

FOCUS

ON OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

MFL OCCUPATIONAL
HEALTH CENTRE

APRIL, 2001
VOL. 13 NO. 2

ISSN 1180-3967

THE TRIANGLE FIRE: NINETY YEARS ON



A day of mourning: New York garment workers memorialize the 146 workers who died in the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.

BY DOUG SMITH

Ninety years ago this spring, Martha Bruere, an activist in the New York garment unions, was walking down Manhattan's famed Fifth Avenue. She turned a corner as a "great, swirling, billowing cloud of smoke swept like a giant streamer out of Washington Square and down upon the beautiful houses in Lower Fifth Avenue. Just as I was turning into the Square two young girls whom I knew to be working in the vicinity came rushing toward me, tears were running from their eyes and they were white and shaking as they caught me by the arm."

They had a horrible story to tell. A fire had broken out on the top floors of the Asch Building in Greenwich Village. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company occupied the top three floors of the building. Over 500 workers, most of them young women, some as young as 15, were on the job.

NO EXIT

One exit was blocked by fire, another door had been locked by management, while the building's outside fire escape could not support the weight of the hundreds of workers scrambling for safety. Nor did it reach the ground.

Many had no choice but to leap from a ninth story window, hoping that the fire fighters and police officers waiting below could catch their fall. Roy Howard, a young newspaper reporter watched from the street. "A young man helped a girl to the window sill. Then he held her out, deliberately away from the building and let her drop. He seemed cool and calculating. He held out a second girl the same way and let her drop. Then he held out a third girl who did not resist. I noticed that. They were as unresisting as if he were helping them onto a streetcar instead of into eternity. Undoubtedly he saw that a terrible death awaited them in the flames, and his was only a terrible chivalry."

Within a few hours 146 workers had died and hundreds more had been terribly injured for life. New York City was traumatized. The factory owners were taken to court and the evidence of negligence on their part was strong. There were no sprinklers, the workplace was cramped, flammable material was not properly stored, exits were both blocked and locked. But in the end the owners were acquitted.

THE RISING OF THE WOMEN

The Triangle Fire is one of the worst industrial tragedies in North American history. It led the way for the creation of the New York State Factory Investigating Commission, new safety laws and new enforcement agencies.

What is often forgotten is that the fire came on the heels of one of the most bitter and dramatic strikes in New York history. In 1909 the women at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory and the Leiserson Shirtwaist Factory went on strike to protect their benefits and for improvements

Continued on page 2

Continued from page 1

in working conditions. They wanted adequate fire escapes and doors left unlocked: it had been company policy to lock doors to prevent workers sneaking out for a break.

The strike soon spread to the entire industry, 30,000 garment workers, members of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, were on the streets. There they were beaten by gangsters hired by the employers and arrested by the police. One union leader was arrested 17 times during the course of the strike. The strike ended with the union winning a partial victory—however the employers did not agree to make any improvements to health and safety. The strike was barely over for a year when tragedy struck.

At a memorial service immediately after the fire, union member Rose Schneiderman reminded the mourners of the bitter conflict and of the way government had sided with the employer. "I can't talk fellowship to you who are gathered here. Too much blood has been spilled. I know from my experience it is up to the working people to save themselves. The only way they can save themselves is by a strong working-class movement."

TODAY

Each year in April the Canadian labour movement observes a day of mourning for those who have been killed or injured on the job. In 2001 it is important to recall the Triangle Fire



Inside the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory after the fire.

— and it is important to remember it in the context of the Triangle Strike.

The dangers that the Triangle Shirtwaist workers faced have not gone away. In some cases, globalization has pushed them beyond the borders of North America. On November 25, 2000, a fire erupted on the third floor of the Chowdhury Knitwear Factory in Bangladesh, where 250 workers mostly young women and children, worked. As at the Triangle factory,

the doors were locked. 51 workers died, some after throwing themselves out of windows to escape the flames.

Recent tragic events here in Manitoba underline the fact that progress has been slow at best over the past 90 years. As Rose Schneiderman said, when "The life of men and women is so cheap and property is so sacred" it is difficult to hear talk of fellowship and co-operation.

MFL Health and Safety Conference

- *strengthening health and safety committees*
- *protecting young workers*
- *Workers Compensation*

May 10-11
Winnipeg
Convention
Centre

To register call 947-1400

Day of mourning

Saturday

April 28

10:30 am

Room 2C

Union Centre

275 Broadway

Comings and goings

Kit Galvin, who served as the MFL Occupational Health Centre's industrial hygienist for the past decade has moved on. Early this year Kit took an exciting new job at the University of Washington as a research coordinator in the university's Department of Environmental Health.

She is coordinating research on a study that is examining the new Washington State Ergonomics Rule. Her work will involve her interviewing workers and employers about the impact of the regulation. The results of this work will be of interest to other jurisdictions looking at creating ergonomics regulations.

