

“Who Will Protect the Working Girl?": The Effect of the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike and Triangle
Factory Fire on Early Twentieth Century Labor Organizations

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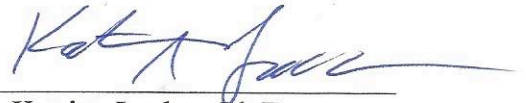
A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN HISTORY-MUSEUM STUDIES

University of Central Oklahoma
2017

THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Kate Lynn Beasley for the Master of Arts in History-Museum Studies was submitted to the graduate college on December 5, 2017 and approved by the undersigned committee.

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Abstract

Organized labor through unions was prominent as part of the Progressive Era in the early twentieth century. Under the influence of the American Federation of Labor, groups such as the Women's Trade Union League and International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union had active roles in New York City's labor movement. Early policy favored mass strikes as a way to earn collective bargaining between workers and their employers. In 1909, a revolution swept the City's garment trade when twenty thousand shirtwaist-making women walked out of their jobs. At the time, it was the largest gathering of women in American history. The WTUL and Local 25 of the ILGWU joined forces in representing strikers and securing a fair agreement between workers and businesses. On March 25, 1911, one hundred and forty-six innocent factory workers died in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire and the WTUL and ILGWU discovered their policies were not as strong as they had spent almost a decade believing. The following work examines the policies of the Women's Trade Union League, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, and how the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike and Triangle Factory Fire effected these organizations and initiated new labor policies. Examining the impact of both events through newspapers, the words of organizers, and analysis of other historians affirms the WTUL and ILGWU changed their policies, because of the Triangle Fire.

Acknowledgements

The first person I need to thank is Mary Jane Auch. Without her book *Ashes of Roses*, I would never have connected with the Triangle Fire or written this thesis. I also want to recognize the work of Leon Stein. Leon Stein was a man who committed his life to the American labor movement. Thanks to his thorough investigation of the Triangle Fire, the facts of the disaster and its victims have a permanent place in American history.

To my family: Thank you for supporting me through my entire academic career, especially my mother who has always supported my ambitious dreams. When I first told my father I was applying for a museum studies degree, he was skeptical. Through his original skepticism, he has had faith in my ability to overcome any challenge thrown my way.

Thank you, Dr. Katrina Lacher, for taking on my project. You gave me the room to write and research on my own while pushing me to go deeper with my personal analysis of this topic. Thank you to the rest of my committee: Dr. Marc Goulding and Dr. Michael Springer. Your time is invaluable and I thank you for agreeing to follow my thesis writing journey!

Finally, thank you to all of the women in the twentieth century who saw injustice in the labor system in the United States and did something about it. Your commitment to women workers continues to inspire people today.

Introduction

When I was in eighth grade, I read *Ashes of Roses* by Mary Jane Auch. The book follows the life of a young, Irish immigrant named Rose Nolan. Readers view her new life in New York City up until the day of March 25, 1911, when one hundred and forty-six people lost their lives in a fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory located in the top three floors of the Asch Building. Before reading the historical fiction book, I had never heard of the Triangle Fire. As a fourteen-year-old, I thought the fire was made up by the author to illustrate the perils of being a factory worker in the early twentieth century. It was only after I finished the book and used the internet to look up the fire that the reality of the event hit me. I was horrified when I discovered that girls my age burned and jumped to their death while trying to earn a living in the United States. Until that point, my history lessons had been about the image of the United States as a land of opportunity where anyone could pull themselves up by their bootstraps. From the time I looked at the pictures of the fire and read Leon Stein's book *The Triangle Fire*, I have been fascinated with the Triangle Fire as well as American labor history.

Leon Stein was the first historian to do in-depth research and writing about the Triangle Fire. His book, *The Triangle Fire*, was first published in 1967. Stein was involved as a writer and editor of *Justice*, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union newspaper, for thirty-eight years. He was also the editor of a book of short labor stories called *Out of the Sweatshop*. In *The Triangle Fire*, Stein uses a narrative approach to address the event. Stein conducted interviews with survivors, city officials, and the families of victims to create a story full of first-hand accounts of what happened during the fire and at the trial that followed. A variety of articles from different newspapers across New York City are also quoted throughout the narrative. The author attempts an objective stance, but it is clear Stein thinks the factory owners and the

building owner, Joseph Asch, were the people responsible for the disaster. Leon Stein's gathering of primary sources has led the way for future historians interested in exploring the fire and its consequences.

David Von Drehle's book, *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*, centers on the involvement of the political machine Tammany Hall in the Triangle Fire and America's labor movement. Von Drehle directs the focus of readers to background players involved in the labor movement in the early twentieth century. The author notes that following the fire, Tammany Hall became more progressive. Democratic candidates put into office had to offer platforms based on labor reform, because the machine's large majority of immigrant voters would no longer ignore unsatisfactory working and living conditions.

The Triangle Fire, the Protocol of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York by Richard A. Greenwald analyzes a different side of the Triangle Fire. As the title suggests, Greenwald establishes and then discusses the relation between the Triangle Fire and the 1910 Protocol of Peace championed by Louis Brandeis and the ILGWU. Throughout the book Greenwald writes about how labor organizers in the Progressive Era began creating new labor reforms and pushing the bounds of industrial relations. Greenwald argues that labor organizations still use daring new approaches to organize today.

Other historians including Jo Ann Argersinger and John F. McClymer have taken a more educational route while continuing Stein's narrative style of explaining the fire. Their goals are to inform readers about the Triangle Fire and its continued contemporary importance. The authors use primary source documents such as newspapers and then walk readers through how to analyze and interpret the sources. Both authors present a chronological narrative, which aims to

teach young students and emerging historians the place of the fire in American history as well as the importance of primary sources for the historical field.

Flesh and Blood so Cheap by Albert Marrin discusses all of the main points typically discussed with the fire, but the author also takes time to explore the background and lives of immigrants who worked in New York City factories. In researching their ethnic backgrounds, Marrin includes poems, songs, etc. that were important to immigrants as well as their experiences with life and leisure. Holding on to songs from their life before America and sharing them with other immigrants allowed them to bond over their homeland while learning the culture of their new home. Day to day factory life wore workers down, but the invention of movies and the creation of parks around the city gave immigrants the chance to relax after being shut up in a sweatshop or tenement. At the end of his work, Marrin also discusses organized crime in the garment industry and the rise of sweatshops overseas. In looking at sweatshops overseas, Marrin presents the argument that tragedies like the one at Triangle are what force developing countries to make improvements. Marrin briefly explains his personal belief that tragedy is a full-circle event that individual countries must experience rather than a global problem that can be solved.

The majority of works over the Triangle Fire touch on the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike, but there are not many that solely focus on the strike. One book that does is *We Shall Not Be Moved: The Women's Factory Strike of 1909* by Joan Dash. Dash's book informs readers about the purpose of the protest and its place in American history. In doing so, Dash discusses all of the social classes involved including their race, religion, and political beliefs. While covering each class, Dash describes prominent individuals, and also relates what the girl strikers thought about the elite women who helped put them in the public spotlight.

My work adds a different perspective to the discussion of the Triangle Fire and its place in America's labor history. The majority of research over the fire tells the same story with the same quotes and interviews. Instead of repeating what is already known, my research examines the effect the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike and Triangle Fire had on the policies and ideologies of the Women's Trade Union League and the International Lady Garments' Workers' Union. Prior to the fire, these two groups used mass strikes as the preferred method for gaining collective bargaining for their members. The Shirtwaist Strike was a milestone in women's labor history, yet many of the women who struck for months were killed a year later at the Triangle Factory by what they tried to prevent. Following the fire, the organizations reevaluated their methods. The Triangle Fire forced the WTUL and ILGWU to change their original policies. I will examine the change in policy and how it continues influencing the course of American labor.

The first part of my work is an analysis and explanation of the labor organizations that played a prominent role in the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike and consequently the Triangle Factory Fire. The American Federation of labor influenced the policies and ideologies used by the Women's Trade Union League and International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. A discussion of the labor groups' relationship with the AFL is essential, because it creates an understanding of the policies they followed before the Triangle Fire.

After explaining the origins of the organizations, my work will move into a discussion of the 1909 Shritwaist Strike and the 1911 Triangle Factory Fire. After the picketing had ended and an agreement had been signed, leaders fully thought their policies, especially organizing women through striking, had validated themselves. The Triangle Fire proved to these organizations that the 1909 walkout was not as successful as they originally thought. When the fire occurred, the

grief-stricken people of New York City remembered how only a year earlier, victims joined the WTUL and ILGWU for better working conditions.

I will also discuss how WTUL and ILGWU organizers reacted to the tragedy. It was a shock to women labor organizers that their methods were not as influential as they thought. Analyzing the people, classes, ethnicities, etc. in the 1909 event reveals the cracks in the united front labor leaders sold to the public. Until the Triangle Fire occurred, leaders were satisfied with their guidelines for aiding rebellious workers. The 1909 Shirtwaist Strike was the ultimate test and the Triangle Fire showed the organizations that they needed to change their methods.

The final part of my work looks at what course the WTUL and ILGWU chose to follow after the fire. In its aftermath, these organizations considered their pro-strike policies. When faced with the reality that their strategies were not working, the WTUL changed its focus to securing protective legislature for women. At the same time, the male-led ILGWU continued advocating for mass strikes while attempting to create a universally recognized protocol between union leaders and factory bosses. The Factory Investigating Commission was the most successful group created in response to the fire. It set the foundation for a new era of progressive reform in factories. Their findings led to the establishment of over twenty bills in New York specifically for factory workers in the state. By its dissolution in 1915, the commission had investigated thousands of factories across New York and published their findings for the federal government to act on the proof that America's factories needed reformed.

Chapter 1

Organizational Beginnings

The organization of working girls' clubs, unions, and societies with a community of interests, despite the obstacles to such a movement, bears testimony to it, as to the devotion of the unselfish women who have made their poorer sister's cause their own, and will yet wring from an unfair world the justice too long denied her.¹

Before delving into the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike and the tensions among the various women and organizations involved in the twentieth century labor movement, it is critical to understand how these groups began. Understanding the roots and original ideologies of the American Federation of Labor, the Women's Trade Union League, and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union establishes a broader understanding of their roles in the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike and the tragedy at the Triangle Factory in 1911. A firm understanding of why these groups were founded and what their policies originally looked like illustrates how much the WTUL and ILGWU changed after the Triangle Fire.

The American Federation of Labor's long history began in 1886. The group broke away from the Knights of Labor and offered another opportunity for unions to have an organization representing them. Most members who no longer agreed with the Knights of Labor wanted the ability to strike and disliked the isolation the Knights created. From its beginning, the Knights were covert about their operations and who was allowed a membership. Additionally, members clashed over Henry George's idea of a single tax. In this situation, people could own land, natural resources, etc., but these resources belonged to everyone instead of the person who owned it. This early sign of socialism in America plus the tension caused over the secrecy of the group led to dissatisfaction among a faction of the Knight's members. Forty-two delegates

1. Jacob A. Riis and Museum of the City of New York, *How the Other Half Lives; Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Dover, 1971), 189.

originally from the Knights wanted their own federation that focused on trade unionism.² Samuel Gompers was elected president of the newly inaugurated American Federation of Labor. The policies women's organizations later adopted were originally created by the AFL.

These ideologies included the demand for higher wages, cleaner working environments, and few hours. Women labor organizers recognized the need for women to likewise petition for these concepts. Increased wages would help working-class, immigrant women and their families pull themselves up from poverty. An eight-hour work day would give workers more leisure time to rest, attend school, and take care of other familial duties such as laundry, etc. Emphasis was placed on higher wages and less hours, but clean environments were also essential. Consumption (tuberculosis) was rampant in factories and sweatshops where there was little air ventilation. In the early twentieth century, populists and socialists were gaining traction in America. The AFL had an opportunity to join forces with these creative groups in an effort to help the working poor in America. Historians including Selig Perlman and Louis Reed agree that Gompers and the AFL turned their backs on these social movements and instead followed their own trade union ideas.³

In his autobiography *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, Samuel Gompers spent a chapter discussing his thoughts and involvement in the women's labor movement. Gompers maintained that "for the labor movement, like all primary human movements, is neither male nor female- it is the instrumentality of unity."⁴ Gompers explains he always thought women were fundamental to trade unions and because of this, he was a strong supporter of suffrage and equal rights for all. Gompers claimed he not only spoke up for women, but also helped them until women

2. Arthur J. Goldberg, *AFL-CIO: Labor United* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), 23.

3. Stuart Bruce Kaufman, *Samuel Gompers and the Origins of the American Federation of Labor, 1848-1896*. Contributions in Economics and Economic History; No. 8. 1973, xii.

4. Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1925), 479.

organizations were able to function on their own. He even mentioned the inner turmoil between working women and upper-class women as well as his dislike for the intertwining of socialism and labor. Despite Gompers' assertions that he originally helped women organize, there is little evidence that it is true. Instead, the president of the American Federation of Labor stood back and let women work tirelessly on their own to achieve labor rights without offering the needed support.⁵

From its beginning, the AFL acknowledged the presence of women workers in the American labor force. Its membership pledge states "no discrimination shall be made on account of sex, creed, or colors."⁶ In 1892, the group began publicly searching for women organizers as well as hinting at their support of women's suffrage.⁷ The group called for suffrage and the establishment of women organizers at the convention, but never seriously championed women's causes and only hired two women organizers between 1890 and 1908. Four hundred ninety-six delegates attended the 1903 convention, but only five were women. Appeasement was simple when the organization's leaders refused equal representation to women. Additionally, it was easy for ambitious affiliates to navigate around the issue of sex and race. As stated in their pledge, the AFL asserted that anyone could join the organization. The reality was that the organization and their affiliated unions preferred American born men who were skilled laborers. The local unions established membership fees that were too high for African Americans to pay, some specified

5. Ibid, 481.

6. Samuel Gompers, *The Samuel Gompers Papers: A National Labor Movement Takes Shape, 1895-98*, vol. 4, ed. Peter J. Albert, Stuart B. Kauffman, Grace Palladino (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

7. American Federation of Labor, *Report of the Proceedings of the Twenty-third Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor*, (Boston, Massachusetts, November 9-23, 1904).

blacks were not welcome to their programs, and others claimed they lacked the require skills to join their group. The same discrimination was also used against immigrant men.

Where unions with both sexes were present in the surrounding community, members told AFL officers that the women disliked labor organization. Local unions used the same reasons for not letting African Americans join against women. It was partially true that women showed less interest in organizing, but the reason men claimed this was because of the men's personal beliefs about working women. Union men and their male leaders shared the misconstrued belief that working-woman held jobs so they could make extra money. This extra money was spent on non-essential items such as hats, not to support a growing family. Men worked, because they had families to provide for. To them, women were taking away their jobs and forcing their wages down. After they grew tired of working, men assumed the young women would get married, have children, and expect their husbands to take care of their living expenses. The reality was that the majority of working women also had families to provide for. At AFL conventions in the 1890s, efforts were made to secure working women legislation such as a fixed wage and working hours, but they never made it through Congress.⁸

By the early twentieth century, America had five million working women. The AFL only represented a small percent of workers in the United States. Six point eight percent and less than one percent of America's men and women respectively benefited from the organization's policies for wages, working conditions, etc.⁹ What accounts for this low percentage is that the AFL was made up of skilled, native-born Americans. The group had three reasons for not

8. Gladys Boone, *The Women's Trade Union Leagues in Great Britain and the United States of America* (New York: Columbia University Studies in History, Economics, and Public Law, 1942), 54.

9. Leo Wolman, "The Extent of Labor Organization in the United States in 1910," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (30 May 1916), 499-500.

wanting to help America's working women: "they were unskilled, they were immigrants, and they were female."¹⁰ The elite group saw women as a threat to the job and wage security of skilled men. It was true that women accepted lower wages, which drove the average wage down for the entire working-class. Most women in the workforce were immigrants, which was an encroachment on the standards native workmen had established. Finally, the AFL followed the societal ideology that women belonged at home raising children rather than working in factories.¹¹

Women could be members of affiliate unions if they were skilled enough and the union allowed women to join, but the group would always view them as less skilled than their male counterparts. As with male immigrants, the AFL concluded that immigrant women workers were unskilled. Not only could they never be as skilled as native born workers, their inability to speak English was seen as a sign that foreign workers were not smart. Although the organization accepted women, it is clear that the conditions of women in labor was not one of the organization's top priorities.

In an attempt to organize working-class women, a socialist named William English Walling created the Women's Trade Union League of America in 1903. Walling was originally inspired by the original WTUL in England. The goal of the organization was "to assist in the organization of women wage earners into Trade Unions."¹² Walling talked with members of the

10. Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and Sisters: Feminism, the Labor Movement and the Women's Trade Union League of New York* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981), 13.

11. Ibid, 14.

12. Boone, 250.

English original in 1902 and sought to help working women with the struggles they faced. He had seen their problems first-hand as a factory inspector.¹³

With the help of Mary Kenny O'Sullivan, three meetings were held in November 1903 to form the Women's Trade Union League. O'Sullivan first became involved in unions when she was a dressmaker. In 1892, she became a paid, female organizer for the bookbinding union, which was under AFL leadership. After the labor group took away her position and she married, O'Sullivan stopped union work. When deciding who should become involved in creating the WTUL, Walling instantly chose Mary Kenny O'Sullivan, because of her AFL knowledge.¹⁴ Not only was the WTUL focused on women laborers as members, they also stipulated that allies could participate in helping women gain representation. By establishing a board made of women organizers, the new organization showed its desire to allow women to create policies for themselves.

Once the original meetings in Boston took place, a variety of well-known labor and progressive women were asked to serve as the WTUL's first board members. The Boston socialite and reformer Mary Morton Kehew was chosen as the league's first president. Mary Kenny O'Sullivan became secretary and Jane Adams of Hull House fame was selected as vice president. These board members eagerly left Boston to create local branches primarily in the Northeast.¹⁵

My work mainly focuses on members of the New York branch of the WTUL. One woman brought into the New York league by Walling was Leonora O'Reilly. O'Reilly started working in the garment industry at an early age and began her involvement in unions when her

13. Ibid, 43.

14. Dye, 14.

15. Ibid, 17.

mother took her to Knights of Labor meetings. Before accepting Walling's invitation, Leonora was a prominent member in Working Girls Clubs and unions such as the United Garment Workers.¹⁶ Walling wanted the WTUL to unite women of all classes in the common goal of building women run trade unions. O'Reilly came into the organization already understanding the importance of bringing all women of all backgrounds and social standings together. In early speeches as a member of the Working Women's Society, O'Reilly spoke about her belief that all women are sisters. When William Walling sent a letter early in 1903 asking her about joining the new WTUL, Leonora wrote on the back, "Keep at it until we get the best Trade Unionists believing in us."¹⁷ These hopeful words show the optimism O'Reilly had when she first joined the group's efforts to organize women.

