



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Triangle Shirtwaist Factory women strike, win better wages and hours, New York, 1909

late Sept

1909

to: Feb

1910

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *New York City, New York*

Location Description: *Brown Building (formerly Asch Building) - 23–29 Washington Place*

Goals:

Higher wages, improved working conditions, official union recognition, and collective bargaining rights.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 016. Picketing

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 048. Protest meetings
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 015. Group lobbying
- 019. Wearing of symbols

Methods in 5th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 106. Industry strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- women garment factory workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Unclear initially, but Clara Limlick came to play a strong role

Partners:

International Ladies Garment Workers Union

External allies:

All of the other women garment workers, the "Mink Brigade" of owning class women led by Ann Morgan and Alva Vanderbilt Belmont

Involvement of social elites:

Ann Morgan, Alva Vanderbilt Belmont and the "Mink Brigade"

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- International Ladies Garment Workers Union

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Clara Limlick and the workers at the other factories

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Socialites Ann Morgan and Alva Vanderbilt Belmont and the

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *each segment is 3.5 weeks in length*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Max Blanck and Isaac Harris - Owners the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory and the other garment factory owners

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

none

Campaigner violence:

No known campaigner violence was used.

Repressive Violence:

Physical violence was perpetrated by the owners upon the strikers. Hired thugs and prostitutes beat the striking women. Police arrested strikers for no reason.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

4 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

After being out on strike from the end of September 1909, and having had the rest of the industry join them in a Industry strike on November 24, 1909 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory officials settle with their workers providing increased wages, and shortened work hours on February 23,1910. They did not gain union recognition.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory is best known for the unique fashion blouse they produced and the horrific fire that killed 146 workers, women who might have lived if the owners had been forced to ensure safety standards in the factory. Historically, the 1911 tragedy defined the Triangle workers as the victims of disaster.

The following is the untold story about those women, not as victims, but as the victors of increased wages and better working conditions and their assertiveness in rising up to demand a change in their conditions. This is the story of women, against enormous odds, forcing the Triangle owners to make concessions to their demands for justice.

Working conditions in the early twentieth century were not very safe for many factory workers. In June of 1909, a fire prevention specialist sent a letter to the owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory to discuss ways to improve safety in the factory. This letter was ignored.

The work day at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory was 14 hours long with only one break throughout the day. Extra bathroom breaks were often denied forcing people to urinate on the factory room floor adding to the already unsanitary work space. Poor ventilation and locked factory room doors were common. Heaping piles of fabric scraps littered the factory room floors. The workers were paid two dollars a day, were docked pay for their errors and for the needles and thread they consumed. Sometimes, they were docked more than they were paid.

At the end of September 1909, with the backing of Local 25 of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) the Triangle Shirtwaist factory workers went on strike seeking increased wages, reduced working hours and union representation.

Conditions were no better at other factories. Unrest was infiltrating throughout the women's garment workers industry. Something big was about to happen. On November 22, 1909, activist Clara Limlich spoke out at a union meeting that they must do something.

"I have listened to all the speakers, and I have no further patience for talk. I am a working girl, one of those striking against intolerable conditions. I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in generalities. What we are here for is to decide whether or not to strike. I make a motion that we go out in a general strike."

As most women's garment workers faced these desperate times, Limlich's call for action against these repressive conditions resulted in a vote to strike. On November 24, 1909, in the largest single work stoppage in the US up to that time, twenty thousand workers walked off the job in an industry-wide strike joining the already striking Triangle workers. They sought better wages, standardized work day, improved working conditions, and union representation.

At first, people paid little attention, and the press barely made mention of the strike in their newspapers. Until in December 1909 Ann Morgan, daughter of international financier JP Morgan, took up the cause of the striking workers. Joining her in support of the workers was Alva Vanderbilt Belmont. With the voices of these rich, upper class women, also known as the mink brigade, by the middle of December the media picked up on the story of the horrible working conditions. Within forty-eight hours, smaller businesses capitulated and workers began to return to union only workshops.

Not so at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory housed in the Asch Building in Greenwich Village. Owners Max Blanck and Isaac Harris were angered and indignant. They attempted to stymie the workers by hiring prostitutes to fight with the women on the picket lines. Blanck and Harris hired ex-prize fighters to pick fights with the picketers. Bribed policemen arrested any who fought back and dragged them off to court bandaged and bloodied. Bribed judges found workers guilty.

Blanck and Harris formed an association of the factory owners. By December 1909, they engaged in negotiations with the strikers offering increases in wages, and improvements in working conditions but stopped short of agreeing to allow the unions to organize in the factories.

Workers refused and the strike continued. Slowly one by one, individual factory owners agreed to the demands of the workers including union representation. But at Triangle, Harris and Blanck would not allow the union to be formed in their organization. Five months after they began their strike, 23 February 1910, Triangle workers decided to accept increased wages and better hours. They did not get the much coveted union representation.

The success of this strike marked an important milestone for the development and growth of unions, in particular for unions of the ladies garment industries. This was the first successful uprising of workers in an action that demanded change and justice.

Research Notes

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