Everyone at the Centre wishes Kit all the best in her new job and thanks her for her tremendous contribution and hard work over the past decade.

Workplace health and safety on line

Q I am a new worker rep on our Health and Safety Committee at work. I have access to the Internet and would like to know if you could recommend some sites I can visit to learn more about health and safety.

A The Internet is a great source of information, but it can be very confusing because of the amount of information out there. The following sites are good to check whether you are just beginning in health and safety, or even if you are already very familiar with the topic. All of these sites include links to other sites on occupational health and safety.

Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS)
www.ccohs.ca/

CCOHS, located in Hamilton, Ontario is an internationally recognized source for information on all aspects of workplace health and safety. The mandate of CCOHS is to promote improvements in occupational health and safety by providing practical information to answer workplace concerns.

Information on this site is easily accessed and reliable. It is recommended as a first stop for anyone wanting health and safety information.

Manitoba Department of Labour, Workplace Safety and Health
www.gov.mb.ca/labour/safety/index.html

This site contains all of the publications of the Workplace Safety and Health Branch, including the Health and Safety Act. If you have a question about any part of the Act, you would be able to view the specific section on this site. Guidelines, Worksafe (newsletter), education, etc. are all available on this site. If your workplace is in Manitoba this site must be added to your bookmarks.

Workers Compensation Board of British Columbia
www.worksafebc.com/default.asp

The BC Workers Compensation Board has a very helpful website. Many of the publications produced by the Board are available on-line for downloading.

New Books at the Centre

Making sense of fibromyalgia : a guide for patients and their families by Daniel J. Wallace and Janice Brock Wallace, 1999.

This book provides a comprehensive guide for both patients and professionals by taking readers through the steps of diagnosis, established forms of treatment, and alternative therapies that have yet to be proven effective.

The authors draw on actual cases to illustrate their points and to break through the isolation that patients often feel when doctors misdiagnose or simply ignore their symptoms.

Occupational health : recognizing and preventing work-related disease and injury edited by Barry S. Levy and David H. Wegman. — 4th ed., 2000.

Designed for use by health and safety professional and by students in health and safety professions. If you can only read one book on health and safety, this is the one.



**COUNT
ME IN!**

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ Prov. _____

Postal Code _____

Telephone _____

Date: _____

Signature _____

I will assist the Occupational Health Centre to continue to publish the Focus newsletter and purchase up-to-date information for the library in the following manner:

a direct donation today of \$ _____

a payroll deduction sent directly to the MFL Occupational Health Centre

I authorize the MFL Occupational Health Centre to withdraw \$ _____ from my account on a monthly basis. I am enclosing a sample cheque with the word void written across it, indicating my account number and branch address.

a contribution through the United Way specifically designating the MFL Occupational Health Centre

Please return this form (Don't forget your voided cheque) to:
MFL Occupational Health Centre
102-275 Broadway
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3C 4M6

SPRING SESSIONS

Please note, our educationals will be held on the first and third Tuesdays of the month.

You are invited to the MFL Occupational Health Centre Spring 2001 training sessions at 275 Broadway. Topics relating to occupational and environmental health will be presented by invited guests and staff of the Centre. The sessions are held on the first and third Tuesdays of the month from 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.

Phone: 949-0811 • Fax 956-0848 • email mflohc@mflohc.mb.ca

April 17	Finding Work and Family Balance in Our Lives	Jan Spak Certified Human Resources Specialist
May 1	City of Winnipeg Respectful Workplace Program	Sharron Gould Coordinator, Employee Relations Corporate Services Department City of Winnipeg
May 15	Fighting Fire Without Getting Burnt: Appropriate Tools for Conflict	David Falk Consultant Centre for Conflict Resolution International, Ltd.
June 5	Drug Testing in Industry	Dr. Marty Fogel Staff MFL Occupational Health Centre
June 19	Treatment and Secondary Prevention of Chronic Work-Related Pain: An Overview	Dr. Rob Chase Staff MFL Occupational Health Centre

The MFL Occupational Health Centre was established in 1982 by the Manitoba Federation of Labour to help Manitoba workers deal with job-related health issues and to assist those in many sectors of our society who strive for safer work environments. The Centre is a non-profit, charitable health centre funded by the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority and is a member of the Manitoba Association of Community Health and the Association of Occupational and Environmental Clinics.

The MFL Occupational Health Centre has a wide range of health, information, and workplace services available to all workers in Manitoba to assist in determining if a health problem is work-related and how to prevent or reduce the risk of hazardous workplace exposures. The Centre is open Monday to Fridays, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

*"Focus on Occupational Health and Safety" is published three times a year. Publication supported by our generous donors including **Crocus Investments**.*