Mary Dreier was the less outgoing sister of Margaret Dreier Robins. Leonora O'Reilly recruited Margaret to become part of the New York league, and in 1905 she took on the role of national president. When she married her husband and moved to Chicago, her younger sister, Mary, took up the vacant New York leadership role. When Mary Dreier and her sister Margaret became involved in the labor movement and WTUL in 1904, they had no first-hand experience with labor or working-class women. The sisters wanted to spend their lives advocating for a worthy cause, and women's labor struggles was where they settled. In 1908, the WTUL reported that the majority of their money came from donations. Over a third of these funds came from the Dreier sisters.¹⁸ Although Mary was originally not as confident as her older sister, she became a champion of working-class women and was essential to the running of the New York branch.

16. Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *A Generation of Women: Education in the Lives of Progressive Reformers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 91-2.

17. William English Walling to Leonora O'Reilly, December 17, 1903.

18. Women's Trade Union League of New York, *Annual Report 1907 – 1908*.

Unlike Leonora O'Reilly, the Dreier sisters were new to the labor movement, but all three women enthusiastically joined the WTUL. Mary strongly agreed with her sister's feelings on the importance of female unionization. A piece written by Margaret for *Life and Labor* in 1912 reflects their early sentiments about unions:

The Chief social gain of the Union Shop is not its generally better wages and shorter hours, but rather the incentive it offers for initiative and social leadership, the call it makes through common industrial relationship and the common hope upon the moral and reasoning faculties, and the sense of fellowship, independence and group strength it develops.¹⁹

Margaret Dreier Robins' words demonstrate the naïve sentiments the group's leaders originally had about unity among working women and all social classes. The league wanted to educate working women so they could have the power to lead unions and organizations. The drastic change from relying on unity through striking to lobbying for protective legislation will be discussed in a later chapter.

A final leading member of the New York league was Helen Marot. Marot was also not from a family where she was forced to work at a young age. Instead, she was known for her Philadelphia library that attracted both socialists and progressive reformers. She was an active social investigator and was a member of the Child Labor Association and Association of Neighborhood Workers. In 1906, she became the New York WTUL secretary. During her time as a member, Marot was vocal about her thoughts on labor strategies, policy, and how women might best be organized. Her peers respected her and her letters and speeches often influenced their own ideologies. Helen Marot's 1914 book *American Labor: From Conspiracy to Collective Bargaining* discusses early twentieth century labor organizations and their policies and

19. Margaret Dreier Robins, "Self-Government in the Workshop: The Demand of the Women's Trade Union League," *Life and Labor*, vol. 2, April, 1912.

organizing methods. Throughout the book readers also catch glimpses of Marot's opinions on unions, labor organizations, and problems with women workers.

Marot was more outspoken than her colleagues. Members of the WTUL knew working women were discriminated against by labor organizations, union men, and the bosses that employed them. This is proven by statistics, interviews, and leader's such as Leonora O'Reilly's first-hand work experiences. The wide-spread discrimination made it difficult for women to organize. Marot, however, disagreed with these sentiments. As she states in her book:

For several reasons the organization of women wage-earners is a subject apart from the organization of workers as a whole... Although there are unquestionably more men organized than women, there are also more men than women in the more organizable trades. The question of proportional membership of men and women is an open one. It is hypothetical to state that there is a policy of discrimination against the unionizing of women.²⁰

Marot's opinion was uncommon among women, but it is an example of how some ladies sided with men over the issue of organizing women. WTUL leaders had proof that unions discriminated against women and wanted solutions to overcome this. Helen Marot disagreed and wanted emphasis placed on both sexes earning better working conditions, wages, etc.

She goes on to comment, "discrimination against women as members of a union is negligible."²¹ Marot was not afraid to speak her mind about her opinions on all aspects of the American labor movement in the early twentieth century. The prominent labor figure thought women should not have special groups dedicated to organizing them because they were no different than working-men. Marot continued as an active ally in the WTUL. A variety of strong women with varying ideologies made up the WTUL. The differences in opinion within the

20. Helen Marot, *American Labor Unions: From Conspiracy to Collective Bargaining* (New York: Arno, 1969), 65.

21. *Ibid*, 67.

league created tensions throughout the 1909 to 1913 strike era and continued when the league changed from focusing on organized labor to legislation.

The American Federation of Labor showed little interest in the WTUL's organization efforts, but they made sure to pledge its allegiance to the AFL. The group was aware that some workers would view them as encroaching on the larger labor organization. This is why they decided to cooperate with the AFL without asking for an endorsement at their annual convention. The WTUL members at the first Boston meetings agreed that because of their status as all-female newcomers they should achieve something historic or worthwhile before asking for a public endorsement. By first accomplishing something without AFL approval, the WTUL thought its first endorsement would be because they were essential to the labor movement. The decision to not seek endorsement was agreed upon even though the AFL already endorsed another women's group called the Church Association for the Advancement of the Interests of Labor and the Women's Label League.²² Samuel Gompers welcomed WTUL leaders into his group and invited them to the national conventions, but members were never given permission to serve as convention delegates.²³

When creating and following policy, the WTUL always made sure it first discussed it with AFL members. This was so it would not seem as if they were creating dual unions, which Samuel Gompers accused the league of being in 1907. That year, a group of mostly female cigarette makers reached out to the WTUL about representing them. They made up a union independent of the AFL called the Progressive Rolled Cigarette Makers. The women could not afford the dues of the AFL recognized cigar and tobacco unions. When the WTUL asked the

22. Dye, 16.

23. Joan Dash, *We Shall Not Be Moved: The Women's Factory Strike of 1909* (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1996), 45.

AFL if the organization could represent the women and help them charter a union, the AFL denied the request, because they thought the women were opposed to the AFL.²⁴

Although the AFL never offered significant aid to the WTUL and at times were hostile to its efforts, the women wanted to please the group they pledged their service to, and always tried to impress the AFL. In the early twentieth century, the AFL was an extremely successful labor organization in the center of the public's attention. If the WTUL strove for that level of success, the group had no choice but to follow the standards already set by the AFL. The early years of the female-led organization were difficult, because of the organization's self-imposed rule of following the AFL. During the time before the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike, WTUL members thought that dedicated persistence would eventually bring them recognition and respect in the labor movement.

The AFL mostly ignored the WTUL, but the group had logical reasoning for continuing the relationship. If the AFL accepted them as an upstanding trade union, the nation and its workers would soon regard them in the same light. Without AFL approval, they might have been seen as radical feminists who ruined the American labor system. Creating a national organization outside of the larger organization would have cost money, which they lacked. Women were paid less and could not afford the standard union dues men were expected to pay. If the WTUL fell outside the Federation's umbrella, they would have quickly collapsed. The AFL was one of the largest and most successful labor organizations in the United States, and its success was what other unions and organizations tried to emulate. It saw no other way to organize, educate, and implement women in the labor force than through following the AFL's methods.²⁵

24. Dye, 84.

25. Ibid, 87.

Rather than dutifully following the lead of AFL policies, the WTUL found ways to appease the group while encouraging women to demand what they needed at their jobs. Several men's groups had benefits for their members. Some of these included strike benefits, paid sick-leave, and in some cases health care. In an attempt to gain more members, the organization made new types of benefits. An example of this is their push for marriage benefits. Members were aware that the majority of women workers were young immigrants who had plans to marry and leave the factories. Money was put away by the union for a working-woman until the time she married. When the worker left for married life, she would receive her benefit and use it to start her new life.²⁶

WTUL leaders had to navigate the notions of marriage. Representatives for the WTUL spoke out about the importance of staying healthy before marriage and having children. Hazardous work places led to physical and mental exhaustion that could permanently change workers for life. The WTUL were realistic when it came to young girls when they explained "marriage did not liberate women from drudgery; it merely substituted one form of exploitation for another."²⁷ In the early twentieth century, women were expected to respect and listen to what their husbands told them. The same principles applied to their bosses, because disobeying rules would cost them their job. Women organizers wanted to persuade women that joining a union was the best way for them to escape exploitation while becoming a well-informed worker.

Leaders also wanted their own location separate from male-led meetings. Their proposed male-free meeting place was not only for leaders, but also members of their organization and unions they represented. New York board members had seen the dirty and unsafe meeting halls

26. Ibid, 113.

27. Ibid, 75.

women currently met in. Therefore, they wanted to provide a safe space for all union-minded women to gather. Additionally, meetings were held at night and women felt unsafe travelling to unknown places alone. Having their own space where women could freely speak their ideas meant there would be no pressure or dissent from male colleagues. In 1909, the league purchased a townhouse on East Twenty-Second Street. It was located in the middle of New York City's clothing district, which provided easy access for workers.²⁸

The WTUL recognized that men and women were not the same, but never strove for gender equality like today's feminist movement. When the league first began organizing, it emphasized that class was more important than gender and ethnicity. Despite this sentiment, William English Walling and the group's first officers listed women's suffrage as one of the WTUL's goals. Emphasis was on class, because several ladies such as Mary Drier were middle or upper-class unlike the lower-class women they represented. In their minds, all classes should be able to work together for the greater good no matter their sex or skill level. In 1913, an officer of a union the WTUL was working with said of the women's group and its upper-class leaders, "leisure-class women [cannot] organize working women."²⁹ The speaker also said she hoped workers would realize they should organize themselves, without the help of the type of women who made up the WTUL.

The league came in contact with mostly Jewish and Italian women, but never fully understood their diverse ethnicities. Many immigrant women followed the wishes of their husbands and fathers. They struggled to see themselves as part of the union movement and even if they could imagine it, most girls were forced to give all the money they earned to the male

28. Ibid, 87.

29. Minutes, Special Executive Board Meeting, Women's Trade Union League of New York, May 27, 1913, WTUL of NY Papers.

head of the house. Upper-class women were not aware of the differences between class and ethnicity, because their privilege sheltered them. With their fine education and upbringing, these ladies had little experience with people who were not white or upper-class. This led to a blind ignorance on how to interact with lower-class people. They viewed working-class women as workers, not female workers, which distracted league members from the different experiences women had from men. One of the differences between men and women workers was that women often had to deal with the unwanted advances of their male employers. Fighting these situations often led to their pay being taken away or in a woman losing her job. WTUL leaders never fully realized that the women they organized faced two forms of work-place oppression: female and immigrant oppression.

Along with recruiting immigrant workers, the WTUL was desperate to have American born members. On September 26, 1911, Mary Dreier wrote to her sister about the New York leagues's desire for American working girls, "The girls are bitter toward the union and also to the Jews, whom they say have not treated them fairly. Yet the girls are good stuff- we are all pining to get ahold of the American girls."³⁰ It was agreed within the organization that having a large number of American girls as members would show foreign women they should not fear unions, but American workers thought there was no place for them in female-led unions. They knew New York unions were made up of mostly Jewish and Italian immigrants. If they could not speak Italian or Yiddish, they were unable to follow the proceedings of union meetings. Similar to the thoughts of skilled, union men, female workers born in America thought of immigrant

30. Mary Dreier to Margaret Dreier Robins, 26 September 1911, Margaret Dreier Robins Papers, Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida.

workers as competition that drove wages down. American women wanted no part of unions and their organizations if it meant their needs were not put above those of foreign workers.

It was not until 1910 that the WTUL understood its goals did not match the AFL's regarding supporting unskilled, immigrant working women. In 1903, Chicago's garment workers went on strike. Those striking were primarily female. The United Garment Workers, an affiliate of the AFL, led the protest with the Chicago branch of the league offering their support. Early the next year, an agreement confirming workers' right to unionize was made with the biggest firms: Hart, Schaffner, and Marx. Once this agreement was complete, the UGW no longer wanted to support immigrant women still marching against smaller shops. The UGW ended the strike, which resulted in the continuation of open shops. It also meant thousands of female workers were blacklisted and no longer had a job.³¹ The AFL showed no leadership or control over their UGW affiliate. League leaders saw the lack of response and no reprimanding as an agreement with the UGW decision to stop the strike. The WTUL felt strongly about helping immigrant women no matter their skill set and the AFL knew this. The unwillingness of the AFL to recognize the league and support their mission angered members including Helen Marot and the Dreier sisters.

The next event to further build on tension between the league and AFL was the 1912 Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile strike. It was led by the Industrial Workers of the World. The IWW disliked the AFL and its policies. At the request of the AFL, the league branch in Boston, Massachusetts, agreed to not get involved. Soon after the event started, the WTUL realized it was another labor struggle that was a "magnificent uprising of oppressed, unskilled foreign

31. Dye, 103.

workers,” which was in line with who leaders wanted to support and organize.³² After asking the AFL’s United Textile Workers approval to help these women, the Boston branch began collecting funds and gave out necessities such as food and clothes to striking workers. The president of the UTW, John Golden, quickly got a small number of men to join the UTW and sign an agreement. Once this was done, the UTW stopped supporting the strike. The league wanted to continue supporting the workers still fighting, but the league left the demonstration, because the AFL was no longer involved.³³

Up until this time, the AFL had only sporadically given the WTUL financial aid. In 1912, one hundred and fifty dollars was donated each month. Money stopped as soon as the women went against the UTW in Lawrence.³⁴ Once again, the AFL let one of their official affiliates act as it saw fit. League organizers could have acted on their own during the strike, but the UTW affiliation stopped them. Many members such as Sue Ainslie Clark thought that meekly following the UTW so their relationship with the AFL stayed intact showed how weak the female-led organization really was.

Sue Ainslie Clark was the president of the Boston league. After the withdrawal from the Lawrence strike, Clark wrote her feelings on the matter in a letter to Margaret Dreier Robins in a letter in April 1912:

To me, many of those in power in the American labor movement today seem to be selfish, reactionary, and remote from the struggle for bread and liberty of the unskilled workers. Are we, the Women’s Trade Union League, to ally ourselves with the ‘stand-patters’ of the Labor Movement or are we to hold ourselves ready to aid the insurgents-

32. Sue Ainslie Clark to Margaret Dreier Robins, April 1912, NWTUL Papers.

33. Anne Withington, “The Lawrence Strike,” *Life and Labor*, vol. 2, 1912, 77.

34 Meredith Tax, *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880-1917*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 102.

those who are freely fighting the fight of the exploited, the oppressed, and the weak among the workers?³⁵

Clark echoed the emerging sentiments of league members across the nation. Members had begun working for the organization, because they wanted to organize women workers while helping marginalized, immigrant women gain rights as American workers. Bowing down to the policies of the mostly male AFL went against league principles and its members finally saw the bigger organization's limitations.

From 1913 on, the WTUL tried new ways of being independent while still remaining on good terms with the AFL. Members also contemplated having a separate federation for women. When it was decided a separate group would essentially create a second WTUL, the league still had no solution for navigating its ties. In 1921, the league thought of a fix to the issue, which they presented for approval. They requested the authority to create federal unions for the groups of women who could not join AFL affiliated groups. AFL leaders wanted no competition from other labor groups. The national league's proposal was immediately rejected because of their fear of dueling unions.³⁶ The league was continually disappointed by the AFL's unwillingness to support unions for women, but they knew breaking from the organization might end in disbandment.

In a letter Raymond Robins wrote to his sister-in-law, Mary Dreier, he explained why the league still could not free itself from the AFL, "The American Federation of Labor with all its shortcomings... is none the less the true representative body of organized labor in this country... as a matter of expediency you must cooperate with the policy of the American Federation of

35. Sue Ainslie Clark to Margaret Dreier Robins, April 1912, NWTUL Papers.

36. Dye, 108.

Labor.”³⁷ When it started in 1903, the WTUL followed the AFL, because it was the most successful labor organization and knew how to operate. A decade had passed since the league aligned itself with the AFL and it still could not disassociate with the group for the same reason.

Once it was clear to all members of the league that being an independent organization for women was not feasible, they continued what they had been doing from the beginning. The WTUL renewed efforts to convince men to allow women into their trade unions, because they knew unions were dominated by males. In their eyes, the integration of both genders of skilled and unskilled workers would create an unstoppable force against factory bosses.

Male workers in the garment making industry founded the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the garment industry began rapidly expanding. A large influx of mainly Italian immigrants began finding jobs in the growing business. The majority of men operated as cloak and suit makers while women manufactured shirtwaists and undergarments. The cloakmakers already organized decided it would be beneficial for all members of the industry if a union was made for the entire women’s garment industry.³⁸

The United Brotherhood of Cloak Makers’ released a statement in March 1900 calling on their fellow workers to answer the call for unionization: “The United Brotherhood... has come to the conclusion that in order to control our trade, to obtain higher wages and shorter hours, and to raise our members to a higher level, in short in order to improve our condition, we must have not only local unions, but also a well-organized national union for all America.”³⁹ The

37. Raymond Robins to Mary Dreier, 12 November 1913, Robins Papers.

38. Louis Levine, *The Women Garment Workers: A History of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1924), 100.

39. *Ibid*, 102

message by the Brotherhood inspired the ideology of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, which formed three months later. Similar to the AFL and WTUL, the ILGWU thought organizing workers gave them the power to demand shorter hours, better wages, etc. The idea of a union for all of the United States was misleading. Its main concern was over immigrant men having union representation. The group extended an invitation to working women, but their first priority was working-men.

On June 3, 1900, other garment workers answered the call made by the United Brotherhood and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union was created. Eleven delegates from seven garment unions were present. These unions had two representatives at the meeting: The Brotherhood of Cloak Makers, the Skirt Makers' Union of Greater New York, the Cloak Makers' Protective Union of Philadelphia, and the Cloak Pressers' Union of Baltimore. The Cloak Makers' Union of Baltimore, the Cloak Makers' Union of Brownsville, and the Cloak Makers' Union of Newark, New Jersey all sent one delegate.⁴⁰

Later that month, the AFL created an official charter, which the new union paid for.⁴¹ From the beginning, the AFL supported the ILGWU, which was strikingly different from their reaction to the all-female league. There was not a struggle between the two male groups. It was easier for the AFL to recognize a union that was not led by women or geared toward organizing female workers. The ILGWU wanted to champion immigrant men and the AFL favored male workers who were born in America. If an organization was willing to represent immigrant men, the AFL would not stop them as long as they were affiliated. The AFL viewed the struggles of

40. Ibid, 103.

41. Ibid, 105.

immigrant men as a burden and the new union gave them a reason for not putting effort into helping them.

