, her older brother
- Rosie Brenman, their sister, oldest of the three
- Dora Miller, a Triangle factory worker
- *Max Zorsky, 16, an immigrant from Austria
- Joseph Zito, elevator operator, an immigrant from Italy
- Rosaria Maltese, 14, an immigrant from Italy
- *Police officer
- Morris Passoff, 15, an immigrant from Russia and a runner for the New York World newspaper
- William Shepherd, a reporter
- Frances Perkins, a social worker, later, U.S. Secretary of Labor
- Narrators A-E
- * Indicates a fictional or composite character. All others were real people.

Words to Know

- **picket line** (*n*): a group of people who protest unfair wages and/or working conditions by chanting slogans and carrying signs
- **sweatshop** (*n*): a factory where employees work in crowded, unsafe conditions for extremely low wages

PROLOGUE

Narrator A: In the early 20th century, the height of women's fashion was a tailored blouse called a shirtwaist. At the same time, new machinery, along with cheap and plentiful labor, made it possible for factories to manufacture huge numbers of shirtwaists and other "ready-made" clothing.

Narrator B: Between 1901 and 1910, almost 9 million immigrants arrived in the U.S. Most came from Europe, seeking a way out of poverty, an escape from religious persecution, or both. They often arrived penniless and ended up working long hours in unsafe conditions for low wages. Even kids as young as 7 worked—no laws yet existed to limit child labor. Though some people had called for workplace reform, it took a deadly blaze in a New York City **sweatshop** called the Triangle Waist Factory to spur the nation to act.

SCENE 1

Narrator C: It's November 22, 1909. Triangle factory employees are on strike to protest working

conditions. Out on the **picket line**, Ellie Weiss runs into a friend.

Ellie Weiss: What's the big rush?

Clara Lemlich: Samuel Gompers, the big labor leader, heard about our strike! He's speaking at a meeting a few blocks away.

Ellie: A man that important is supporting poor girls like us?

Clara: I told you that if we didn't give up on our strike, people would take notice and help us. Come to the meeting with me.

Ellie: I have to get home. My pa is furious that I'm on strike. It takes all of us working to keep our family from starving.

Clara: Doesn't he know how awful our jobs are?

Ellie: Yes, but at least I bring home \$6 every week.

Clara: To earn that \$6, we have to be at our machines 11 hours a day, 6 days a week!

Narrator D: The only break workers get is a half hour for lunch—which consists of an apple or a hunk of dry cornbread with some water.

Ellie: All day long, we're bent over our sewing machines or cutting

continued on p. 20 →



10TH FLOOR: Many workers escaped by going up to and across the roof.

9TH FLOOR: With one door locked, most workers on this floor perished.

8TH FLOOR: The fire broke out here, with most workers escaping.



AMERICAN HISTORY PLAY

boards. Stiff necks, aching backs, bloody fingers! Plus it's dark, dusty, and noisy. Not that I dare cry about it—a tear stain on a piece of fabric would get me fired.

Clara: We deserve better treatment. That's why we're on strike.

Ellie: Striking is almost as hard as the job. On our feet all day, walking the picket line. Then there's the thugs the company hires to scare us!

Clara: They beat me and broke some of my ribs. But I won't give up! Come to that meeting with me.

Narrator E: Thousands of garment workers are jammed into the hall.

Samuel Gompers: There comes a time when not to strike is but to rivet the chains of slavery upon our wrists. . . . Mr. Shirtwaist Manufacturer, there are things of more importance than your convenience and your profit. There are the lives of the boys and girls working in your businesses!

Narrator A: The crowd cheers.

Clara (*yelling out from the crowd*): I want to say a few words!

Ellie: Let her speak!

Clara (*from the stage*): No more talk! It's time for garment workers throughout New York to join us. I call for a general strike—now!

Narrator B: Cheering wildly, the crowd agrees. The next day, more than 20,000 garment-industry workers in New York City go on

strike. Clara becomes a hero of the “Uprising of the 20,000,” as the strike becomes known. By the time it ends in February 1910, some 40,000 workers have taken part.

