

Friday, March 25th, marks the 100th anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire.

The tragedy of the Triangle fire is not just the deaths of 146 workers – mostly young women in their teens and early twenties – but the fact that those deaths were avoidable. If the owners of the factory hadn't locked the doors to the stairwells and exits, if they had installed a stable fire escape or put in sprinklers, many of those lives would not have been painfully and tragically lost. If the owners of the factory hadn't fought long and hard against their employees' right to join a union of their choice, those workers might not have been locked in and prevented from fleeing the fire, as the owners were able to do themselves.

The depictions of the tragedy by eyewitnesses are difficult to read. The fire broke out on the Saturday afternoon, at the end of the workday. Survivor Yetta Lubitz said that the warning and the fire arrived at the same time. Within three minutes, the only unlocked exit was blocked and the fire escape soon twisted and collapsed from the heat. Within 30 minutes, 146 lives were lost, including sixty-two people who died by jumping or falling from the ninth floor.

The International Ladies Garments Workers, the National Women's Trade Union League, and other unions didn't just mourn the victims – they organized. The day after the fire, 15,000 shirtwaist workers demonstrated in support for a 52-hour week and a 20 percent pay raise. On Sunday, thousands gathered at the Metropolitan Opera House and passed a resolution calling for a Bureau of Fire Prevention and a permanent citizens' committee to push for labor reforms.

Soon after, Governor Al Smith acted to create the Factory Investigating Commission, chaired by Robert Wagner, who would become a U.S. Senator and the sponsor of the National Labor Relations Act. One of its key investigator staffers was Frances Perkins, who became Secretary of Labor,

The impetus for reform came from the workers themselves. Their activism resulted in the passage of major worker protections – not just new fire safety laws but laws against 7-day work weeks and child labor. The Triangle tragedy resulted in more workers having the right to union representation, collective bargaining rights, and a voice at work.

In 1961, on the 50th anniversary of the Triangle fire, ILGWU President David Dubinsky attended the memorial service and said, “We want a fitting memorial to the martyrs we honor today. No better one can be found than to increase the respect for and the safety of workers.”

100 years later, those words continue to ring true. Today, we confront a coordinated effort to roll back the hard fought gains that were won not just because of the horrific nature of the tragedy that occurred but because of the organizing power of unions, workers and their supporters. Just as the Triangle Fire spurred people into action, the anti-working family agenda of Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker has mobilized millions. The message is clear: we will not go back to the days when workers had no voice, no dignity and no safety. We will not go back.