There were two reasons the AFL quickly chose to work with the ILGWU. The first was that the AFL preferred working with skilled men, because the organization thought it was smarter and could therefore better manage a union.⁴² A second reason the AFL immediately supported the group was because it was virtually a giant union. The ILGWU's board members served as the leaders over its local unions and the entire group fell under the AFL. Unions were not seen as a threat to the AFL. At times leaders opposed the WTUL, because it was a labor organization, not a union. The AFL was eager to accept union affiliates to further build its credibility as the champion of America's working people. Throughout the early years of the ILGWU, the AFL gave significant funds to help it organize. The AFL gave four hundred dollars to the IGLWU in 1902 simply to advertise the existence of the new union.⁴³

The major difference between the AFL and its new affiliate was their political beliefs. One of the reasons the founding members of the AFL broke away from the Knights of Labor was because of member's who supported socialism, which they saw as a threat to the Knights. The majority of the young organization's leaders were Jewish and had a strong socialist ideology, because of their experiences in Europe and Czarist Russia. AFL policy was to keep politics and union work separate, but the ILGWU encouraged its members to become politically involved. Members moved to the United States, because they felt hopeless in the violent situations created by the government of their homeland. They rationalized that involvement in the United States' democratic system of government would ensure the bloodshed from home would not follow

42. Dye, 13.

43. Levine, 112.

them. Despite their political differences, the AFL continued its support of the union as long as its socialist ideologies stayed in check.⁴⁴

The ILGWU could not exclude or show prejudice against women workers in its local unions, because women were the majority of workers in the women's garment industry. Embracing socialists, immigrants, and women gave it an advantage over other similar organization such as the United Garment Workers of America who closely followed AFL policies. The WTUL had socialist leaders including Rose Schneiderman, but the majority of its leading ladies disapproved of the political group. The ILGWU showed little interest in helping its local unions organize beyond providing startup funds. Instead, it let the local unions organize and then keep themselves running.

In the beginning, the WTUL was willing to help any union wanting to strike. The ILGWU supported its unions striking, but it was impossible for them to help, because the group often had no money. Since the ILGWU offered no aid, the league took on organizing lockouts, etc. while the ILGWU showed support without offering any significant help. The AFL did everything it could to persuade workers not to walkout, but would lend money and other backing if they chose to leave their jobs in protest.

All three groups were willing to help at a moment's notice in the early twentieth century. By 1909, WTUL and ILGWU funds were exhausted and they had grown tired of the amount of strikes occurring. In 1905 the WTUL dealt with a large laundry movement in Troy, New York, neckwear strikers in 1906, white-goods workers in 1907, and a variety of other strikes across the manufacturing industries. In 1907, the ILGWU was able to help the cloakmakers and children coatmakers in Boston and New York walkout.

44. Ibid, 109.

A year after the WTUL was found; a member of the ILGWU sat as a representative on the league's executive board.⁴⁵ The depression that took place in 1908 almost ended the WTUL. The league's membership went from almost three hundred members to only having officers as its makeup. Early into the next year, the women organizers created a tentative affiliation with the ILGWU in order to keep building their membership following the depression.⁴⁶ The ILGWU's first major contact with the women-led group happened during 1909 Shirtwaist Strike. When the general strike officially began, the league offered assistance to Local 25, the New York Ladies' Waist Makers' Union, which took on leadership responsibilities. The organization helped organize picket duty, take union dues, and collect donations. They worked well together during the protest, but their relations deteriorated afterwards. Leaders became angry over the men who ran the ILGWU and Local 25. They said an all-male union was detrimental to the inclusion of females in the labor movement. Besides neglecting their female members, league women also insisted the national organization and Local 25 were not being run correctly. This mismanagement also stemmed from what the WTUL saw as a lack of interest in working-class women. In the late 1910s and into the 1920s, the WTUL continued to hold itself above the ILGWU. The organizations still recognized each other, but their days of cooperation were over.

When discussing the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union in this work, I will mainly focus on Local 25 in New York City. Not much is known about its local unions, because no known records exist.⁴⁷ Local 25 was created in 1905 and was not a famous name until the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike. Before the strike, Local 25 reported at conventions that it needed money

45. After consulting primary sources and secondary books, I was unable to find a record of this individual's name.

46. Dye, 71.

47. Ibid, 32.

in order to continue operating. Although it is reported that the union had only one hundred members and four dollars to function, Local 25 supported garment workers when the Triangle lockout began on September 27, 1909.⁴⁸ Once the general strike was called on November 22, 1909, Local 25 became the centerpiece of union recruitment and deal making among shop workers and their owners, because they represented the city's garment industry. Local 25 was not prepared for the overload of workers signing up for the union and picket duty. Similar to problems in the league, the ILGWU and its local unions struggled to find peace in a society where different races, classes, and political stances frequently clashed. The union ignored these issues and stuck with the labor strategies they had faith in. With its Jewish leadership, it worked throughout the twentieth century to secure better working conditions for its diverse immigrant membership.

The explanations of the founding of these three groups and their policies towards women shows how they are all connected in the larger scheme of twentieth century American labor. The chartering of the WTUL and ILGWU with consent from the American Federation of Labor formed a strange hierarchy. The AFL was at the top of the chain, and the younger groups followed their lead, because they feared being blacklisted by the labor community. In the eyes of the league, the ILGWU was beneath them, because men led the union and were lax with the management of their local groups.⁴⁹ The aloof feelings among all three groups meant opportunities for collaboration never occurred. Instead, they all attempted to reform America's labor system while operating on their own.

48. Levine, 149, 151.

49. Dye, 98.

Changes in the attitude of working women were slowly taking place, but both groups felt ready to lead a mass organizational effort. As the early 1900s progressed, more stories and investigations were being conducted on tenement and factory life. It was only a matter of time before the manipulative system broke. Once faced with a large situation of labor unrest, the organizations would have to prove that women could and should unionize for the betterment of their health and safety at work. However, the ultimate challenge for the WTUL and the ILGWU would be if their policies held up in a mass labor strike.

Chapter 2

Fiery Girls

Part 1 – The Uprising of Twenty Thousand

Hail the waistmakers of nineteen nine,
Making their stand on the picket line,
Breaking the power of those who reign,
Pointing the way, smashing the chain.⁵⁰

The women who held leadership roles in the Women’s Trade Union League had different personal reasons for organizing women. Some of these leaders though organizing women, specifically immigrant women, would help them overcome the harsh working and living conditions poverty had forced them into. Others such as Leonora O’Reilly wanted to bring working women together to educate them and introduce them to the culture middle and upper-class women possessed. Even Helen Marot had her own emphasis, which was entirely on labor without politics, gender, etc. One component women involved with the WTUL all agreed on was the desire to unite women of all backgrounds across class lines. In the special strike edition of the *New York Call* published on December 29, 1909, the socialist newspaper reflected the push for unity among all women: “Now is the time for women in New York, Philadelphia, and in fact everywhere American shirtwaists are worn, to rise in their might and demonstrate that with them... they have said goodbye to the products of the sweatshop... Friends, let us stop talking about sisterhood, and MAKE SISTERHOOD A FACT!”⁵¹ The 1909 strike was an opportune moment for the league members to make their wish for unity a reality, but the path to uniting women was not as easy as organizers imagined.

50. *The Uprising of the Twenty Thousands (Dedicated to the Waistmakers of 1909)*, “Let’s Sing!” Educational Department, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, (New York City: 1910).

51. *New York Call*, 29 December 1909, Special Strike Edition.

As discussed in the previous chapter, there was unrest in the labor sector before the general strike was called in November 1909, but a combination of factors led to a boiling point. Workers suffered from low wages, poor working conditions, and cramped tenements. It is key to understand how working girls and the upper-class women who helped them lived, because it illustrates how different their upbringings and grasp of the world was. While working girls lived in East Side tenements, the elites of the upper classes and well-educated college girls from places like Bryn Mawr lived in town houses and luxury apartments.

Several upper-class women wanted to secure a better living wage, working hours, etc. for young immigrants. Many of their reasons for helping were misguided. Some women felt it was their duty to support society in whatever way they could, because their elite lives were insignificant if their status was not used for good. The Dreier sisters became involved in the labor movement for this reason. Adamant suffragists saw working women as an opportunity to persuade more women to join their cause. In the end, their personal agendas overshadowed the needs of the people who had to live below the standard of living while toiling away in factories. Labor leaders in the WTUL were aware of the unrest between classes and political ideologies throughout the strike, but chose to maintain a united facade for the public rather than mend the mistrustful feelings broiling among participants. Both groups desired for everyone involved to cooperate and avoided making any group feel unappreciated. League leaders took a gamble when they actively chose to ignore the problems damaging their united front.

The Uprising of Twenty Thousand was the largest labor event the WTUL was involved in. It was time for the league to show its full-support and prove that working women could successfully organize. They would also attempt to convince male laborers and the general public that an all-female organization could lead women workers. The Uprising of Twenty Thousand

was the biggest test for the WTUL's and International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union's original policies.

The living conditions of immigrants across the country in the early twentieth century are well recorded by Progressives such as photojournalist Jacob Riis. New York City is the best documented, because the majority of immigrants entering the country took up residence there. The knowledge within these records illustrates the higher-quality conditions workers fought for when they went on strike. They told their stories while speaking about the standard of living they thought all humans deserve.

In New York City in 1900, three out of four families were impoverished and had an average income of five hundred and fifty dollars a year. At this time, it was estimated that families with four members needed at least six hundred and fifty dollars for living necessities including housing costs such as rent. Most families in New York City had more than four members. On top of their poverty, workers had to worry about the dangerous conditions they worked in. Over fifty thousand American workers died at their jobs in 1911.⁵²

These people lived in the worst buildings New York City had to offer. Even with as many as seven people to a room, families would take on renters for extra income. With low pay, life was an endless cycle of work. Lower-class people worked to get paid so they could feed their family and pay rent. Buying new clothes or getting medicine for an ill family member was almost impossible, because the cost meant less money for food and rent. Tenements averaged seven to eight stories tall. Toilets were usually outside and cold water came from an outdoor spigot or faucet inside. Buildings were infested with cockroaches, vermin, and lacked windows and circulating air, which moved people to sleep on fire escapes and stoops. Lawrence Veiller

52. Albert Marrin, *Flesh and Blood so Cheap: The Triangle Fire and Its Legacy* (first ed. 2011), 5.

called the East Side “The City of Living Death,” because the blocked fire escapes and cramped living quarters became firetraps.⁵³

Abysmal living conditions were not only a problem at home. Workers spent their days at factories and sweatshops that avoided city building codes. Before the Triangle Fire, there was no law in New York that required factories to run fire drills.⁵⁴ Officials had already been discussing the lack of drills before 1911. Without them, it was thought workers would panic, because there was no procedure to follow. In the summer of 1910, the New York Board of Sanitary Control examined over one thousand shops and factories in the city. They reported ninety-nine percent of the shops inspected failed to meet mandatory safety standards. Many had faulty fire escapes, only one exit, locked doors, and doors that opened in instead of outward.⁵⁵

The busy season for shops began in the spring and ended in the summer. During the peak period of garment making, some workers spent one hundred hours a week at their shop sewing from morning until the sun had long set. Most workplaces were poorly lit with gas lamps, which caused serious strain on the eyes. As many machines as possible were put into small spaces. People had little room to themselves during the work day. Employees sewed as many pieces as fast as they could in order to earn as much money as possible during the week. Contractors and floor managers urged them to sew more pieces while continually cutting piece rates without informing workers until they received their paycheck. Sewing machine operators spent so many hours operating their machines that it was common to develop permanent back injuries such as stooping.

53. Dash, 21

54. Leon Stein, Michael Hirsch, and William Greider, *The Triangle Fire* (Centennial ed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 25.

55. *Ibid.*, 26.

Rose Cohen was a Russian immigrant who came to the United States when she was twelve-years-old. She wrote about her experience as an immigrant in New York City in her book *Out of the Shadow*. At her first factory job, Rose's boss would make her stay late and take extra clothing home to work on. Soon after she started, Rose told her father, "The boss is hurrying the life out of me."⁵⁶ Many immigrants were in the same position, but they all continued to work. Rose had to support her father and provide money to help the rest of her family leave Russia. She spent the rest of her life working while spending time in and out of hospitals, because of her poor health, which started after she began factory work.

Most shops lacked proper ventilation. Workers who turned fabric into full garments risked inhaling the fine particles from the cloth, which floated in the air of the room. Constant inhalation of the dust caused tuberculosis, which killed many workers each year. If a laborer was lucky enough to not be permanently damaged from illness, injury, etc., then their mental state was surely affected. A researcher named Annie MacLean wrote about seeing the nerves in young workers eyes and physical appearance in her work *Wage-Earning Women* by noting, "It appears in heavy eyes with deep dark rings, in wrinkled skin, and old young faces. The high rate of speed that must be maintained through so many successive hours is undermining the health of thousands of girls in this industry."⁵⁷ Tirelessly sewing each day with little pay and not a day to themselves quickly exhausted the mind and body. Eventually, many broke from the stress of their living conditions. Families could not afford losing income from a valuable factory job. Countless workers continued their jobs through their physical and mental pain.

56. Rose Cohen, *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), 113.

57. Annie MacLean, *Wage-Earning Women* (New York: Macmillan, 1910), 36.

Sue Ainslie Clark and Edith Wyatt of the National Consumers' League oversaw extensive research on how working women in New York lived. Clark and Wyatt's in depth research reflected the Progressive Era popularity of investigative journalism to bring societal issues to public attention. Their findings were presented in the book *Making Both Ends Meet: The Income and Outlay of New York Working Girls*, which was published in 1911. Some of their work was also published in *McClure's Magazine*. *McClure's* was a monthly periodical, which began the trend of muckraking with its political content. The opening statement of the article in the October 1910 issue of *McClure's* clearly explains the contents of the authors' investigation:

These articles are based upon information obtained through an investigation conducted by the National Consumers' League, and covering the earnings of working-girls-wages, overtime work, loss from slack seasons, their expenditure for shelter, food, clothing, etc., down to the last penny of their earnings, and their uncertain struggle to preserve health and vitality.⁵⁸

In order to accurately collect information for each female interviewed, the Consumers' League asked questions over the type and amount of work done and how they used their payment to survive American life.⁵⁹ What sets the work of Clark and Wyatt apart from other work at the time is their willingness to interview women from all job sectors. Girls interviewed related that money was saved where it could be. Sometimes this meant walking an hour to work instead of paying for transportation or renting out already cramped living spaces to strangers for extra income.

An example of the common lifestyle of young garment workers is illustrated by a shirtwaist worker named Rachael. Rachael was a Jewish immigrant from Russia whose family

58. Sue Ainslie Clark and Edith Wyatt, "Working-Girls' Budgets" *McClure's Magazine*, Vol XXXV, October, 1910.

59. *Ibid*, 596.

fled violence from Christians. The eighteen-year-old began factory work at five dollars a week and eventually moved to eleven. She talked about how bosses would cut worker pay if they thought they earned too much. Along with this, she spoke to interviewers about the long work hours and how bosses pressured them to constantly work as fast as they could.⁶⁰

Outside of her job, Rachael lived with a sister in a small tenement with other girls. She also made her own clothing, washed her own laundry, and attended a night school where she most likely learned how to speak English. Rachael only had six days of work four months of the year. The rest of the year was spent with little to no work depending on what orders factories received.

When Rachael became ill and missed work, she received no income and had to spend money on doctors and medicine.

Her income for the year had been \$348.25. Her expenses had been as follows: rent for one-third of room at \$3.50 a month equaling \$42 a year, suppers with landlady at 20 cents each equaling \$63 a year, other meals approximately \$90 a year, board while ill for seven weeks at \$7 equaling \$49 a year, doctor and medicine (about) \$15, clothing \$51.85, club, 5 cents a week at \$2.60 [for a year].⁶¹

The total of her expenses was \$313.45, which left Rachael with \$34.80.

The treatment women workers received from their superiors at low-wage jobs was discouraging. Threats from bosses about losing their jobs frightened women into not risking joining an organized group. Women were not taken seriously as workers and men thought they only worked for a little spending money. This notion completely ignored the reality that immigrant women had families to support. They could barely afford food and rent, yet were vilified for any joy they may have gotten from spending money on themselves. A work surveyor

60. Sue Ainslie Clark, and Edith Wyatt, *Making Both Ends Meet the Income and Outlay of New York Working Girls* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1911), 49.

61. *Ibid*, 50.

noted the reality of young working girl's situation when she wrote, "In New York City there is always a surplus of girls seeking labor; they are daughters of the poorer classes, and live in tenement houses, in close quarters- are shabbily clad, and their wages go to support perhaps a drunken father, or a widowed mother and fatherless children."⁶² The reality of the situation of immigrant and native-born girls in the United States was that they desperate sought any menial way to make an income for their struggling families.

Women struggled with unequal workloads in shops where men were unionized. The unorganized women had to pick up the slack from the unionized men. While union men enjoyed shorter hours, longer lunches, and better wages, women worked non-stop during the day and after the men had left for the evening while receiving less pay.⁶³ With no representation, women workers had no choice but to do what their boss said or lose their job.

A combination of events led up to the historic night in New York City at Cooper Union in November 1909. Earlier in the summer, a strike involving men and women began at Rosen Brothers and Leiserson's due to the maltreatment they received as workers. Picketers made signs that said '*We are striking for human treatment*' to show their bosses, the public, and other factories why they walked out.

Clara Lemlich became the champion of the first workers who walked out. Lemlich was an immigrant originally from the Ukraine who was born at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1903, Clara and her family came to the United States where she immediately began working. Three years later, the young woman helped form Local 25 of the ILGWU in New York City. When the men of Leiserson decided to walkout in September 1909, Clara convinced them to let

62. Virginia Penny, "Hoop Skirts," *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy*, ed. Leon Stein, (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1977), 11.

63. Cohen, 124.

the women participate. From the start of her career as a labor activist, Clara spoke to crowds on street corners about the cause and decried alliances with upper-class women. She soon became a heroic icon to laborers living in the East Side and was fondly spoken of in the socialist ran paper the *New York Call*.

Unlike the Dreier sisters and Helen Marot who ran the New York WTUL, Clara had years of first hand-experience inside factories as a worker. After retiring from participating in the labor movement, Clara wrote to the American political activist Morris Schappes about her experiences, “I went to work two weeks after landing in this country. We worked from sunrise to sunset... The shop we worked in had no central heating, no electric power... The hissing of the machines, the yelling of the foreman, made life unbearable.”⁶⁴ Clara’s account is another example of the common conditions immigrants worked in.

Curious workers at the Triangle Factory heard about a meeting to organize workers at Clinton Hall in September 1909 and decided to attend. Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, the factory owners, became aware and let the whole factory know that unionization would not be tolerated. The Triangle Company had their own union called the Triangle Employees Benevolent Association, which employees were encouraged to join. An in-house union was a way for bosses to appease workers while continuing to operate their establishment as they saw fit. The factory organization was a way to fool workers into thinking they had representation while distracting them from actual unions. After the announcement, workers went to another union meeting. When the workers arrived the next morning, September 27, 1909, the factory was locked and

64. Clara Lemlich Shavelson to Morris Schappes, March 15, 1965, *Jewish Currents* 36, no. 10 (November 1982), 9.

advertisements had already been posted to hire new employees. Rather than find new work, the fired Triangle workers joined other garment workers on the picket lines.⁶⁵

Women suffered at the hands of thugs and corrupt cops on the picket lines throughout the summer and fall of 1909. Cops would stand by as picketers were beaten and took the girls to jail for loitering, not picketing peacefully, or even for talking to strikebreakers entering and leaving factories. Factory bosses also bribed cops to protect their workers and intimidate picketers. At first, picketers thought the police were there to protect them. They soon learned not to trust New York City's law enforcement.