Narrator C: Out of 353 garment-manufacturing companies, 339 agree to better conditions. Even so, life for workers at many factories, including the Triangle, remains difficult.

SCENE 2

Narrator D: About a year after the strike ends, three siblings join a crowd of workers climbing stairs to the building's ninth floor. The date is Saturday, March 25, 1911.

Surka Brenman: Six weeks ago I got to the U.S. from Russia, dreaming of streets paved with gold. Now, six days a week, I sit in a dark room bent over a sewing machine.

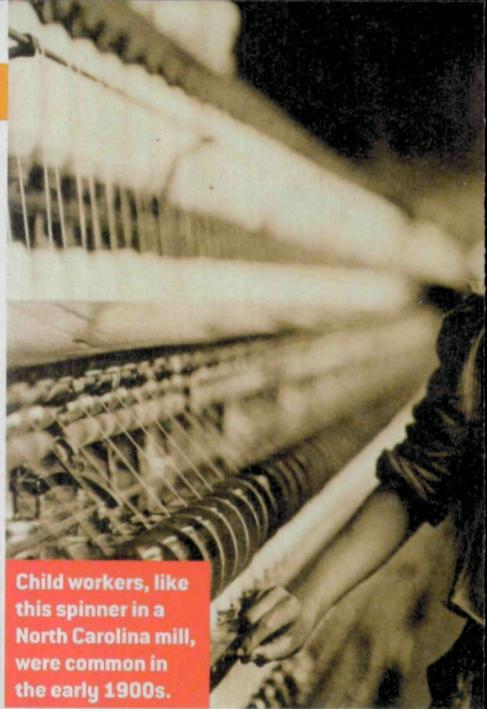
Joseph Brenman: We came to America to be free. No one ever said it would be easy.

Rosie Brenman: At least we're earning a living—and it's payday!

Narrator E: On the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors, workers head to their machines before the start-to-work bell. A minute's delay could cost them pay, or even their jobs.

SCENE 3

Narrator A: Hours later, on the building's eighth floor . . .



Child workers, like this spinner in a North Carolina mill, were common in the early 1900s.

Dora Miller: Why did we come back to work after the strike? The company's goons knocked my teeth out. Yet here I am, slaving away.

Ellie: Because we need the money.

Narrator B: In the back of the room, someone screams. Then . . .

Max Zorsky: Fire! Lord help us!

Narrator C: A fire has started in a waste bin. A man tosses a pail of water to douse the flames, but it's too late. Panicked eighth-floor workers stampede toward the two stairwells and a freight elevator.

Narrator D: The elevator door opens. The operator, unaware of the fire, is nearly knocked over by the crowd. As he closes the doors . . .

Dora: Wait, here comes my friend Ellie! Run, Ellie!

Joseph Zito: There's no more room, but I'll come right back. I promise!

