

This young girl stands between looms in a textile factory. At the turn of the century, millions of children worked long hours in mines, mills, and factories.



25.6 Working Conditions

Working conditions in most industries were appalling. Gone were the days when business owners knew and cared about the people who worked for them. Men like Carnegie and Rockefeller knew little about their workers.

Working Families Gone too were the days when factory workers could expect decent pay. With so many people looking for jobs, business owners could pay low wages. Many wages were so low that men

The Triangle Factory A Hazardous Workplace

Saturday was payday at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. Most workers earned only \$9 per week, with the most experienced employees making up to \$12. The younger workers, some only 13 years old, earned just \$6 per week for sewing on buttons all day. The very youngest earned even less. Worker Pauline Newman recalled, *We were young, eight, nine, ten years old . . . The hours were from 7:30 in the morning to 6:30 at night when it wasn't busy. When the [busy] season was on*

we worked until 9 o'clock. No overtime pay, not even supper money . . . My wages were \$1.50 for a seven-day week.

These pay rates were what workers earned before deductions. The company charged its employees for the thread and electricity they used, for the chairs they sat on, and even for using Triangle's coat lockers.

Employees were expected to work at least 59 hours a week. This included every Saturday, plus occasional Sundays. To keep workers from claiming

overtime pay, the managers sometimes set the clock back. To keep workers from being "interrupted," the heavy steel doors to the hall and stairs were locked until closing time.

To make sure workers didn't steal, the factory built a narrow corridor leading to the elevators. Every day at quitting time, employees filed through this corridor one at a time so that a watchman could inspect each woman's handbag.

Working at Triangle was unhealthy, uncomfortable, and unsafe. Managers seldom let workers leave to use the bathroom or to drink from the dirty

could not support their families. To get by, wives and children had to work as well, usually at even lower wages.

Most factory women earned about \$1 to \$3 per day. If business was slow, wages dropped. A boss might not pay a new worker anything until she had learned her job. Then he would charge her for maintaining the sewing machine she worked on. If a worker complained, she could easily be replaced with a new one, perhaps for less money.

Millions of young children worked in mines, mills, and factories. A newspaper reported that young boys hired by coal miners to separate lumps of coal from rocks “go to work . . . at seven o’clock in the morning and work till it is too dark to see any longer. For this they get \$1 to \$3 a week.” They also got curved spines from bending over piles of coal all day.

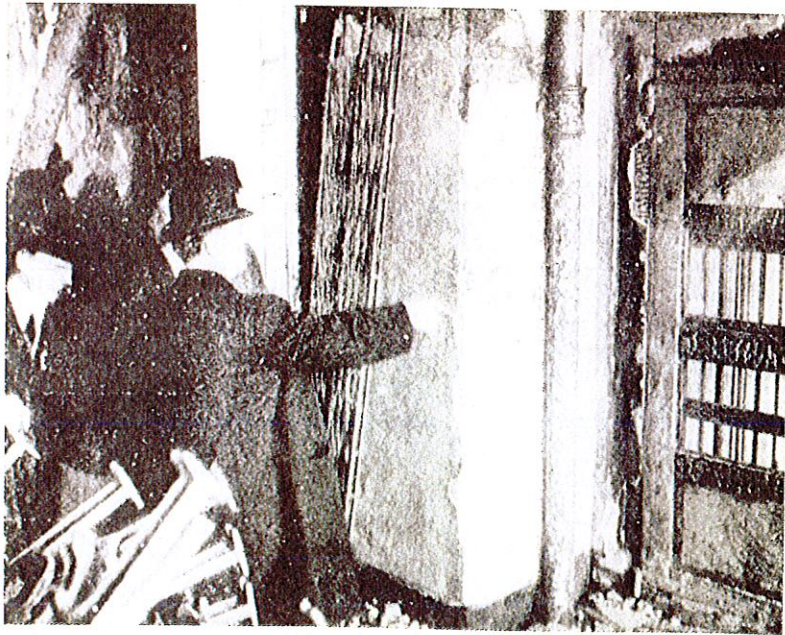
Inside the Factories Mills and factories were hot in summer and cold in winter. To keep costs low, owners crowded workers together rather than finding additional space.

Of all workplace dangers, fire claimed the most lives. In New York, tall buildings often lacked fire escapes. New York City’s fire chief wanted buildings to have fire escapes and sprinkler systems that could put out fires quickly. But factory owners objected to such expenses.

New York City did require that factory doors “open outwardly” and “shall not be locked” so workers might escape quickly in a fire. The law was not enforced, however. In 1910, about 94 percent of all factory doors in the city opened inward instead of outward.

tap in the hallway. In the sewing room, women could barely squeeze by each other’s machines without catching their clothes in the moving parts. The chairs often lacked backs to support the sewers while they worked. With all the machines in use, the noise could be deafening.

Fire hazards abounded. The city prohibited smoking, but the factory rarely enforced that rule. Workers stuffed leftover fabric into wooden bins where it sat for months just waiting for a spark to set it ablaze. The building’s only fire protection was a few hundred pails of water scattered throughout its ten floors.



An inspector points to a bolted door in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. The inspection came too late for the women who would lose their lives in the fire.