Rough cops took strikers to jail for doing nothing wrong. Picketers followed the union's picket line rules: keep walking while talking to a strikebreaker, stay in small groups, and do not shout at or touch anyone, yet they still found themselves in the dark cells of the city prison. Picketers had instructions to take down police badge numbers if they were wrongfully arrested, but nothing came out of the practice.⁶⁶

A prime example of the difference between how working women and high-class ladies were treated occurred on the picket lines before the general strike was called. Mary Dreier, the president of the New York WTUL, was arrested for threatening to assault a worker after an interaction with a strikebreaker at the Triangle Factory. The story of her arrest and its aftermath appeared in the November 5, 1909, edition the *New York Call*:

Mary Dreier... was covered with insults and arrested without cause yesterday while doing picket duty in the strike of the Ladies' Waistmakers against the Triangle Waist Company...A member of the Triangle firm heard her speak to one of the girls as she came from work and in the presence of an officer he turned on Miss Dreier and shouted: "You are a liar. You are a dirty liar." Miss Dreier turned to the officer and said, "You

65. Von Drehle, 49.

66. Dash, 98-9.

heard the language that man addressed to me. Am I not entitled to your protection.” The officer replied, “How do I know you are not a dirty liar?”⁶⁷

As soon a Mary arrived at the police station and it was discovered who she was, she was immediately released. *Survey* magazine wrote, “...the police attitude toward the woman was deliciously revealed when the officer in charge upbraided her for not having told him she was ‘the working girls’ rich friend,’ had he known...he would not have arrested her.”⁶⁸ New York City police viewed upper-class women as respectable members of society. They feared a scandal might occur over their treatment of a high-class woman. Working girls were treated as inferior people, because of their workplace rebellion and status as poor immigrants. Furthermore, the money police received from Tammany Hall and factory bosses ensured protesters had a hard time picketing.

They were routinely taken to court where judges imposed fines without giving the girls a fair trial. One magistrate named Olmstead told a group of girls who appeared in court before him, “You are on strike against God and nature, whose prime law is that man shall earn his bread by the sweat of his brow.”⁶⁹ The strict judge thought it was fundamentally wrong for workers to defy their bosses. Olmstead had never worked in a factory, but he prescribed to the idea that people should follow the chain of command without question. Rebelling meant picketers broke society’s hierarchical order, and privileged bosses disliked being challenged.

Before they knew better, striking girls thought judges would listen to them and empathize with their cause. Harsh words from magistrates such as Olmstead confused strikers. If the law was not on their side, who was? Unions like the ILGWU and supportive organizations such as

67. *New York Call*, November 5, 1909.

68. *Survey*, November 5, 1909.

69. Stein, 167.

the WTUL were the only option they had for protection and support. It was the unions who paid the girls' jail fines and cared for them after suffering through the workhouse on Blackwell Island. The two groups viewed women workers as their sisters and helped them up when the corrupt justice system took them down.

Even with increasing incidents of beatings and jail time, the general strike was not called until November 22, 1909, at a meeting held at Cooper Union where speakers including Samuel Gompers and Mary Dreier addressed a restless crowd of disgruntled garment workers. The speakers continued to call for peace. They knew the hardships strikes caused workers who already struggled to make a living. Winter would bring even harsher conditions for picketers. Without an income and little financial support from the union, out of work protesters would have a difficult time paying for food, clothing, and shelter during the winter months.

Clara Lemlich finally had enough of leaders not on the factory front lines preaching appeasement to the audience. The Jewish immigrant stood on the stage in front of Cooper Union, and asked who would support a general strike. Lemlich's motion was quickly seconded and the crowd became so loud it took several minutes to quiet them. When she was older, Clara spoke about what led her to take the stage, "Each [speaker] talked about the terrible conditions of the workers in the shops. But no one gave or made any practical or valid solution."⁷⁰ While labor leaders wanted to take an easy road towards settlement, Clara Lemlich spoke on behalf of her fellow working-class brothers and sisters about bringing the fight straight to their bosses. The following afternoon, at least twenty thousand women left their sewing machines and took to the street in a citywide walkout. Union halls flooded with people as garment workers eagerly joined Local 25 of the ILGWU.

70. Clara Lemlich Shavelson, "Remembering the Waistmakers General Strike, 1909," *Jewish Currents*, November 1982.

The goals of the workers who walked out were strikingly similar to the goals of the WTUL and ILGWU. Strikers wanted a fifty-two-hour work week, a standard for wages and piece rates, no subcontracting, and the stoppage of fines. Most importantly, the workers demanded union recognition as well as a closed shop policy.⁷¹ In the politics of labor, a closed shop means a business where only workers belonging to a union are hired. An open shop, therefore, is a shop where employees affiliated or not affiliated with a union are hired. The problem with open shops during the early twentieth century was that employers gave preference to non-union members when hiring, which created a blacklist for unionized workers. It was also a way for employers to deal individually with their workers instead of as a whole body under the protection of a union. They wanted an end to open shops even if it meant alienating their non-union co-workers. Union members viewed closed shops as a giant step in the right direction for ensuring immigrant workers in the United States received treatment equal to native-born Americans.

Labor organizations had already been dealing with workers of different ethnicities and their reasons for not wanting to organize. With the start of the 1909 general strike, the WTUL and its partner, Local 25 of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, were met with a willingness from Jews, Russian, and even native-born American workers to join the garment strike. Organizations and their inner operations are more complicated than workers uniting for a common cause. There is a hierarchy from leaders and organizers to the members and picketers, and these sections soon clashed over their differences.

The stories of impoverished immigrant workers striking in New York City emotionally moved upper-class women. League organizers put effort into speaking to society women, college

71. Dye, 90.

girls, and even suffragists in an attempt to educate the public on why workers needed better factory conditions. The addition of these and other upper-class women put a strain on the WTUL executive board and membership in general, because many of the women focused on their personal beliefs/goals instead of the aims of the strike. Most donations came from these upper-class and educated ladies. The majority of the fund went to bailing strikers out of jail and paying their jail fines. Small stipends were offered to out of work strikers: three dollars for workers with dependents and a dollar fifty for other living situations were given each week. Most workers chose not to take the money, but with nearly twenty thousand people out of a job, the money used quickly added up. The financial aid given by society women helped keep the fund alive.⁷²

While workers and college girls walked the picket lines no matter the weather conditions, the WTUL executive board allowed more women on the board who had never seen the inside of a factory or sweatshop. J.P. Morgan's daughter, Anne, was elected to the board with an endorsement by Mary Dreier. Anne's father was an extremely wealthy American banker. Anne benefited from her father's money and became a philanthropist. Once she showed sympathy for the working girls' cause, Anne was put on the New York league's board, because Mary knew Anne's wealth was important for funding the strike.

Alva Belmont also became a board member during this time. Through her marriages to William Vanderbilt and O.H.P. Belmont, Alva Belmont became a socialite with millions of dollars behind her name. After the death of her second husband, she remade herself into a suffragist. She created the Political Equality Association, which followed the militant footsteps of England's Emmeline Pankhurst and the Women's Social and Political Union. The female dominated strike was an easy way for her to spread the word about votes for women as well as

72. Dash, 74.

persuade workers to join the suffragist cause. She organized a rally at the New York Hippodrome on December 6, 1909, for labor leaders as well as suffragists to speak at. The rich members of society sat in boxes while strikers had general audience seats. Banners hung around the Hippodrome demanding votes for women. After listening to what many outsiders considered radical speakers, the *New York Times* gave its input on Alva Belmont's presence among the young striking girls. The newspaper reported, "Socialism, unionism, woman suffrage and what seemed to be something like anarchism were poured into the ears of fully eight thousand persons by Alva Belmont."⁷³ She was not a socialist, but the public viewed Alva Belmont as a radical, because she was a feminist and advocated for women's suffrage.

Alva Belmont ignored the criticism. Instead, she continued speaking about her personal belief in suffrage. On December 19, Alva Belmont went to Jefferson Market Courthouse where strikers taken to jail received a short trial before being fined or sent to the workhouse. The socialite stayed all night bailing girls out with her own money. When she ran out of the money she brought with her, she used her house as collateral. Even after witnessing how the girls were treated for defending their labor rights, Alva Belmont still focused solely on women's suffrage. The *New York Times* quoted her as saying, "During those six hours I spent in that police court I saw enough to convince me and all who were with me beyond the smallest doubt of the absolute necessity of woman suffrage."⁷⁴ Her persistent stance on women's suffrage demonstrates how some upper-class women involved constantly put their personal beliefs above the workers and the true purpose of the strike.

73. *New York Times*, December 9, 1909.

74. *New York Times*, December 21, 1909.

From its beginning, the league promoted the unification of all social classes. Working women and members of the WTUL shared the injustices men put on their sex. The common oppressive experiences among these groups led WTUL organizers to thought uniting all women would solve their suffering.⁷⁵ For this reason, some members agreed with the involvement of upper-class women. It was argued that their participation helped break down class barriers and bring together all women. Another factor was that these women donated twenty thousand dollars in aid. When the mass movement started, Local 25 only had four dollars to its name. It was hard for strikers to donate their own money, because they no longer had a stable income to support themselves. These rich women financed the strike, which made their inclusion on executive boards necessary. The presence of society women also kept the walkout relevant in public interest, because society columns in newspapers happily reported the involvement of women such as Alva Belmont in bailing picketers out of night court.⁷⁶ Most of the ladies were born or married rich and had never needed to work for a living. Their interactions were with other white, rich Americans, which made them “naive about class and ethnic differences.”⁷⁷

There was still backlash from strikers and prominent labor leaders. The reliance of Local 25 and the WTUL on elite women donating money put a burden on regular members who the strike was supposed to benefit. They no longer thought they could openly speak their mind about the struggles they faced, because they did not want to offend the ladies who now had power over union decisions. Additionally, they felt they had to agree with their opinions and ideas for fundraising, etc. Like the executive leaders, workers feared the women would stop donating

75. Tax, 279.

76. Dye, 93.

77. Ibid, 3.

money if someone spoke against them. While the wealthy women earned praised in newspapers, the picketers who went through beating, fines, and sentences to the workhouse were ignored, which rightfully angered them.⁷⁸

Leaders actively chose not to speak about the tensions with upper-class allies at meetings, etc. The girls on the streets served as the face and resistance of the movement, but they were never invited into spaces where their feelings and ideas could be heard. Young girls in the strike thought they were being treated like naive children even though they suffered at the hands of the sweatshop and factory system. In order to gain donations, the New York league had factory girls meet for luncheons with society ladies where they spoke about their lives at home and at work. The girls related that they felt like they were paraded around for the ladies, which made them feel inferior. Instead of proactively supporting the strike, the society ladies ogled workers while participating from the comfort of their own homes.

An example of these luncheons occurred on December 9, 1909. Ten girls presented to the Colony Club told their stories to women of the richest families in New York. More than one thousand dollars was given to the fund. Many of the girls present felt like animals forced to perform for money. They also thought the rich who donated could afford to give more money.⁷⁹ Wealthy ladies never went to picket lines or factories where workers struggled for money to make a living. The elite may have been empathetic to the girls, but many wanted them to do more than be entertained by impoverished strikers. The WTUL and Local 25 continued bringing them to luncheons and benefits even after the girls vocally protested.

78. Ibid.

79. Richard A. Greenwald, *The Triangle Fire: The Protocols of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 41.

The difference between classes was especially apparent when it came to politics. Some of the WTUL leaders were socialists. Most factory workers in 1909 were also socialists, because the majority was Russian Jews who had escaped pogroms in their home country. Society women viewed socialists as radical and only joined the strike, because they wanted to push their political agenda over the good of women's suffrage.⁸⁰ When workers found out about the judgment they received for being part of the socialist movement, they refused to remain silent.

Theresa Malkiel was a striker who refused to bow down to society ladies and labor leaders. She understood the nuances of the walkout and put her thoughts into writing. Using a fictional character, Malkiel wrote about her experiences in her book *Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker*. When it was first published, her work was viewed as propaganda rather than Theresa speaking for those who could not. The short book explores the warring ideologies between strikers and their supporters. Rich activists who viewed them as children wanted to give aid, because of their young age and status as lower-class immigrants. In the mind of the upper-class, helping the poor was a good deed for society. On the other side of the issue, strikers saw their unfair treatment as a reaction to their class and nationality. Malkiel wrote, because she wanted wealthy people to respect working girls the same way they respected rich men. She advocated for girls to speak up for themselves writing, "The sooner we demand justice as our right and not as a boon from the rich the better for us."⁸¹ Malkiel was outraged by the treatment factory girls received from their wealthy allies. If more girls boldly took a stand, they might stop relying on others for help and instead independently represent themselves.

80. Dash, 127.

81. Theresa S. Malkiel, *The Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, ILR Press, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, 1990), 54.

The law was also not on the side of socialist strikers, because they were not upper class businessmen and corrupt cops took bribes from business owners. Socialists had a reputation as anarchists and the New York City police force agreed. If a picketer was not ever beaten or taken to jail, she certainly saw it happen to a friend or coworker. Police had the job of protecting people, not harassing them for peacefully protesting. Based on the violence she saw, Malkiel wrote, “Talk about [socialists] being anarchists- I really wonder if that name doesn’t suit the police better than it does us girls?”⁸² Socialism was important to immigrant workers and they would not give their political stance up because supporters disapproved. It was part of their individual identities. The workers in the strike wanted to be treated as humans rather than faceless factory workers. They wished to afford a comfortable living without working themselves to death.

The women’s labor movement was complex and had different factions working against each other, but Malkiel was able to see through it all to the root of the problem:

Here are thousands of young girls who have come to this country strong and full of desire to do things, but after slaving for a few years in the land of the free they have neither health nor money; they’ve become poorer and [America] richer. It stands to reason that our generous country is robbing them instead of being robbed.⁸³

WTUL and Local 25 leaders silently let tensions rise among picketers and upper-class sympathizers, but Theresa Malkiel took a firm stand against their exploitation. The socialist spoke on behalf of her working sisters who felt ridiculed by New York City’s elite.

Alva Belmont was one of the millionaire women who looked down on socialism. At one point in the winter of 1909, a group of socialist picketers went to her home to speak with her. They wanted to understand her reasons for becoming involved in their struggle. She chose not to

82. Ibid, 27.

83. Ibid. 33.

Speak with them, so they gave her secretary questions they had. Their questions were: “Are you interested in strikers because they are possible suffragists or because they are workers in trouble?” and “Do you believe the interests of the employers and workers are identical or could ever be identical?”⁸⁴ Strikers were viewed as naïve girls, but they knew about their supporters’ ulterior motives. Alva Belmont refused to answer their questions and declined setting up a future meeting. She understood what many other ladies involved did not. Young, immigrant girls were not ignorant. They continued learning while fighting for the rights they thought workers deserved.⁸⁵

Although Alva Belmont continued supporting the strike with the presence of socialists, some elite women were so scandalized when they discovered their involvement that they withdrew from their position in the WTUL. On January 2, 1910, a rally was held at Carnegie Hall to bring attention to the girls that had been arrested while picketing. Speakers included Leonora O’Reilly, from the WTUL, and Morris Hillquit who was a founder of the American Socialist Party. Anne Morgan left the league the next day and claimed she had not known about the socialists. She then let the press know that the speakers should not teach working girls about socialist doctrines, which she viewed as fanatical.⁸⁶ She is quoted as saying, “It is very reprehensible for Socialists to take advantage of these poor girls in these times, and when the working people are in such dire straits, to teach their fanatical doctrines.”⁸⁷ Anne Morgan felt sorry for factory girls and thought others took advantage of their lack of intelligence to expose

84. Dash, 128.

85. Ibid, 152.

86. Ibid, 130.

87. Tax, 231.

them to socialist teachings. It is another example of how labor allies put their personal ideologies above those of the people they supported.

Eventually, women not directly affected by the strike became disillusioned with it. The turning point came when a settlement was offered that the protesting workers refused. By this time, most small shops had already settled and gone back to work. Partway through December, the larger factories like the Triangle Factory presented the remaining workers with a settlement deal. The proposed deal met all of the workers' conditions except one. They refused to allow a closed shop, which displeased the strikers.

Workers desired a closed shop for many reasons. If a shop was open, preference would be given to workers who were not part of a union. It would be easy for factories to continue hiring greenhorn immigrants that would work for anything. Therefore, wages would continue being pushed down. The strikers thought a settlement was nothing without the promise of a closed shop, because there was no way to ensure businesses followed it.

The majority of shops workers walked out of created individual agreements with Local 25. Therefore, shops set their own rates for piecework, contracting systems, etc. and had no obligation to follow the settlement made with other businesses. There was no procedure or standardization for how the shops should behave after they settled. Almost as soon as the 1909 event ended, workers reported mistreatment at settled shops.⁸⁸

The falling apart of support following the December contract refusal shows how fragile the WTUL's female unity was. Some upper-class women involved genuinely wanted to help workers secure better conditions, but others romanticized the strike and the workers involved. They imagined using their fine upbringing to educate immigrant workers and then lead them

88. Dye, 95.

towards female suffrage. The society ladies fell in love with the idea of the unification of women, but when the road became rough for the women they were helping, the privileged turned their backs and their idealized unity crumbled.

Without funding from the rich ladies, it became harder for the strike to fund itself. Grocers sympathetic to the cause had to stop donating food, because they were nearing bankruptcy. In an attempt to gain support and money, Local 25 and the WTUL sent girls door to door asking for money. They failed to earn enough to alleviate the pressure on the fund. Another method tried was a newspaper drive. Striking girls walked the streets of New York City selling a special edition of the *New York Call*. All of the proceeds from the edition went to the fund. The money collected from the newspaper sell was quickly used up. Even though they lacked warm clothes, food, and money, girls continued picketing throughout December and January.⁸⁹

As winter progressed, the busy season for garment factories came closer. The shirtwaist makers and factories became increasingly desperate to break the strike. Owners were willing to solve the problem by hiring new workers. Hired policemen protected factories from protesters and workers stayed overnight to avoid the determined picketers. Many factories had lunch, dancing, and offered fifteen dollar wages to new workers. Of course, all of these amenities immediately ceased after the conflict ended. Manufacturers went as far as assembling a blacklist, which was distributed in papers. The purpose of the list was to let factory owners know who stayed with the strike until the end. It was meant as a punishment, because it prevented workers from being hired back when they looked for jobs again.⁹⁰

89. Malkiel, 19.

90. Dash, 135.

Then there was the Triangle Factory. Like other businesses, they offered perks for those who chose to work during the strike. Triangle was about making money and they refused to settle with rebellious workers. One point they made clear was they would never agree to an open shop. The owners claimed they would employ union members, but they would not create an open shop, because it would alienate non-union workers. The factory stated that “[they] sympathize with the liberty-loving employee.”⁹¹ In reality, the owners never planned on recognizing the union. By saying they cared for employees who felt pressured into joining a union, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris used the well-being of their workers to cover-up their true plans.