Chronology Workers' Rights, Before & After Triangle

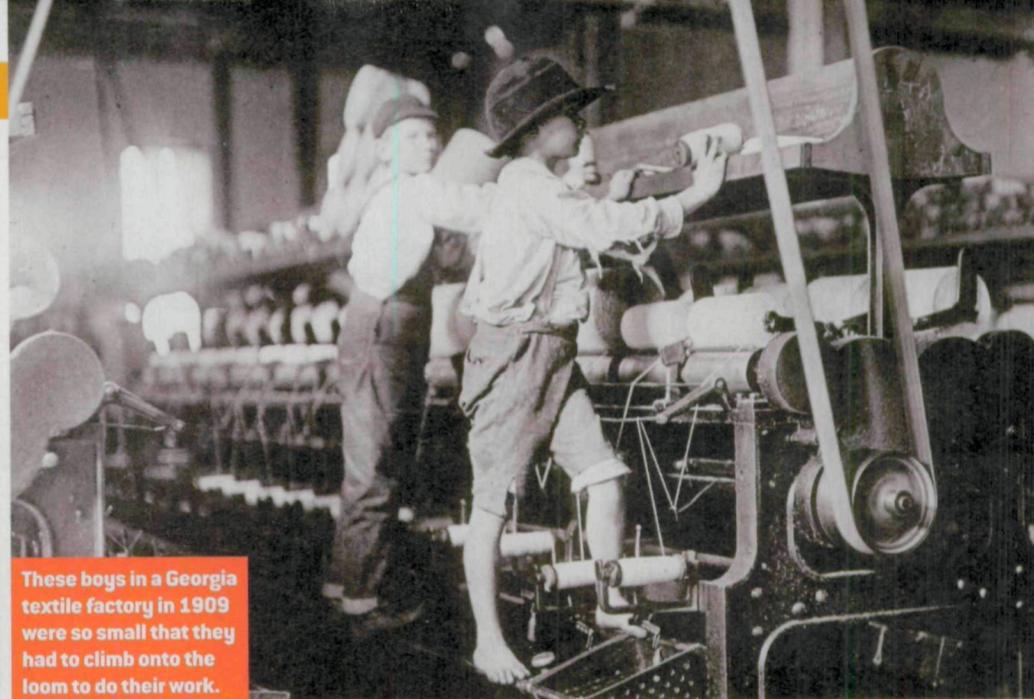
1901-1910 IMMIGRATION

Millions of immigrants flock to the U.S. Desperately poor, many work long hours in grimy factories for meager pay. Few laws exist to protect workers.

1909-1910 ▶ STRIKES

A strike against the Triangle Waist Company is organized; soon, about 20,000 other New York City garment workers join in. After 13 weeks and the arrest of 700 women, many factories agree to a 52-hour workweek and four paid vacation days a year.





These boys in a Georgia textile factory in 1909 were so small that they had to climb onto the loom to do their work.

Narrator E: Someone on the eighth floor calls to warn the others. The call to the tenth floor goes through, but not the one to the ninth. By the time most ninth-floor workers realize what's wrong, flames block one of the stairwells. At the other . . .

Rosaria Maltese: Someone please help us! This door won't budge!

Narrator A: It's jammed—or locked. The company often locked doors to keep workers from sneaking out with valuable materials.

SCENE 4

Narrator B: On the streets below, a crowd of onlookers has gathered.

Police officer: Get out of here, kid!

Morris Passoff: It's my job to be here! I'm a newspaper runner—I take reporters' stories back to the office. That's my horse cart.

Police officer: Then stand back. Here comes the fire department!

William Shepherd: My God, look at all those people crowding the ninth-floor windows, with flames and smoke behind them!

Police officer: It started on the eighth floor. Looks like people on the eighth got down a stairwell, and the folks on the 10th floor went to the roof and across to other buildings. But lots of people on the ninth are trapped.

Dora (running): I made it! The operator couldn't save any more of us because the elevator crashed!

Joseph Brenman (stumbling out): Surka! Rosie! Where are you?

Police officer: You need a doctor?

Joseph: Oh, God, I lost my sisters!

Frances Perkins: Officer! Too many people are on that fire escape!

Narrator C: It collapses under the girls' weight, plunging them to their deaths.

Shepherd: Some girls are jumping rather than die in the flames!

Perkins: This is a disaster! I'll remember it for the rest of my life.

Narrator D: In 45 terrible minutes, 146 factory workers died—most of them women and girls.

EPILOGUE

Narrator E: The Triangle fire led to state and national laws on workplace safety (see chronology).

Narrator A: Every March 25, people gather in New York City to commemorate the event. This year, a centennial procession will honor the victims—and the labor movement that sprang from the fire's ashes. —Kathy Wilmore

1911-1915 SAFETY LAWS

After the Triangle fire, New York enacts 36 new safety laws over the next four years. Other states follow.

1935 UNIONS

The National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act) prohibits employers from discriminating against union workers and guarantees workers the right to negotiate the terms of their employment.

1936 CHILD LABOR

Under the Walsh-Healy Act, the U.S. government agrees not to purchase goods made by children under 16.

1938 ▶ MINIMUM WAGE

President Franklin D. Roosevelt signs the Fair Labor Standards Act, which bans child labor, sets minimum ages for various types of work, and mandates a minimum wage [25 cents an hour] and overtime pay beyond 40 hours a week.

