

Strikes often pitted police against labor organizers. This painting shows a policeman being shot on Haymarket Square in Chicago during a strike of the Knights of Labor in 1886.



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25.7 Labor Unions

As a teenager, Rose Schneiderman found work in a cap factory. After three years, she later wrote, “It began to dawn on me that we girls needed an organization. We were helpless; no one girl dare stand up for anything alone.”

Workers like Schneiderman had been forming unions since the 1830s. These early organizations were **labor unions**. They organized workers in the same trade, or job, to fight for better wages and working conditions. Sometimes workers in these unions went out on strike, refusing to work until their employers agreed to meet their demands.

The Triangle Factory Fire Ends in Tragedy

About 5,000 workers from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory were part of the strike of 1909. Their demands included unlocked doors during working hours and safer fire escapes in the Asch Building.

Rather than meet those demands, Blanck and Harris responded by locking the strikers out of the factory and advertising for replacements. “If the union had won, we would have been safe,” said striker Rose Safran. “But the bosses defeated us and we didn’t get the open doors or the better fire escapes.” Because of that defeat, 146 workers would die tragically.

The cause of the fire that swept through the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in 1911 was never known. But one Saturday afternoon, people on the eighth floor began to cry, “Fire!” Within minutes, the entire floor was a “mass of flames.” Escaping workers rushed to the stairs or pushed their way into the two small elevators. The stairs, however, were soon ablaze, and the elevators stopped running.

On the tenth floor, Mary Alter was warned of the fire by telephone. Owner Isaac Harris and production manager Sam Bernstein led some people out onto the roof. People from nearby buildings stretched

ladders between the rooftops to help those on the roof escape.

Workers on the ninth floor had no warning. The fire just appeared. Some women died immediately. Firemen later found them as “skeletons bending over sewing machines.” Those who had time to escape found themselves trapped by the locked factory door. In desperation, they rushed to the windows and began to jump.

The crowd that gathered outside the Asch Building watched in horror as girls began to fall out of the sky—“fire streaming back from their hair and dresses”—and drop to their deaths on the pavement below.

Firefighters arrived quickly but had trouble bringing their equipment close to the build-

Knights of Labor In 1869, Uriah Stephens organized a new union known as the Knights of Labor. Stephens hoped to unite “men and women of every craft, creed, and color” into “one common brotherhood.” The Knights led several successful strikes against telegraph and railroad companies. With such victories, the union grew to over 700,000 members.

In 1886, nearly 200,000 workers went on strike nationwide to demand an eight-hour workday. During a rally at Haymarket Square in Chicago, someone threw a bomb at police. The police shot back, injuring many workers. Four workers were sentenced to death for the bombing, even though no evidence tied them to the bomb.

Fearing more violence, employers fired anyone associated with the Knights. Membership dropped quickly, and the organization faded away.

American Federation of Labor As the number of Knights declined, a group of local trade unions formed the American Federation of Labor. Led by Samuel Gompers, the AFL tried to negotiate agreements with employers on such issues as wages.

Despite the AFL’s peaceful approach, many employers made their workers sign pledges not to join unions. They also fired union members and exchanged lists of such “troublemakers” with other employers.

ing because of the bodies on the pavement. There was little the firemen could do, however. Their ladders were not tall enough to reach beyond the sixth floor. Their safety nets were just as useless. The workers fell with such force, said one fireman, that they “went right through the life nets.”

It was all over in half an hour.

At the funeral for the victims, garment workers marched under a banner proclaiming, “We demand fire protection.” As she marched, Rose Schneiderman glanced up at the buildings lining the funeral procession. “There they were. Girls right at the top of hundreds of buildings, looking down on us,” she recalled. “The structures were no different from the Asch Building . . . many were in a far worse condition.”



This New York paper ran an eyewitness account of barred doors at the Triangle fire next to a cartoon that demanded “Who Is Responsible?”



Shirtwaist workers display strike leaflets for a newspaper photographer. Strikers wanted shorter hours, higher pay, and safer working conditions.

A strike was declared in five of the biggest factories. There are 30 factories in the city. About 100 girls went out. The result was a victory, which netted us—I mean the girls—\$2 increase in our wages on the average . . . But all was not lovely by any means, for the bosses were not at all pleased with their beating and had determined to fight us again.

The largest women's union was the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), which represented women in clothing factories. In 1909, thousands of New York City garment workers walked off their jobs to protest poor working conditions and low pay. As the strike grew, so did public sympathy for the young women. The newspapers called this movement "The Uprising of the 20,000."

The strike ended months later when employers agreed to a shorter workweek and better pay. They also ended fees for the use of factory equipment. The employers refused, however, to meet the workers' demands for safety improvements. Most garment factories remained unsafe.

The Homestead Strike Some business owners used force to defeat unions. When workers struck at a Carnegie steel plant in Homestead, Pennsylvania, Henry Clay Frick, Carnegie's partner, refused to talk about their demands. Instead Frick made plans to reopen his plant with non-union workers. To protect these strikebreakers, he hired 300 armed guards.

When the guards arrived in Homestead, they faced an angry crowd of strikers. A battle broke out in which both guards and strikers died. Still, Frick went ahead with his plan. When the Homestead plant reopened with strikebreakers, the union collapsed in defeat.

Working Women Organize

Such tactics kept many women from joining unions, but not Rose Schneiderman. Upset by pay cuts, Schneiderman organized the women in her factory as part of the National Board of United Cloth Hat and Cap Makers. Soon after she joined the union, she wrote,