The Triangle Company opposed having union members as employees long before the general strike started, as shown by the previously mentioned September 1909 lockout. Before labor unrest kicked up in 1909, the two men had already made attempts at keeping workers in check. First, they practiced the contract system. Contracts were used to hire and control shop workers. The contractor was given money based on how much product their workers made and the contractor then paid the workers.⁹² Workers could not argue when they received less pay or the contractor kept more money for themselves, because contractors had the authority to fire workers. In an attempt at appeasement, the Triangle bosses created their own union. It was called the Triangle Employees Benevolent Association, but it was a façade. The officers in charge of the Triangle union had family relations with the factory owners. Besides appeasement, it was created in a vain attempt to stop the worker solidarity other shops had stirred up. Blanck and

91. Ibid.

92. Von Drehle, 48.

Harris' fake union fell apart as soon as the original lockout occurred and employees began joining real unions.⁹³

Blanck and Harris continued running the factory run as they deemed it should. They encouraged other large factory owners not to give in to the rebellious workers by establishing the Allied Waist and Dress Manufacturers Association. The mission of the group was to stop settling with the union and its strikers. The Allied Waist and Dress Manufacturers Association was created to show the ILGWU that they could not get Triangle and other large firms to surrender. By banding together, the large factories presented a unified front against the demands of the striking girls.

The Triangle owners used whatever means necessary to keep their business operating, even if it was illegal. Those who continued working were rewarded with free lunches and prizes for dancing. Hired thugs dealt with the most problematic picketers outside the shop. Triangle also paid police officers to take dissenting workers to court. If all else failed, the bosses had a backup plan. They would create a new factory outside of the city to get away from the strike and the union demands that accompanied it.⁹⁴

On February 8, 1910, the strike finally ended. Workers' wish for a closed shop was not achieved, but those in charge of Local 25 of the ILGWU settled with the remaining factories by agreeing to the deal workers refused in December. The settlement included an open shop agreement. Under the leadership of Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, large factories such as Bijou and Triangle wore down the union and its members until there was no fight left in them. The settlement meant Triangle had to allow their workers to join unions. Nonetheless, they never

93. Ibid, 49.

94. Ibid.

intended to recognize the unions they belonged to.⁹⁵ Local 25 and the WTUL continued their charade that everything was peaceful with their supporters and members. The fact that the main requirement strikers requested was not granted was ignored by leaders in favor of celebrating the achievement of women laborers successfully organizing.

There is no clear indication that the WTUL or Local 25 had a plan for making their demands happen. During beginning of the strike, both organizations became overwhelmed by the number of workers joining the union. The confusion and overload caused the ILGWU to rapidly settle shops on an individual basis. For the untested union, it was a good sign that shops wanted to quickly end the disagreement. A few months later, the ILGWU and WTUL realized their mistake of not making all shops settle under one deal. Shops signed different contracts, which made it hard for the union to note who was disregarding rules after the strike ended.

When workers refused the December deal, there was no massive regrouping to plan the strike's next move or how they would make up for the lost support of society ladies. Without open discussions, the movement quickly deteriorated and the labor groups were forced to end the strike. It came down to allowing picketers to starve without money from work or settle for less than what they struck for.

One paper, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, saw the strike's outcome in a different light. Rather than following the optimistic tone of the organizers, the newspaper published bitter words for its readers about the Triangle Factory and their resistance of fair labor conditions: "With blood this name will be written in the history of the American workers' movement, and with feeling will this history recall the names of the strikers of this shop- of the crusaders."⁹⁶ The

95. Ibid, 86.

96. *Jewish Daily Forward*, January 10, 1910.

Jewish Daily Forward was skeptical about the final agreement. Writers likely heard stories from workers about how the Triangle operated and how the factory owners created a sham union for employees. The Jewish publication had strong opinions about lower-class workers of their faith winning better working conditions, and their words reflect their opinion that the Triangle Factory was such a corrupt operation, America's labor movement would always remember its role in the 1909 strike.

Thousands of women joined together during the Shirtwaist Strike to fight for themselves and other immigrants trying to live the American dream. Before the walkout, the assumption was that women were not capable of striking. The large turnout during the winter months of 1909 proved that females could organize. Three hundred and fifty-four businesses ultimately signed the contract that ended the strike. The work week was reduced from sixty hours to fifty-two hours a week, rates for piece work went up twenty percent, and the factory rather than employees paid for sewing machines, threads, needles, etc.⁹⁷

Along with these main agreements, subcontracting was banned, workers could only work two nights a week, holiday pay was established, and a fair system for assigning employees work during slack seasons was decided on. New York City gained a reliable union women could join. Following the strike, the union would aid workers in finding jobs instead of letting them wonder from business to business. Local 25 was no longer threatened by closure and started building its operations up to continue their work.⁹⁸

97. Miriam Finn Scott, "What the Women Strikers Won," *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy*, ed. Leon Stein, (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1977), 85.

98. Ibid.

The strike convinced female labor leaders that it was possible to organize women. They had been trying to unionize New York's working women for almost ten years, but workers avoided risking their jobs for a union. The 1909 Shirtwaist Strike was proof for labor leaders as well as the rest of the country that women were as tough as men and could hold their own on picket lines. Prior to the shirtwaist turmoil in 1909, the WTUL was only led by female allies. After the contract was signed, allies still claimed the membership majority, but working women began holding roles as heads of committees. At the end of the strike, eighty percent of Local 25 was made of female members.⁹⁹ Increases in membership numbers encouraged doubting organizers that working women understood how unions benefited them, and wanted their help organizing.

The New York WTUL boasted about having two hundred laborers for members. but the league was still mostly made up of middle and upper-class allies. Nancy Schrom Dye suggested that the biggest gain was that the labor movement in New York finally saw the benefit of the WTUL's help. Local 25 asked the WTUL to guide them through creating settlements and policies for future walkouts, and they elected Rose Schneiderman to their board to show their commitment to the WTUL. Rose Schneiderman was a well-respected labor leader born in Poland. She was a socialist, suffragette and was passionate about unionizing the Jewish and Italian immigrants in the lower East Side. In return, the WTUL setup its own policies. Instead of aiding any union that asked for help, the league permitted two members to serve as delegates on a strike committee. Reports from the delegates then decided what aid, if any, was given.¹⁰⁰ Before 1909, the New York WTUL had aided any strike, because trust was being built between

99. Dye, 94.

100. Ibid, 95.

their organization and local unions. Now that the organization had a foothold, the WTUL planned on being a guiding source for unions who applied for their help. They could no longer hand out their time and money to any trade union. Only unions serious about organizing women and doing it in a way the WTUL approved of would receive their help.

Besides the goal of securing garment workers better working conditions, a portion of women involved in the strike also hoped the event would be a unifying moment for females. Their unification would demonstrate that class, race, religion, etc. were not barriers. Instead, women could form a mutual understanding, overcome their differences, and band together for a common good. The situation's reality was that the unification was never a priority. Leaders instead focused on fundraising, appeasing society ladies, and getting picketers out of jail. WTUL members shared with the press and public that their sisterhood was strong and would last. Leaders, upper-class ladies, and strikers let their differences define them and fuel judgment and resentment towards each other. The sisterhood talked about throughout the end of 1909 was a false illusion, which dispersed as quickly as the strike.

Life went on as it had before the strike. Immigrants went back to their derelict factories and worked hard for little pay in unsuitable conditions. The WTUL and ILGWU continued working together, but their bond was weak. Their mutual hope for organizing women became even more diminished by the Cloakmakers' Strike in July 1910. Unlike the Shirtwaist Strike, the Cloak Manufacturers' Association was prepared for a general strike and already had a plan implemented for securing the workers' needs. After ten weeks, the Protocol of Peace was established. Future Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis created the protocol as an unconventional trade agreement. It formed collective bargaining, better working conditions,

etc.¹⁰¹ The Protocol of Peace and how it was utilized by the ILGWU is discussed in the third chapter.

The WTUL and Local 25 began waiting for the next labor struggle to erupt. Both groups thought their policies and overall handling of the strike was successful. When the next conflict inevitably arose, they would rely on their experience during the Shirtwaist Strike to lead them to further success. As 1910 wore on and a new year began, labor organizers avoided reports of factories breaking the final contract and workers' complaints about the lack of a closed shop. In the mind of organizers, they had done a good job of earning better protection for workers. They knew their work was not done, but they were ready to move on from the Shirtwaist Strike and put their experience on using the same methods in other industries. Workers involved in the 1909 struggle worried the contract was flimsy, and they could not get their representatives in the WTUL ignored to their concerns. Factory employees knew the risks they faced working in unsafe environments, but they had little choice. They could either work in dangerous spaces or walk the streets for charity. The full consequences of the unsatisfactory strike agreement became apparent on March 25, 1911, when the workers the WTUL and ILGWU promised to protect experienced the most feared workplace accident: fire.

Part 2 – The Triangle Factory Fire

O wasteful America! We boast we are clever people, yet go on juggling with youth and its dreams.¹⁰²

Burning heat. Choking smoke. The decision to jump or burn alive. Employees at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory faced this when their workplace caught fire on Saturday March 25,

101. Greenwald, 17.

102. Sonya Levien, "Veteran," *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy*, ed. Leon Stein, (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1977), 137.

1911. By the time the bodies stopped falling from the building's windows; one hundred and forty-six people were dead. It was a spring afternoon in New York City and the Triangle workers at the factory located on the eighth, ninth, and tenth floor of the Asch building were preparing to leave for the day when the fire began.

The eighth floor of the building housed the fabric cutters of the Triangle operation. Thin pieces of the fabric called lawn hung over the cutting tables. Each row of tables had makeshift bins for scrap pieces of fabric underneath them. The last time the scraps had been cleared away was January 15, 1911.¹⁰³ Historians including Leon Stein hypothesize a burning cigarette fell into one of the bins and started the deadly fire. Smoking was not allowed, but some employees ignored the rule. Lawn is extremely flammable and the bins of scraps quickly went up in flame. Buckets of water used for such instances were futile. Workers desperately tried dousing the fire with a hose from one of the stairwells, but no water came forth. Those who survived on the eighth floor escaped down the stairwells. Some went down the fire escape and then busted through the windows into the sixth floor. A fireman had to let them out of the locked sixth floor.¹⁰⁴

The fire department received the first fire call from the Asch building at 4:45 pm. As workers began fleeing the flames on the eighth floor, the manager on the floor tried alerting the other two factory floors. The telephone and telautograph available for sending messages only connected to the offices on the tenth floor. In order to speak with the ninth floor where the majority of sewing machine operators worked, the tenth floor switchboard operator would have

103. Stein, 33.

104. Ibid, 15.

to connect them. The ninth floor was never alerted and only discover the dire situation when the flames were upon them.¹⁰⁵

Young girls on the ninth floor were giddy when the workday ended. It was payday and many had a Saturday evening of leisure planned. The girls went about their routines once the quitting bell rang. Their laughter turned into panicked screams as fire and thick smoke entered the floor. The open staircase was impassable and workers discovered that the door to the other available staircase was locked. Some people pried the shutters off the windows of the fire escape and then piled onto its metal stairs. A combination of heat from the fire and the weight of people on the flimsy escape led to its collapse. Those trying to escape fell to their death in the courtyard below.¹⁰⁶

Another escape route was the passenger elevators. During the day, executives and important clients only had access the passenger elevators. After the tenth floor was clear, the elevators, operated by Samuel Levine and Joseph Zito, began stopping at the ninth floor. Girls pushed their way into the two operating elevators packing them past their capacity. One of the elevators stopped making trips once the heat from the fire melted the metal tracks it was on. In fear that the other elevator would not return, girls began jumping down the elevator shaft onto the roof of the elevator. The weight of all who jumped combined with the people already in the elevator pushed it down into the basement where it became stuck and could not return. Some of those who jumped in time survived.¹⁰⁷

105. Ibid, 35-7.

106. Ibid, 78.

107. Ibid, 49.

Realization hit those still on the ninth floor that their escape options had vanished. They were now faced with the choice of jumping to the pavement below or burning to death. By this point, they had seen the uselessness of firefighter nets. Those who jumped hit the nets at a force of eleven thousand pounds.¹⁰⁸ The heavy force sent the bodies through the nets and onto the sidewalk. Workers watching from the windows witnessed their coworkers jump to the sidewalk and not get back up. The ladders on the fire trucks only reached the seventh floor. Those who proceeded to jump knew their families would recognize them in death. The fire could burn them until they were unrecognizable, which would make it difficult for their family to identify them. At 4:57 PM, the last body fell.¹⁰⁹ The fire burned for eighteen minutes and killed one hundred and twenty-three women and twenty-three men. The youngest victims were two fourteen-year-old girls.¹¹⁰

Factory fires with loss of life frequently occurred during the time period. On November 25, 1910, a fire occurred in Newark, New Jersey, at a four-story factory building. Most of the employees were young women. Six people burned to death and nineteen jumped.¹¹¹ The Triangle Fire was different, because a large audience witnessed it. The Asch Building, now the Brown Building, is located in Washington Square. In 1911, many rich families lived in the area. Since the fire occurred on a Saturday, people were enjoying a day in the park when smoke appeared from the building. Word spread quickly and bystanders watched in helpless horror as people began jumping from the top floors of the building.

108. Ibid, 17.

109. Ibid, 27.

110. Von Drehle, 2, 168.

111. Stein, 27.

“For many, it became a powerful emotional symbol of what seemed wrong about America,” because people were taking notice that lucrative labor was becoming more important than human lives.¹¹² Politicians, law enforcement, local leaders, etc. progressively got more corrupt as the twentieth century continued, and the public saw it as a sign that American standards had been tarnished. The public witnessed what young, immigrant girls fought for in the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike. There was a difference between reading about factory conditions in papers and seeing first-hand how unchecked conditions harmed workers. People who had never worked in a factory or struggled to make a living observed what lower-class workers, including the ones falling from the Asch Building, risked everyday they went to work.

The whole city soon heard about the tragedy. Relatives and friends of workers ran to the scene in search of people they knew worked at the factory. Curious citizens who had no business gawking at the disaster gathered around. Police and medics went through the building collecting bodies while others picked the dead off the sidewalks. By the end of the next day, it is estimated that fifty thousand people made the trip to the site of the fire.¹¹³

Three days after the fire, a notice appeared in New York City newspapers stating the Triangle Company was still operating at 9-11 University Place. An inspection the day after the notice ran found that the new headquarters was not a fireproof building. Additionally, two rows of sewing machines containing seventy-five machines each blocked a fire exit.¹¹⁴ The company was open and blocking fire exits right after it lost one hundred and forty-six workers to fire displays the fact that the company valued money over the safety of its employees.

112. Marrin, 6.

113. Ibid, 93.

114. Martha Bensley, “The Triangle Fire,” *Life and Labor*, May 1911.

The Women's Trade Union League hosted the largest protest meeting after the fire. On April 3, 1911, the meeting took place at the Metropolitan Opera House, which Anne Morgan rented for the occasion. The highlight of the gathering came from Rose Schneiderman. The young woman worked with the WTUL and aided Triangle workers during the 1909 strike. Rose stood in front of those gathered from all parts of New York society and urged them to do something about the horrors facing working girls:

I would be a traitor to these poor burned bodies if I came here to talk good fellowship. We have tried you good people of the public and we have found you wanting. The old Inquisition had its rack and its thumbscrews and its instruments of torture with iron teeth. We know what these things are today; the iron teeth are our necessities, the thumbscrews are the high-powered and swift machinery close to which we must work, and the rack is here in the firetrap structures that will destroy us the minute they catch on fire.

This is not the first time girls have been burned alive in the city. Every week I must learn of the untimely death of one of my sister workers. Every year thousands of us are maimed. The life of men and women is so cheap and property is so sacred. There are so many of us for one job it matters little if [146] of us are burned to death.

We have tried you citizens; we are trying you now, and you have a couple of dollars for the sorrowing mothers, brothers and sisters by way of a charity gift. But every time the workers come out in the only way they know to protest against conditions which are unbearable the strong hand of the law is allowed to press down heavily upon us.¹¹⁵

Rose Schneiderman was deeply devastated by the fire. Constantly seeing her working sisters harmed in factories made her emotional enough to release her anger and sorrow on the crowd at the Metropolitan Opera House. The speech was more than an emotional outburst, it was a plea for people across the United States no matter their background, religion, political party, ethnicity, etc. to come together and form a solution to stop workplace disasters.

115. Rose Schneiderman and Lucy Goldthwaite, *All for One* (New York: Paul S. Eriksson, 1967), 99-102.

Some people lost their entire financial support system in the fire. In an effort to help these families, the Red Cross and Local 25 of the ILGWU asked the public for donations. They raised \$120,000 but only \$80,000 was given to affected families.¹¹⁶ The amount given depended on how many survivors/deaths a family had. Thorough interviews determined how much aid was received. The given money was used for living expenses and funerals. Money was also sent overseas to families who had sent members to the United States to work. Families with no deaths received ten to one thousand dollars. Families who had a death due to the fire received fifty to five thousand dollars.¹¹⁷

On April 5, 1911, the public came together for a final funeral procession. When it was decided no more fire victims would be claimed, seven unidentified bodies remained. New York City's Mayor, William Gaynor, refused the request of the WTUL and ILGWU of overseeing the burial of the bodies. He cited the threat of a riot as the reason for his denial. The burial of the victims was conducted by the state of New York, but the two groups organized a public funeral procession. It was a rainy day, but 400,000 people had either marched in the procession or silently watched. Mary Dreier, president of the New York WTUL, Helen Marot, the league's secretary, and Rose Schneiderman were noticeable participants. The procession was separated into two crowds. One group started from downtown while the other came from uptown. The two became one group at Washington Square where they marched up fifth avenue before disbanding at Madison Square Garden. Thousands of people gathered in respectful grief at the gravesite in

116. There is no statement of where the remaining \$30,000. The Red Cross may have kept it for future disaster relief.

117. "The Factory Fire and the Red Cross," *Survey*, May 25, 1912.

Cypress Hills Cemetery where the unidentified bodies of six women and one man were laid to rest.¹¹⁸

Martha Bensley, a member of the WTUL, wrote from her window while watching the procession. After contemplating the 1909 strike and the fire itself, Bensley talks about how the union helped bereaved families. Besides gathering money, they arranged funerals for twenty-one victims, gave medical aid, and paid a month's rent for those who lost their sole money earner.¹¹⁹

Speaking on more than the tragic loss of employees at the Triangle, Bensley wrote:

Never have I seen a military pageant or triumphant ovation so impressive; for it is not because one hundred and forty-three workers were killed in the Triangle Shop- not altogether. It is because every year there are fifty thousand working men and women killed in the United States- one hundred and thirty-six a day; almost as many as happened to be killed together on the 25th of March: and because slowly, very slowly, it is dawning on these thousands on thousands that such things do not have to be!¹²⁰

Martha Bensley's observations went beyond the funeral procession. The author recognized that the fire was part of the United States' labor problems. The public aspect of the disaster drove non-workers to see what factory workers dealt with on a daily basis. These thoughts began with the 1909 strike. The fire took it a step further by showing the public that workers do not have to die to make consumer goods. Bensley's article pushed reformers to examine what they had already accomplished and what still needed done.

The Triangle Company had safety warnings before March 25, 1911. In the New York University building next door, a professor wrote to the city's Building Department in November 1910 that he saw overcrowding and other dangerous activities in the Triangle Factory. He was

118. Stein, 149-55.

119. "12,000 Pay Tribute to the Five Victims," *New York Times*, April 6, 1911.

120. Bensley, *Life and Labor*.

told an investigation would occur, but it never took place. A man by the name of Mr. H. F. J. Porter who was in the business of teaching fire drills at factories contacted Triangle about implementing them at the high-rise factory. The company never contacted him back. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Mr. Porter discussed his dealings with factory owners. Some places where he taught fire safety stopped using the drill soon after he left. When he had asked an owner about the safety of their employees, the man replied, “Let ‘em burn. They’re a lot of cattle, anyway.”¹²¹ The anonymous quote is yet another example of how early twentieth century businesses owners had the horrifying philosophy that the money made from their products should be valued over the lives of immigrant workers.

An inspection was made at the Asch building by fireman Edward F. O’Connor on October 15, 1910. He noted that the material used to make the building was fireproof. Pails of water were on each floor in addition to a water tank on the roof for emergency use. In 1911, before the fire took place, the WTUL disclosed that half of the more than 600,000 factory employees in New York City worked on the seventh floor of buildings. The height was taller than hoses and fire ladders could reach. Despite all of this, no protective legislation for employees or new building codes had been passed that decade.¹²²

The Triangle Factory also had a history with fires before March 25, 1911. It is thought the previous fires had been purposely started for insurance payout purposes. Their insurance was worth \$199,750 on the day of the 1911 fire. Factory bosses used loopholes to abuse insurance

121. Stein, 27-8.

122. Ibid, 28-9.

policies and little was done to stop it from happening. When fires meant a company could earn money instead of lose it, there was no motivation for up keeping safe workplace practices.¹²³

In 1902 Max Blanck and Isaac Harris rented the ninth floor of the new Asch building as a modern factory space. Around five in the morning on April 5, 1902, a fire broke out on the ninth floor of the building. No materials were saved and no one was in the building at the time. The same situation occurred on November 1 of the same year. The owners received thirty-thousand dollars in insurance money. Along with Triangle, Blanck and Harris owned the Diamond Waist Company. Fires occurred in the loft it occupied in April 1907 and 1910. These fires also received money from insurance coverage.¹²⁴

Journalists and authorities speculated owners started factory fires on purpose for valuable insurance claims. All of the previous fires involving the Triangle owners occurred at the end of a busy season. With materials left over that money could not be made from, fire was a simple, stock clearing solution. Although people had died in the 1911 fire, insurance companies paid almost the full amount in lost materials to the Triangle owners. In total, Blanck and Harris gained about four hundred and forty-five dollars for every worker killed, which equaled almost 65,000 dollars.¹²⁵

On the evening of the infamous fire, the Triangle Factory owners gave an interview to the *New York Times*. The pair immediately became defensive in preparation to protect them from blame even though the interviewer never insinuated they were at fault. Blanck took charge of the interview. After explaining how they escaped the fire from the tenth floor, Blanck was asked

123. Ibid, 169.

124. Von Drehle, 161-2.

125. Stein, 176.

what the owners had done in the building for fire safety and how employees evacuated in case of fire. Blanck informed the interviewer that after previous fires in the building, a guard had been hired to patrol at night. Two engineers on staff ensured machine motors had no problems during business hours. As for fire escape methods, Blanck said both passenger and freight elevators operated all day and could be used during an emergency.

Blanck also asserted on several occasions during the interview that the factory doors always remained unlocked during working hours. Keys to the door were attached to its knob and Blanck insisted he checked all doors were unlocked each morning. While referring to the 1909 strike, Blanck related that they happily followed all of the settlement conditions. The interview also said Blanck checked the fire buckets on each floor and made sure they were refilled every other day. Each floor also had a fire alarm box installed. A week prior to the fire, Blanck said an inspector had visited and found the factory in perfect condition.¹²⁶

Although Blanck's stated he and his partner Isaac Harris were not guilty, on April 12, 1911, both owners were charged with six counts of manslaughter for the death of two machine operators. Only two deaths could go to trial, because the penalty would be the same no matter how many deaths actually occurred. New York County District Attorney Charles Whitman was convinced the door on the ninth floor was locked. This decided the charges given to Blanck and Harris. Investigators discovered a piece of door with a bolt in it on the ninth floor almost a month after the fire happened. Keeping doors locked during working hours was a misdemeanor, but Whitman intended to prove that the locked door was the reason workers died. If found guilty, the factory owners would face a maximum of twenty years in prison. When the case officially began,

126. "Partners' Account of the Disaster," *New York Times*, March 26, 1911.

Whitman singled the manslaughter charge down to one victim, a girl named Margaret Schwartz.¹²⁷

Blanck and Harris needed the best lawyer and would pay anything for their services, because they knew the public was supportive of finding them guilty. Max Steuer was the lawyer eventually hired. Steuer was a thorough lawyer who counseled the rich including bankers and movie stars. He was involved with Tammany Hall and was known as one of New York City's best lawyers.

The trial began on December 4, 1911, and ran until December 27, 1911. At the beginning, District Attorney Whitman was confident with his witnesses and the evidence of the locked ninth floor door. The jury was made up of twelve men who worked in business and trade. Many witnesses were forced to speak English during their testimony instead of in their native tongue. Steuer did this, because many Americans thought poor English speaking skills meant the speaker was not intelligent. Therefore, Steuer was sure jurors would thought the Triangle workers "were not smart enough to save themselves."¹²⁸ Additionally, Judge Thomas C.T. Crain ruled that the details such as the falling and burning bodies during the event could not be used in the prosecution's testimony. District Attorney Whitman failed to anticipate these added factors and he had no plan to overcome them.

The case came down to the testimony of a Triangle worker named Kate Alterman. Steuer had Alterman give her account of the fire and the last time she saw Margaret Schwartz three times. The lawyer had Alterman tell her testimony more than once to see if any of her story was told exactly the same. Alterman's third time to repeat her story showed that she had repeated the

127. Von Drehle, 219-20, 254.

128. Ibid, 238.

first telling almost word for word the two following times. There is no evidence that those testifying truly had been coached by the District Attorney, but the testimony was telling.¹²⁹

Before the jurors began their deliberations, Judge Crain spoke to them about the law pertaining locked doors and how it should influence their final decision. In order to find Max Blanck and Isaac Harris guilty, the jury had to prove the owners knew the door was locked at the exact time the supposed murder took place on March 25, 1911. Furthermore, the members of the jury needed proof that if the door had not been locked, Margaret Schwartz would have survived the fire.¹³⁰ The judge's authority over the court influenced the jury into rethinking their opinions.

The jury debated the case for over an hour before a unanimous acquittal was decided. Later, jurors admitted to feeling pressured by Judge Crain and his instructions. One man said he knew the public wanted justice and he felt the same way, but he still voted for acquittal. Judge Crain's speech about proving if the door was knowingly locked at the time the fire broke out led the jury to conclude he was on the side of the defense. By voting for an acquittal, the jurors thought they carried out what the judge covertly commanded of them.¹³¹

It is highly possible that Judge Crain was biased when he sided with the Triangle owners. Crain was previously the tenement house commissioner for the Tenement House Department. In March 1905, a tenement fire in the Lower East Side took the lives of twenty people who could not safely make it down the furniture clogged fire escape or out the locked skylight to the roof. Crain was blamed for the poor job done by inspectors and was forced to resign from his position in the Tenement Department. He may have thought of Max Blanck and Isaac Harris as

129. Ibid.

130. Ibid, 255.

131. Ibid, 254-6.

scapegoats for the Triangle Fire, because he felt he was the scapegoat for the Allen Street fire. Judge Crain had a connection to the owners and wished to protect them and their business from ruination.¹³²

The blame for the fire was put on the Triangle factory owners, but it is clear that several factors created the potential for the disaster at the factory. Corners were cut in the building's architectural plans, laws about required working space and locked doors were ignored, and city officials failed to ensure factories maintained safe working environments. These circumstances created an unsafe workplace, but the WTUL, ILGWU, and 1909 Shirtwaist Strike were outside factors that influenced how factory owners controlled their workers and the space they occupied.

Workers who joined Local 25 during the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike expected the union to represent them and make factory owners see their demands as fair and essential for their welfare. Factory workers were not only in need of better wages and less demanding work hours, they also required better places of work. Improved conditions included: better lighting, more space to move, bathroom breaks, proper fire escapes, and unlocked doors.

The WTUL and Local 25 failed to deal with issues that arose in 1909. Upper-class women presented themselves as good citizens by donating their time and money to the cause of poor, immigrant women living in New York City. Working-class women resented the presence of society ladies, but the WTUL and Local 25 relied on their money to finance the strike and would not turn them or their fundraising ideas away. Although these problems were present, the WTUL and ILGWU insisted striking was the best method for organizing and gaining workers collective bargaining.

132. Ibid, 257.

In 1909, Mary Dreier spoke about why the WTUL strongly believed in union organization over legislation: “Even while we make laws, let us not forget the more important work of organization, for we know that the greatest power to enforce labor laws is trade unions, and a strong trade union can demand better conditions and shorter hours than the law will allow, and then, too, we get education and power through organization, which we do not get through law.”¹³³ The WTUL mistrusted the state and its proclaimed empathy for workers. State politics were full of corrupt officials interested in how to make money from manufacturers while elevating their political status. Instead of relying on protective legislation, the WTUL wanted women to rely on the national organization, Local 25, and striking to accomplish their goals. Mary Dreier’s words illustrate WTUL policy before the Triangle Fire.

Nancy Schrom Dye relates in her book *As Equals and as Sisters*, “...the Triangle fire demoralized the New York league, for the tragedy dramatized how little progress had been made in improving women’s conditions.”¹³⁴ Finally, WTUL and ILGWU leaders saw their strike settlement was not as effective as they thought. If no one listened to what workers and labor organizations said during mass walkouts, there was no point in striking.

Although they failed to secure union recognition in factories across New York City, young women still thought labor organizations would protect them. The 1909 strike brought awareness to the public about poor working conditions and the Triangle Factory Fire continued to stoke outrage. The WTUL and ILGWU may harbored guilt for the Triangle fire. Responsibility for the welfare of the young women who paid their dues for union membership fell under the organizations. Local 25 and the WTUL acted as pseudo guardians for the girls

133. Report of the Legislative Committee, Women’s Trade Union League of New York, March 1911, Women’s Trade Union League of New York Papers, State Labor Library, New York, NY.

134. Dye, 96.

when their plight was ignored. The fire was disheartening for labor leaders who had spent the last decade attempting to organize women into unions, because they felt they had let down the workers they defended.

Rather than take responsibility for the 1909 strike settlement, the WTUL and ILGWU continued arguing with each other over the best policy for organizing women. Local 25 connected the failure of the 1909 agreement with the occurrence of the Triangle Fire: “The victory nearly two years ago of the Ladies’ Waistmakers, Local 25, of New York, has, it appears, not been as complete a success as was generally thought at that time; at any rate not a lasting success. One of the main reasons for the disappointment is that the agreements originally signed with the union were of an individual rather than collective character.”¹³⁵ The speaker talked about the unsuccessful agreement in broad terms. Instead of admitting their strike and settlement failed, the speaker in the *Ladies’ Garment Worker* article said not having a collective settlement that recognized the union is the reason the strike failed. It is presented in a way that takes responsibility off the union and puts it on the greedy manufacturers.

Admitting their policies and methods were not successful following the fire would have given the WTUL and Local 25 the opportunity to discuss strategies to gain workers’ rights together. These tensions plus issues between the different political stances and social classes created a situation where the WTUL and ILGWU failed at what their top priority should have been: protecting working girls. Working girls dreamed of an independent life in the United States, but their gender, status as an immigrant, and low wages that went to support themselves and their families held them back. Optimistic working-class girls joined the union, because they

135. “Agitation Among the Ladies Waistmakers Local 25. General Executive Board Sanction Agitation,” *Ladies’ Garment Worker*, October 1911.

thought outside backing was their solution for a less-than ideal life. The Women's Trade Union League and Local 25 of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union failed to protect their members, which demonstrates their part in the broken American labor system at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Chapter 3

Outcome

It is unfortunate that the occurrence of a catastrophe is often necessary to awaken a people to its true sense of responsibility.¹³⁶

The tragedy at the Triangle Factory fundamentally changed how labor leaders and organizers looked at unionizing and creating safe work environments. Following the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike, these leaders felt sure of the direction their organizations and unions were heading. In their minds, the strike agreement created strong collective bargaining in the shirtwaist trade. Now that they knew they could successfully teach shirtwaist workers about trade unions, the next step was spreading their method to other labor sectors. Both the Women's Trade Union League and International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union wanted to spread their ideas and striking standards to cities across the United States. After the devastation of the Triangle fire, the same leaders saw that their hard work was not as successful as they had spent the last year believing. All they had to show for the fight put up during the 1909 strike were the burned bodies of girls who had fought on the picket lines in an effort to receive improved conditions in their factories.

As previously discussed, the WTUL and Local 25 of the ILGWU were never able to completely agree on the best strategy for organizing women. They wanted workers to unite against the problems in factories across New York City, but following the Triangle Fire their disagreements continued. Members of the WTUL saw the need for new strategies in securing rights for working women while the male-led ILGWU continued advocating for general strikes.

136. *Minutes of the hearing of the New York State Factory Investigating Commission*, opening statement: Abraham I. Elkus, counsel to the commission, October 10, 1911 (Preliminary Report II).

Soon after the Triangle Fire occurred, members of Local 25 began voicing their interest in another general shirtwaist strike. Their goal for the walkout was to win women their own Protocol of Peace. On September 2, 1910, the Cloakmakers Strike ended with the signing of a permanent contract called the Protocol of Peace. The protocol not only had the usual elements of minimum wages, fewer hours, etc., it also created the Board of Sanitary Control and a Committee of Grievances to settle shop disputes. Louis Brandeis wanted the protocol to act as harbinger of peace between workers and their employers.¹³⁷ However, “The Protocol [was] a treaty entered into between the Manufacturers’ Association and the Union and not between employer and employee.”¹³⁸ Cloakmakers had representation through the protocol, but it put them under the will of their shop bosses and union. Shops and unions decided how workers should be treated instead of the workers themselves. The ILGWU ignored the concerns workers had about the protocol. Since the cloakmakers had successfully installed a labor agreement, Local 25 thought it could be repeated in all industrial trades throughout the city.

While the ILGWU supported a second shirtwaist strike, the WTUL remained wary. Strikes were costly and the ladies of the New York WTUL now doubted their effectiveness. Factories involved in the 1909 event had already broken the signed agreement and the union lacked enough employees to follow-up on complaints filed against them. The ILGWU and Local 25 were led by males who refused to understand the young women they represented, which caused further mistrust among WTUL leaders. Nancy Schrom Dye wrote her opinion that “WTUL women... increasingly viewed their difficulties with organized labor as a fundamental

137. Levine, 196.

138. John A. Dyche, “The Board of Grievances,” *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy*, ed. Leon Stein, (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1977), 124.

conflict between men and women rather than as a conflict between workers and a predominantly upper-class organization.”¹³⁹ During the 1909 strike, there was mistrust over the well-off women who made up the WTUL, because the ladies lived different lives than those in New York City slums. Still, WTUL organizers thought banding together across class lines would ease the suffering of working women. The majority of WTUL leaders came from the upper-class. They would never abandon the idea of class unity.

When the WTUL was created, they modeled several of their core policies after the American Federation of Labor. In 1911, the group still stood by the American Federation of Labor, because of its no-nonsense qualities. All of its employed board members were male but the majority of the WTUL was okay with this, because the AFL ran itself as an organized, business machine. Meanwhile, the men who controlled the ILGWU clashed with the WTUL mainly because of the difference between an all-male group and an all-female group.

One problem with ILGWU male leadership was their refusal to include women in all aspects of the union. Men ran the waistmakers’ union, but women made up eighty percent of the trade.¹⁴⁰ Organizers including Helen Marot thought the lack of male confidence in organized women overall weakened the power of the union. A divided union was easy for bosses to exploit. Members rationalized that they had no reason to help men with their labor struggle if they continued discriminating against their sex. Women who participated in union proceedings were mostly given the role of picketing. In the 1909 strike, they were on the frontlines of the labor movement being beaten, arrested, and berated by the police and courts. Yet after the strike they

139. Dye, 123.

140. Ibid, 97.

still had no executive roles. Women could not continue learning about how to better their place in labor if they only had low-level jobs.

Frustrated with how the ILGWU treated women, Helen Marot wrote to the *Jewish Daily Forward* in 1911, “It is becoming clear to the League that it is a betrayal of the faith and fine spirit of the girls to encourage them to organize into trade unions if their union is to be dominated by men without business sense or executive ability and by men competent to talk but not act.”¹⁴¹ In Marot’s opinion, the men leading the group acted improperly and had no idea how to run a union. As Marot saw it, the union men talked about what they wanted to accomplish without actually working towards any of their goals. Females joined the ILGWU, because they were willing to work for the union and create change in workplaces. They could not actively be a part of industrial change if the men in charge were unwilling to give women a place in labor reform.

The lack of diverse roles for women union members barred them from learning about union management. Unions, as intended by the WTUL, empowered women workers. It was useless to organize women into unions if they were not given the power to create change in their shops. Helen Marot wrote, a “misgoverned, badly managed union is worse than no union.”¹⁴² Marot’s letter to the *Jewish Daily Forward* revealed the prevailing WTUL opinion that the ILGWU was unreliable and misgoverned by its male leaders. WTUL leaders such as Helen Marot and Mary Dreier understood that policy must include the voices of women members, because they were a large part of the workforce. The WTUL concluded that refusing to listen to

141. Helen Marot to *Jewish Daily Forward*, May 13, 1911.

142. Ibid.

them would drive women away from unionization, which would damage the progress the WTUL had made with organizing women.

Even though Marot publically criticized the running of the ILGWU, debate for a second shirtwaist walkout continued in New York City. In October 1911, Local 25 officially called the second strike. The WTUL provided legal help out of sympathy for their cause and because of the bond formed during the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike. Even with the additional help, the protest was not successful.¹⁴³

At the same time as the second general waistmaker strike, other locals of the ILGWU asked the WTUL for help striking against their employers. These locals consisted of white-goods workers. The main body of the ILGWU abandoned its other locals in New York City by focusing its efforts only on the waistmakers. The international organization was unwilling to give precious money to its other workers. With no other choice, these locals turned to the WTUL who continued refusing to endorse their mass walkouts. Citing workplace fear after the Triangle Fire and the successful turnout for the 1909 strike, these working women were willing to organize, but they needed outside support and representation to obtain their own contracts.

Again, the WTUL recognized that working women needed their help even if they no longer supported strikes. Rose Schneiderman vocally supported these smaller groups, because she was once one of them. The WTUL began paying her to organize the women as a way to avoid a mass strike. Schneiderman said a general strike was the only way for the smaller locals to secure better wages and conditions, but she accepted the league's orders.¹⁴⁴

143. Dye, 98.

144. Minutes, Strike Council, Women's Trade Union League of New York, 2 April 1911; Minutes, Executive Board, Women's Trade Union League of New York, 26 September 1912, WTUL of NY Papers.

At the end of 1912, a final effort was made to establish strikes as the most successful and preferred way to gain collective bargaining for workers. Local 62 of the ILGWU began a white-goods strike, and the WTUL was persuaded to lend its support. The walkout began in January 1913 and lasted five weeks. During that time, the league helped nearly five thousand young women join Local 62.¹⁴⁵ It had the numbers to effectively rebel, but not the support the 1909 protest had. Society ladies and educated college girls showed no support for the white-goods workers. Their financial help as well as public interest is what supported 1909 strike and allowed it to last for an extended period of time. Without them, the WTUL gave the white-goods fund one thousand dollars and only six thousand was donated outside of the union.¹⁴⁶ The strike ended with the white-goods workers securing a fifty-hour week, a wage increase for piecework, a five-dollar minimum wage, stopped employees from paying for machine power and thread, and it established an industry-wide preferential shop.¹⁴⁷ A preferential shop was different from a closed one. Louis Brandies explained that in a preferential shop, “The manufacturers can and will declare in appropriate terms their sympathy with the union, their desire to aid and strengthen the union, and their agreement that, as between union and non-union men of equal ability to do the job, the union men shall be given the preference.”¹⁴⁸

145. Dye, 100.

146. Rose Schneiderman, “The White Goods Workers of New York: Their Struggle for Human Condition,” *Life and Labor*, May 1913, 132.

147. “Victory of the White Goods Workers’ Union; Full Text of the Collective Agreement,” *Ladies’ Garment Worker*, March 1913, 5-6.

148. Edith Wyatt, “The Preferential Shop,” *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy*, ed. Leon Stein, (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1977), 111.

The 1913 strike forced the league to once again consider their relationship with the ILGWU and what they had overall accomplished from 1909 to 1913. Included in these accomplishments were an examination of their finances, membership gains, how well they had educated workers, and if they brought awareness to the public. In 1909, league members gladly worked alongside the ILGWU. By 1913, members had developed the complex that they were better than the all-male leaders. Their elevated feelings came from their situation as a female-led versus a male-led organization. League organizers thought they were pursuing something more important, which would have a greater impact than the ILGWU's continually male targeted policies. The haughty attitude of the WTUL only strengthened the dislike between the two organizations.

The league worked to make labor gains for women in all industries, not only the garment sector. There is no denying that garment unions had more success and gained more attention during the strike era. From 1909 to 1913, garment union membership rose from three thousand women to nearly sixty-four thousand women.¹⁴⁹ Thousands of women in different industries such as tobacco, artificial-flower making, and bookbinding unions did not benefit from organizations or strikes during the nearly five years spent on promoting them.

Since its creation in 1903, the WTUL had been working hard for the inclusion of women in labor unions. In reflecting on the strike era (1909 to 1913), league women recognized that their AFL modeled policies were not succeeding. One of the original reasons the group joined the AFL was because they agreed the organization and its president, Samuel Gompers, were serious about organizing women. After a meeting with Gompers in 1915, Margaret Dreier

149. State of New York, Department of Labor, *Ninth Annual Report*, 1909, appendixes 2 & 3; State of New York, Department of Labor, Bureau of Statistics and Information, *Trade Union Statistics in 1913*, 109.

Robins repeated to those present at the 1915 National WTUL Convention the insults the AFL president told her about organizing women:

...the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor recognized the need of organizing women, but they did not think women were qualified to organize women, that, in the first place, women were very difficult to organize, if they could be organized at all; that, secondly, women organizers were rarely worth anything, that they had a way of making serious mistakes.¹⁵⁰

The conversation between Margaret Dreier Robins and Gompers proved how the AFL and its leaders negatively regarded women. Rose Schneiderman put a voice to the thoughts held by the WTUL in 1915 when she told the *Call*, “We [came] to the American Federation of Labor and said to them, ‘Come and help us organize the American working girl’ ...but nothing [has been] done.”¹⁵¹ If the AFL was not serious about the objectives of the women leaders, there was clearly no reason for the WTUL to continue its support.

Several women organizers lost interest in organized labor and the labor movement in general following the events of the 1909 strike and the horror of the Triangle Fire. The last decade was spent attempting to unionize women throughout the nation, specifically in New York City, but they never gathered enough workers to stay successfully organized. A lack of understanding between classes and ethnicities persisted after the Shirtwaist Strike in 1909. League organizers still struggled with Italian and Jewish women who followed their father’s and brother’s house-hold rules. Many immigrant women remained wary of trade unions and struggled to come out of the shadow of their homeland’s domestic traditions. Organizing the diverse population of working women in New York City was not as easy as the optimistic WTUL first dreamed. Rather than grassroots campaigns to established organized labor, the

150. *Proceedings of the National Women’s Trade Union League Convention, 1915*, National Women’s Trade Union League papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

151. *New York Call*, June 15, 1915.

remaining women standing with the league such as Mary Dreier and Helen Marot found a renewed focus for their work through protective legislation.

Fire was the factor that pushed the WTUL towards advocating for legislation. After the Newark, New Jersey, Fire only four months before the Triangle Fire, the WTUL setup a New York City committee to investigate factories and mutually decide how to bring needed change to them. Due to the nature of the Newark disaster, the committee first focused on the likelihood of factory fires. Many of the girls that responded to the New York league's survey remained anonymous, because they feared their bosses would punish them for testifying. The report revealed that most women were afraid of their work environment. In 1910 when the survey was given, New York City contained eleven thousand factories. Out of this huge number, it was reported that only one hundred were considered fireproof. Being fireproof was not a guarantee for the safety of workers. As seen with the Asch Building, it meant the building itself was safe from fires, not what was inside them. Circumstances that prevented employees from escaping the Asch Building were cited in other factories before the Triangle Fire took place. An alarming number of buildings had no water to put fires out, stairs made of wood, faulty or no fire escape, and locked doors and windows.¹⁵² For league members who pushed against becoming involved with legislation and politics, the Triangle Fire quickly changed their minds.

Shortly after the Triangle Fire, the WTUL came together to further investigate the serious issue of factory fires. Uncaring bosses played with the lives of innocent girls, and the league saw it as their job to stop workplace disasters. On April 3, 1911, Anne Morgan once again rented out the Metropolitan Opera house. The Committee of Twenty-Five was established by the WTUL at the assembly to continue the league's work on fire hazards. It was given its name, because its

152. *Fire Questionnaires*, Leonora O'Reilly Papers, Papers of the Women's Trade Union League and its Principal Leaders, Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

members consisted of twenty-five of New York's upper-class citizens. The job of the permanent committee was not only to investigate workplace complaints. They also agreed to pressure government officials into adopting labor legislation.

Rabbi Stephen S. Wise commented on why the committee was needed, "We don't want an outburst of charity for those who have suffered only to have the whole thing forgotten in short order."¹⁵³ Mary Dreier and other allies involved in the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike saw how quickly the public moved on from their sympathy for factory workers. Allies could not trust the public to ensure factories became safer and a tragedy similar to the Triangle Fire never happened again. Instead, the twenty-five on the committee trusted themselves to get the job done. They refused to listen to criticism from others regarding the committee.

People in attendance at the Metropolitan Opera House meeting acknowledged a committee was needed, but voiced their dissatisfaction with the established group. Workers were not allowed at the meeting. Therefore, their opinions went unheard. Those against the committee argued, because the people involved in workplace tragedies, the working-class, had no assigned committee role. Members of the WTUL talked about class solidarity, which was one of the reasons upper-class women participated in the 1909 strike. Excluding working-class people from the committee led some to think the league was no longer serious about the class solidarity they spoke of. Those at the meeting who dissented argued that if the people working in hazardous environments had no place on official labor committees, they should have their own organization or there should be no board at all.¹⁵⁴

153. Stein, 136.

154. "Mass Meeting Calls for New Fire Laws," *New York Times*, April 4, 1911.

The barring of those directly affected by working in unsafe conditions from the meeting is ironic. It was doubtful beneficial decisions could be made by people who had never worked in a factory. Comments circulated about working-class people forming their own committee, but it never happened. Outside of the upper-class allies in the labor movement, laborers had little influence with the city's elite. Without the resources to get their committee off the ground, suggesting a separate committee was futile. The WTUL always emphasized class solidarity. Supporting an exclusively upper-class committee demonstrated that their policy of equality was no longer fully followed.

After the meeting, the *New York Times* quoted an unknown female WTUL leader as saying, “[We] have lost faith in the public and must rely on [ourselves].”¹⁵⁵ Although the quote is anonymous, it shows how much the ideology of the organization and its leaders had changed since the Shirtwaist Strike. Before the Triangle Fire, the organization rallied around unions and their efforts to organize women. By 1911, the group of women was no longer optimistic that they could successfully organize large groups of women in large cities. Unionization would always be a top priority for the league, but they now believed in their own ability to make lasting reform rather than working with the public and other organizations such as the American Federation of Labor and ILGWU.

A few weeks after it started, the Committee of Twenty-Five was renamed the Committee on Safety. The Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor and its leader John Kingsbury made the committee well-known and provided members access to social welfare resources. Founded in 1843, the AICP was one of the most successful New York charities in the early twentieth century. Rather than following past methods of protesting such as mass marches

155. Ibid.

and picketing, the Committee of Safety aimed to lobby for fire related bills that had a chance at passage.¹⁵⁶ Without government back, the committee never accomplished any of its objectives.

The WTUL decided the first step to obtaining protective legislation for women was through suffrage. Female suffrage was not achieved in the United States until 1920 when the nineteenth amendment was officially passed. Prior to its passage, their lack of voting rights did not stop women from lobbying for protective legislature. Women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century became vocal about their rights. Margaret Sanger became a spokesperson for reproductive rights, which included birth control. Charlotte Gilman was a proud feminist who wrote about psychological disorders including post-partum depression. Lucretia Mott, Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony all had a part in starting the women's suffrage movement in the United States. What is now called the first-wave of feminism was sweeping the country, and the messages of strong-females resonated with league members. Discussing feminine issues was considered inappropriate in the United States' conservative society. Women had grown tired of their perpetual suppression. WTUL leaders joined the movement with their advocacy for suffrage and protective labor legislation.

Women in the league began to view the issues of working-class women from a feminist standpoint rather than as a labor issue. The involvement of women in the American labor movement was now about gaining protective legislation for women. Instead of prioritizing class over gender, the league now theorized women were at a disadvantage to male workers. Protective legislation would assist women in gaining treatment equal to male workers.

Now that WTUL leaders had spent significant time in the presence of working women, they recognized the difference between the sexes instead of treating them all as workers. They

156. Greenwald, 156.

heard stories about unwanted advances from employers, struggled with women who gave all their income to male heads of house, and saw the tragedy of workplace disasters. Men had to endure punishing manual labor such as dock and railroad work and some had to support their entire family. Often times, both genders felt embarrassed asking for charity at aid houses. Female workers had a different set of problems than men. Once this was realized, the WTUL began using these differences as a reason why women needed protective legislation.

The organization also knew they needed a feminist based platform for why women workers needed protective legislation. Leaders who advocated for protection for women in the workplace found one major difference to capitalize on: a woman's biology. Feminists argued against putting an emphasis on a woman's ability to have children, because society already considered it a weakness. Leaders still chose to use it as a reason for the need of better factory conditions. Emphasizing the differences between men and women was needed and The league was willing to make sacrifices to gain protection for women.

The new platform presented was that women started in the labor force already at a disadvantage. According to society, women were destined to be wives and mothers. During the early twentieth century, the idea that women were weaker and often felled by their fragile emotions was widespread. Emphasis on the perceived weakness of women led men and WTUL leaders, including Mary Dreier, to their opinion that women should not be allowed to work in places where they had to stand all day, deal with hazardous materials, etc. If they worked in situations detrimental to their health, legislation should protect them. Working for a business in a high-risk work environment was harmful to a woman's future. An unhealthy woman may never find a husband. Without the support of a family or husband, a woman would be driven to working on the streets, which was a fate organizers wanted a woman to never experience. If a

woman was healthy enough after leaving factory life, there was still the chance that those who had worked closely with chemicals and other hazards would have issues with child bearing. It was agreed that children should not suffer in life, because their mother was forced to work in an unsafe environment.

Late in 1916 Mary Dreier discussed her change of views on the league's strategy to Leonora O'Reilly. In writing, Dreier said, "The attitude of the labor men to the working women has changed me from being an ardent supporter of labor to a somewhat rabid supporter of women and to feel that the enfranchisement of women and especially my working-class sisters is the supreme issue."¹⁵⁷ In the beginning, WTUL organizers saw feminism as a non-issue. The league's focus was on organizing women into trade unions, not gaining the vote or establishing that men and women are equal. Even with this ideology, the group recognized that women workers were different from their male counterparts.

Following the strike era, women labor organizers had a better understanding of how politics and legislation worked. They knew that politicians under political machines including Tammany Hall were part of the government's failure to adopt protective legislation for workers. Women such as Rose Schneiderman lobbied for the fifty-four-hour bill in 1912, which was meant to establish the work week at fifty-four hours for women and children in New York. Thanks to Frances Perkins' work with Alfred E. Smith, who was a part of Tammany Hall and a member of the New York State Assembly, the bill was eventually passed. Rose Schneiderman and other female lobbyists became pessimistic, because of their treatment at the hands of male politicians. Their views were not taken seriously, because women could not vote. Some women labored their lives away in derelict factories, but men held the belief that without voting rights,

157. Mary Dreier to Leonora O'Reilly, 16 September 1916, Leonora O'Reilly Papers, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

their experiences and opinions were invalid. At the same time, men discouraged votes for women, because they saw them as less intelligent than men and led by their emotions rather than logic. Before the nineteenth amendment, women relied on men to vote for bills related to female issues. By receiving the ability to vote, labor women speculated that their call for protective legislature would be heard by the all-male political scene.

Clara Lemlich explained the inherent problem of working women not having the vote in 1912 when she wrote:

The manufacturer has a vote; the bosses have votes; the foremen have votes; the inspectors have votes. The working girl has no vote. When she asks to have a building in which she must work made clean and safe, the officials do not have to listen. When she asks not to work such long hours, they do not have to listen... For until the men in the Legislature at Albany represent her as well as the bosses and the foremen, she will not get justice; she will not get fair conditions. That is why the working-woman now says that she must have the vote.¹⁵⁸

Suffragists including the Dreier sisters had one strong justification for women suffrage and they spread their message throughout the slums of New York City. If women received the vote and then used its power wisely, men may start listening and following their proposed labor reforms.

The establishment of the WTUL showed that women desired to become part of the male-dominated American labor movement. The men's lack of interest in women's issues as well as the failure of sponsorship from the American Federation of Labor drove women organizers, especially the WTUL, towards feminism and all-female organizations. Women were a minority in the inner-circle and decision making of the early twentieth century labor movement, but WTUL women began shaping their policy to match this fact.¹⁵⁹

158. Clara Lemlich Shavelson, "The Inside of a Shirtwaist Factory," *Good Housekeeping* 54, March 1912.

159. Dye, 123.

The Triangle Fire served a purpose for labor organizations, specifically the WTUL and ILGWU. Although it was a devastating event, it showed these organizations that they could not solely rely on the strategy of mass strikes in garnering working conditions. At the same time, it opened the eyes of women in the league. Until this time, they had dutifully followed the AFL. Following the example of male-led organization was not beneficial. The men made empty promises, gave little funding, insulted women organizers and ignored their concerns. Instead of passively struggling with men on political and labor issues, league members began actively changing the way they ensured working-class women received fair treatment in their workplaces.

Female organizers in the WTUL still followed their original vision of women united across class, religious, and ethnic lines after switching to supporting protective legislation. The Dreier sisters, Rose Schneiderman, and other supporters of organized labor only change their thinking about how women unionization could successfully be achieved. Organization was always their primary job. Following the 1911 fire they regarded government legislation as a successful way to reform workspaces and keep women firmly united in unions. Without strikes to bring women to the unions, hope was now pinned on the theory that legislation would start a domino effect among working women. Schneiderman explained the new strategy by commenting, “We only began to stress legislative activities when we discovered... a stepping stone cause and effect relationship in the American labor movement. If we organized even a handful of girls and then managed to put through legislation which made into law the advantages they had gained, other girls would be more likely to join a union and reap further benefits for

themselves.”¹⁶⁰ The WTUL still used the principle of spreading their assistance by word of mouth, but strikes no longer had a place in the operation.

Meanwhile, the male-led ILGWU still advocated for strikes. The organization and its unions in New York City were still riding high from the 1910 Protocol of Peace. Following the Triangle Fire, factory workers’ demands for walkouts increased, because they feared sharing the same fate. The Waist and Dressmakers’ Union of New York, Local 25, was the first union to petition for another strike. The ILGWU affiliate related that enthusiasm for unionization among workers was created through strikes. Similar to the WTUL, Local 25 saw through the Triangle Fire that their 1909 agreement created no lasting change. Despite the disappointment of their first strike, Local 25 relied on it as their main strategy unlike the New York league who quickly created new reform tactics. As the league found, the all-male organization was a detriment to working women earning a place in American labor. Their indifference to workers who fell outside of their mostly socialist and Jewish membership created a rift between the two organizations. The ILGWU knew women were the majority of the garment trade and should be included in their operations, but the group only wanted women as picketers. Delegating women to a front-line role would keep them out of executive roles, which male organizers vehemently said women were not intelligent enough to handle.

Rose Schneiderman, who was also part of the WTUL, worked for the ILGWU for three years as an organizer. After months of working with Boston’s shirtwaist makers in 1916, Schneiderman convinced the president of the ILGWU that the women were ready to walkout of their jobs. When the president decided at the last minute that a man should lead the strike instead of a woman, Rose wrote out her anger to Pauline Newman: “They have got to be taught... that a

160. Rose Schneiderman, “Women’s Role in Labor Legislation,” Rose Schneiderman Papers, New York University.

woman is no rag. Think of doing all that worrying and planning and when the task is almost done to send a man in and give him the credit for building up the thing.”¹⁶¹ Following the incident, Schneiderman left the ILGWU and channeled all of her passion into running the national league.

The ILGWU spent less effort on women workers than on the immigrant, male socialists in the United States. Thanks to the Protocol of Peace, the organization tried implementing the same policies of the protocol in industries made of mostly women workers. When dress-makers agitated for a general strike at the end of 1912 and voted for it in January 1913, the ILGWU swiftly created a protocol. It started on January 14 and on January 18 the protocol for the mostly female industry was signed by the ILGWU and the Dress and Waist Manufacturers’ Association without the workers’ consent. At the same time, kimono makers and white-goods workers also struck. Local 41 and 62 both declined several agreements before the manufacturers gave in to the idea of a preferential shop and signed their own protocols with the ILGWU.¹⁶²

The union had a grand dream of creating protocols for men and women throughout America’s major cities. Its ambition for protocols for women spread to Boston and Kalamazoo, but it never had a far-wide reach for either gender. The waistmakers of New York, particularly Local 25, had the most success with the protocol. All shops that were part of the protocol included a white label in their garments to let consumers know the item had been made in a shop that followed the protocol and standard factory conditions. In the organization’s opinion, a protocol for women’s industries was a way for working women to unionize and exercise their right to collectively bargain. Additionally, the international stated the protocol would bring the

161. Rose Schneiderman to Pauline Newman, February 6 and August 6, 1916.

162. Lewis L. Lorwin, *The American Federation of Labor: History, Politics, and Prospects* (Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1933), 226-8.

“frailest and most helpless” workers “relief from industrial slavery.”¹⁶³ No matter a worker’s job, race, gender, etc., the protocol would save them from the dangerous prison workplaces had become.

Essentially, the ILGWU saw the protocol as a way to give working women an opportunity to rise above their workplace oppression. In reality, the protocol was not an effective change. Preferential shops as described earlier by Louis Brandeis were an idealistic fantasy. Shop owners still hired non-union workers over more qualified organization members because they refused to recognize the groups. Protocolism gained few converts beyond the northeastern United States and the only truly successful agreement was the original 1910 Protocol of Peace. It was a promising new strategy, but the Protocol of Peace had its own set of issues. The ILGWU did not actively lobby for legislation like the WTUL. Instead, they relied on their members and the word of factory bosses to reform American labor. It was the least impactful organizational strategy following the Triangle Fire. The group gave its working-class members hope and has left its mark on American labor history, but it failed to adopt successful reform methods following the 1911 tragedy.

While the New York WTUL was working on their own campaign for protective legislation and the ILGWU created protocols, the Factory Investigating Commission led its own labor crusade. The commission passed was formed by the New York State legislature on June 30, 1911. It was made as an official body in charge of fully investigating the conditions of factories and its employees throughout the state. The state gave the commission permission: “to inquire into the conditions under which manufacturing is carried on in cities of the first and

163. *Ladies Garment Worker*, May 1913.

second class of the State to the end that remedial legislation might be enacted for the protection of life and health of all factory workers, and for the interests of the public generally.”¹⁶⁴

Officially, the FIC was established to investigate factory fire hazards. The commission swiftly changed their goals to evaluate all aspects of factory life after their first investigations. The commission reported, “A superficial examination revealed conditions in factories and manufacturing establishments that constituted a daily menace to the lives of thousands of working men, women and children... The need for a thorough and extensive investigation into the general conditions of factory life was clearly recognized.”¹⁶⁵ After their first year, the commission moved on from legislation for typical issues such as women, children, and fire safety. The following three years saw them submitting bills for fair employment, disabilities, sanitation, and insurance for older workers.

From the beginning, the commission was under the control of Al Smith and Robert F. Wagner of Tammany Hall. Al Smith joined the political scene in New York as a member of the New York State Assembly in 1904. After meeting with Frances Perkins, Smith became active in reforming New York labor. Later, he served as the Governor of New York from 1919 to 1920 and 1923 to 1928. In 1928, Smith was the Democrat candidate for president of the United States. Although he was involved with Tammany Hall, Smith avoided its corruption and never developed an unfavorable reputation.

Similar to Al Smith, Wagner started as a member of the New York State Assembly in 1905. From 1909 to 1918, he was a New York State senator. Working on the FIC gave Wagner

164. "Report of the New York State Factory Investigating Commission," *Monthly Review of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics* no. 2, (1916).

165. New York (State) Factory Investigating Commission, *Preliminary Report of the Factory Investigating Commission, 1912*, 3 vols. (Albany, New York: The Argus Company, printers, 1912), 13.

the reputation of a Progressive Era reformer. From 1927 to 1949, Wagner served as a Democrat in the United States Senate. Both Smith and Wagner helped Tammany Hall turn itself into a progressive body with a large working-class backing.

Following the Triangle Fire, Smith and Wagner realized Tammany needed to get involved in the reform movement its immigrant voters supported in order to stay a top machine. New York City had a large immigrant constituency and the politicians agreed immigrants would not willingly vote for Tammany-backed candidates if they showed no interest in the safety of the working-class.

Samuel Gompers, the long-time president of the American Federation of Labor, was also a FIC board member. Today, Frances Perkins is the most recognized person involved in the FIC. She witnessed the Triangle Fire and created a name for herself through the commission. Perkins was an activist for workers' rights and served as the Secretary of Labor under Franklin D. Roosevelt. The WTUL inadvertently had a hand in the FIC, because several of its members worked for the commission. Clara Lemlich and Rose Schneiderman served as investigators. Mary Dreier was the only female FIC board member. All of these women had worked in or seen factory conditions and the people who worked in them. They badgered their male colleagues to investigate factories and interview employees themselves rather than reading over reports from others.

The FIC only lasted four years, but it was more successful at establishing legislature than the national WTUL its New York branch ever were. Of course, that is because the commission was sanctioned by the New York government. Unlike other groups, the FIC had access to resources and prominent political figures. Its first year, the commission tested the labor waters in New York's major cities with ten thousand dollars allotted for the work. Over three thousand

pages of testimony was taken from all of their factory investigations, public hearings, and interviews. By the end of the 1912, the FIC gave fifteen bills to the New York legislature for consideration. Eight of the bills were passed.¹⁶⁶ In 1913, twenty-five laws created by the commission were passed and three more followed the next year. New York's Republican party was able to cut off funding for the FIC in 1915, which led to its dissolution.¹⁶⁷

The commission used the Triangle Fire at the Asch building as the foundation for their work. They related that if measures were not quickly and efficiently created, another Triangle Fire would occur. Its first meeting on October 14, 1911, included interviews with New York Fire Chief John Kenlon, the Commissioner of Labor, and an inspector from the State Labor Department. These interviews consisted of discussions on the cost of fire protection such as sprinklers and the major flaws with the Labor Department's investigation system. The commission's male and female investigators were serious about their job, and it showed through their thorough searches of factories and sweatshops. No corner was overlooked and investigators often caught bosses unaware when they arrived for a surprise inspection.

At the fiftieth anniversary of the fire in 1961, Frances Perkins emotionally spoke to those present about the reason for the FIC and its lasting legacy:

Out of that terrible episode came a self-examination of stricken conscience in which the people of this state saw for the first time the individual worth and value of each of those 146 people who fell or were burned in that great fire... Moved by this sense of stricken guilt, we banded ourselves together to find a way by law to prevent this kind of disaster. And so it was that the Factory Commission that sprang out of the ashes of the tragedy made an investigation that took four years of searching, of public hearings, of legislative formulations, of pressuring through the legislature the greatest battery of bills to prevent disasters and hardships affecting working people... We had in the election of Franklin Roosevelt the beginning of what has come to be called a New Deal for the United States. But it was based really upon the experiences that we had had in New York State and

166. Greenwald, 161.

167. Ibid, 187.

upon the sacrifice of those who, we faithfully remember with affection and respect, died in that terrible fire on March 25, 1911. They did not die in vain and we will never forget them.¹⁶⁸

The Triangle Fire was the driving force behind the FIC, but the commission showed its awareness of negligence in all of New York's industries. Through the hard work and moral awareness of everyone involved with the FIC, the commission was a success that not only set an example for other states, but for the country's national government.

168. Frances Perkins, "Not in Vain," *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy*, ed. Leon Stein, (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1977), 200-1.

Conclusion

Legacy

From 1903 to its gradual dissolution, the women who worked for the Women's Trade Union League always had ambitious goals. It started with unionization and gradually added suffrage, protective legislation, and, near the end, participation in the equal rights amendment. Following its fame from the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike and presence in reforming labor laws, the WTUL and industrial feminism slowly disappeared.

The overwhelming focus on the new communist presence in the United States rather than the betterment of working conditions had consequences. Overall, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union lost seventeen thousand members during the first four years of the 1920s. At the beginning of 1920, women made up seventy-five percent of ILGWU membership. By 1924, it had dropped by thirty-six percent. Throughout the first half of the 1920s, 45,000 women quit the organization and 20,000 men joined.¹⁶⁹ The union was never able to recover from declining membership figures among females. In the early twentieth century, women expected the ILGWU to adequately represent them. By the 1920s when their desired representation was still not fully realized and the male-led group continued putting their needs last, women gave up hope on the organization that had originally guided them through the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike.

In the 1930s and after the Second World War, the WTUL allowed female Congress of Industrial Organizations members to join them. Until 1938, the group was called the Committee for Industrial Organization and was affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. Once the group broke from the AFL, officials punished the WTUL for fraternizing with a now rival group.

169. Levine, 431.

Even with the financial threat, women in charge, including Rose Schneiderman and Pauline Newman, continued allowing CIO members to join while never addressing the situation. As discussed, the league knew from the beginning that they needed the AFL to ensure their own success. Unlike the early 1900s, it no longer passively followed AFL directives. In 1940, Rose Schneiderman said, “We will organize women where it is necessary. We will work with the AFL, we will work with the CIO.”¹⁷⁰ League organizers no longer cared if they associated with AFL antagonists. The league was already financially struggling to stay active and were desperate for the dues new members would bring.

The league’s response to the AFL’s demands concerning the CIO made its financial situation worse. Instead of issuing a blanket response, the president of the National league and New York branch, Rose Schneiderman, occasionally acted out against the CIO. In 1937, she refused an aid request to a CIO union and no league member was present at the CIO convention in 1938. Again, these sporadic decisions made union leaders and their members question the WTUL. Branches were angry over the lack of response from the national board when the AFL targeted them over the CIO issue. At the same time, the CIO stopped giving donations to the WTUL. The lack of decisive leadership from board members was the first sign of the league’s decline.

Over the next decade, the league continued slipping into a poverty it could not recover from. Women who held executive roles in state branches quickly resigned as it became clear the league was dying. The league had problems getting young women to join their cause and its original members and leaders left the organization for retirement. In 1950, the national WTUL

170. Gary Edward Endelman, *Solidarity Forever: Rose Schneiderman and the Women’s Trade Union League* (University of Delaware, 1978), 237.

voted to officially close the league. The New York branch, which was the champion of the league, continued operating until 1955.

The league's first members witnessed the height of sweatshops in America and the gradual adoption of safe work place practices for all workers. The United States now had a minimum wage, a forty-eight-hour work week, and unionization was recognized by the federal government.¹⁷¹ The WTUL's purpose was to organize women in a way that included all classes. By the official disbandment of the league, the organization had lost its original purpose and the spirit that drove its leaders. Uniting women across class lines was no longer what created passion among organizers. The switch to recognizing feminist ideologies led the group away from overcoming class, religious, ethnic, and political differences among allies and working women. Leaders gave into the notion that women would never receive equal pay with men or become high-skilled workers. By the end of the league, disagreements with allies, women workers, the AFL and ILGWU, etc. throughout the league's history had fundamentally changed its goals and what it stood for.

While the WTUL struggled towards its end, the ILGWU grappled with its own issues, which led to its abandonment of women's issues. Following the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike and the Triangle Fire, the National group and Local 25 of New York had concentrated their efforts on a universal Protocol of Peace. A war among members in the organization quickly changed its ability to run an effective union. Women's issues were set aside by the male-led organization in favor of the struggle between left and right political factions among members. Socialist immigrants started the organization and their socialist ideologies became imbedded with its leaders and the organization's policies. The growing presence of communist members and low-

171. Dye, 166.

level leaders in their locales horrified upper-level leaders. Starting in 1923, leaders declared war on several of its affiliates and local branches including the Trade Union Education League. The National organization asked members to leave unions considered overran by communists. The members who refused to leave were expelled.¹⁷² Once again, women took notice of how male leaders treated them. Leaders ignored their concerns and there was still no female officer on the international board.

A few decades later, large shops and factories in the United States began relocating abroad where sweatshops could still be taken advantage of. The ILGWU began having trouble organizing manufacturers who by the 1950s were centered in the western United States. In 1995, the organization joined the Amalgamated Clothing & Textile Workers Union to create UNITE HERE, which still operates today. The labor union works in North America, has almost 300,000 members, and has a majority membership of women and people of color. UNITE works with a variety of industries besides garment and textile trades. A few other industries under the UNITE umbrella include: food services, hotels, laundry, and transportation. Every year the organization holds a remembrance ceremony in front of the former Asch building where the Triangle Fire took place. The name of each victim and their age is read. Many descendants attend the ceremony with makeshift shirtwaists, which also read the victims' names. The ceremony's purpose is not only to remind and educate people of the past, but also to ensure the public remains aware of the struggle for workers-rights.

The Women's Trade Union League and International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union have a legacy that goes beyond the foundations their dedicated leaders established as part of the American labor movement. Their legacy is entwined with the horror and lessons learned from

172. Tyler, 155.

the Triangle Factory Fire. The WTUL and its move towards legislative advocacy following the fire changed the traditions of the American labor movement and how labor-related protests were conducted. The organization successfully inserted itself into American politics, which had not been done before. Without the publically witnessed Triangle Fire, the league would not have rallied around legislation. Its leaders such as Mary Dreier and Helen Marot created a new precedence for how unions and their national organizations demanded proper conditions for workers no matter their ethnicity, gender, etc. Instead of taking to the streets in protest, women lobbied for female suffrage and protective legislation for women and children workers. The WTUL never achieved the class unity it originally sought, but it opened the eyes of thousands of immigrant, working women as well as the general American public to the plight of the working girl. Their public involvement during the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike and outrage following the Triangle Fire inspired and educated the masses.

The ILGWU in its original form left a strikingly different legacy behind for women organizers and workers. Members of the group felt deep sympathy for the girls who had picketed for Local 25 during the 1909 strike and then lost their lives a year later at the Triangle Factory. The mostly male group fail to channel its anger over the fire into creating new policies. The WTUL slowly edged away from mass strikes while the ILGWU embraced walkouts and attempted a universal Protocol of Peace. For the most part, the group's involvement in the lives of working women was a tool used to gain more members. Once women realized the ILGWU was never going to support them the way they supported male members, they quickly quit. The labor organization is a prime example of an organization that lacked solid representation for its female membership. Their pursuit of a protocol recognized across all industries and its special attention to socialist members is the ILGWU's legacy following the Triangle Fire.

Why is analyzing the effect of the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike and Triangle Fire on early twentieth century labor organizations important? The simple answer is that it still is important, because unsafe factories are still a global problem, especially where manual labor is cheaply purchased. Disasters similar to the Triangle Fire will never stop as long as bosses and officials choose products and money over their workers. An example eerily similar occurred in 2012 in Karachi, Pakistan. On September 11, 2012, a fire broke out at a garment factory owned by Ali Enterprises. Many workers at the factory only came in that day to receive their paycheck.

Mohammed Pervez, a survivor of the incident, commented on the fire risks employees dealt with every day, “If there were no metal grilles on the windows, a lot of people would have been saved. The factory was overflowing with garments and fabrics. Whoever complained was fired.”¹⁷³ People also jumped out of open windows in the four story building to save themselves from the flames. In the factory that employed at least 1,500 people, it is estimated two hundred and eighty-nine people died in the fire. Several bodies were unidentifiable, because they burned beyond recognition.

Shortly after the disaster, an investigation into the cause of the fire and the reason workers could not escape began. It is speculated that a faulty electric circuit started the blaze. Reports from workers included in the joint investigation court said they never had fire drills and medical kits were locked away, because the owners said workers would steal them. Furthermore, the fire department arrived at the scene of the fire seventy-five minutes after it began.¹⁷⁴

173. Imtiaz Shah, “Fire Engulfs Pakistan Factories Killing 134 Workers” *Reuters*, September 11, 2012, Accessed November 8, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/09/seeking-justice-deadly-pakistan-factory-blaze-150908113220153.html>.

174. Declan Walsh, “Certified Safe, a Factory in Karachi Still Quickly Burned” *New York Times*, December 7, 2012.

Mohammed Pervez said in his interview, “The owners were more concerned with safeguarding the garments in the factory than the workers.”¹⁷⁵ It is clear the factory owners, Abdul Aziz, Arshad Bhalia, and Shahid Bhalia, cared more about money than the people who made their products. The trio fled to London, England after paying bail during the factory case. As of 2015, they still resided in London.¹⁷⁶

Similar to the United States in the early twentieth century, Pakistan has a booming labor industry relegated to unsafe factory buildings. There are few labor laws and these are ignored by business owners. Factory inspectors do not report issues, because they are paid off by corrupt bosses. The *New York Times* noticed the fire’s similarity to the Triangle Factory Fire in its 2012 article on the Karachi fire by writing:

There was evidence that Ali Enterprises was flawed well before September’s fire. Abdulrauf Shaikh, a longtime inspector, examined the factory three times, in 2010, 2011 and again this July, just two months before the fire. Each time he found a locked fire exit — as in the fatal 1911 Triangle shirtwaist factory fire in New York — minimum wage violations and other serious problems.¹⁷⁷

To further illustrate the prevalence of factory fires today. Hours before the Karachi fire, twenty-five workers died at a shoe-sole making factory in Lahore, Pakistan. Remembering the Triangle Fire and encouraging global labor unions is important, because horrific factory tragedies will keep happening unless labor leaders continue demanding protective legislation, which their predecessors in the Women’s Trade Union League began. Technology has rapidly evolved since the early twentieth century, but employees across the world are still treated like immigrants in

175. Shah, “Fire Engulfs Pakistan Factories Killing 134 Workers.”

176. Tansy Hoskins, “Seeking Justice for Deadly Pakistan Factory Blaze,” *Al Jazeera*, September 11, 2015, Accessed November 8, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/09/seeking-justice-deadly-pakistan-factory-blaze-150908113220153.html>.

177. Walsh, “Certified Safe, a Factory in Karachi Still Quickly Burned.”

the United States during the 1900s. If no one stands beside them in solidarity, the labor movement will permanently fail.

The WTUL and ILGWU were not the first labor organizations in the United States, but the Triangle Fire forced them to think outside of the policy box created by the AFL. Both had different goals and groups they represented, but they ultimately introduced new labor strategies that changed how the labor movement looked. Thanks to these organizations, today's unions have learned from past strategies and mistakes while continuing the practice of trying new methods for successful organization. No matter what shocking roadblocks labor organizations come across, they must pursue their goals until workers across the United States are treated fairly. Standing firm through adversity in the name of making certain all workers are treated with respect no matter their job title honors the memory of the league and ILGWU. Their work is not complete, but unions have the opportunity to build on their combined revolutionary progress.

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