

The Triangle Fire

Level: Pre-Intermediate & Up

Objective: Raise social awareness about worker's rights, unions, and safety regulations for workers.
Listening to a story for specific information.
Asking questions based on a listening.
Modals of obligation and prohibition
Past tenses

Plan: Before class make sure to read up on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire if you aren't familiar with it. Basic info can be found on Wikipedia and here: <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/photos/default.html> Be sure to wear an all black outfit to class. Write the date on the board as March 25th, 1924 as it is the 10-year anniversary of the fire. Draw students' attention to it later. Before the students enter tape pictures of the Triangle Fire up around the room. As students walk in encourage them to look at the photos. Ask them to speculate about what story they think the pictures tell.

Put them in groups and have them speculate on these questions: Where did the fire happen? Why did it happen? When did it happen (date)? How many people died?

After you have discussed the answers as a class explain that you lived through this event. You have come here today to tell the students your story. As the students listen they should try to answer these questions.

Where was I working?
What were the working conditions like?
Did I have any family?
Why couldn't we leave through the doors?
How did I escape the fire?
What did I see that I will never forget?

You can read the story below, but make it your own. Relate the story as if it's personal and it really happened to you. Make the students believe that you were there. You can change the questions accordingly.

Only tell the story once. Afterwards, have the students ask you questions to clarify any things they didn't understand. Stay in character. Through the question session it should become clear what happened during the fire and how the owner's actions and unsafe working conditions allowed the tragedy to happen. Students are always super interested and I've never needed to prompt them to ask questions. If they don't ask a lot of questions, you could explain what happened or supply a supplementary reading.

Put the students in groups. Tell the students that they have been put in charge of a government committee that will make new laws and working regulations to protect worker safety and rights. Have them present their ideas to the class.

Auxiliary Vocabulary: a blaze, a scar, a flame, chaos, to choke, to struggle, to survive, to cough, to shove, to faint, to splash

I'm going to tell you a story about that day. I will never forget it. It remains permanently etched into my memory like some horrible scar. I still have nightmares about it. The smoke chokes me and the flames reach for my skin. Then I wake screaming in the night in a cold sweat. Unfortunately, the memory has not faded with time as much as I would like.

I was sewing the last few buttons on a shirt so that I could go home. It was the weekend and my sister and I were working overtime to make some extra money for our family. Making only 6 dollars a week, we were poor as dirt and every little bit helped to put food on the table. Ever since we had come across from Yugoslavia, we had struggled to survive. As I reached for the next button, I heard someone scream, "Fire!" Then I smelled the smoke. Immediately, I started to panic. My sister and I stood and started to run towards the doors. Suddenly everything was chaos. All the other girls were also running for the doors. We were all scrambling over piles of clothes on the floor and trying to get around the machines.

The smoke was getting worse and it was becoming harder to breathe. I was coughing constantly. Other workers were pushing and shoving, there was so many people. I tripped over some clothes and fell to the floor. A pair of hands reached down and helped me up. It was Fransesca, one of the other sewers. Together we started running for the doors again. Finally we neared the exit and ran into a huge crowd of workers blocking the door. Everyone was screaming. I tried to shove my way through the crowd, but it was no use. Someone was screaming, "The doors are locked, the doors are locked." Someone else was screaming, "It burns, it burns."

Then I understood. The owners had locked the doors - we were trapped. "No, no, no I thought. I have to get out. I can't die here." It was then I realized I had lost my sister. Was she in the crowd of workers by the door or had she already left? There was no way to tell. Turning away from the doors I started shouting her name, "Chava, Chava, where are you?" I tried to look into the faces around me, but there was too much smoke now. I couldn't see. I could only hope she wasn't stuck in that crowd.

Then I remembered there was an exit on the roof. If I could make it there I could get away from this fire. The air was hot now, I was going to be burned alive! I started going back the way I had come. I was running and bumping into workers going towards the doors. "They're locked, they're locked," I shouted, "Don't go that way, go to the roof." Some people heard me and followed, others probably died in the blaze. There were flames everywhere now. It burned my face and hands. I couldn't see anything anymore.

Finally I made it to the stairs and started to climb. My face felt like it was melting. All I felt was pain. Then, suddenly, I could breathe. I was on the roof and there were others there. Workers from the factory next door had thrown a ladder from their roof to ours. People were scrambling across it as fast as possible. When it was my turn I hurried across. As soon as I got to the other side I fainted from sheer terror. Someone splashed water on my face. I stood up and looked back at the building. The firefighters had come, but their hoses only made it to the 7th floor. Most of the workers were on the 9th. Flames were shooting out of the building. What I saw next I will never forget until the day I die. There were girls jumping out of the windows, screaming as they fell to their deaths. They were trying to escape being burned alive. I still see those girls in my nightmares, their bodies hitting the ground with a thud.

And that is my story. I hope to God that none of you ever experience something like it.

The story from <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/>

Auxiliary Vocabulary - an immigrant, an incident, a victim, a martyr, a sweat shop, excessive, unsanitary, a hallmark, to highlight, to subcontract

The Triangle Waist Company was in many ways a typical sweat shop in the heart of Manhattan, at 23-29 Washington Place, at the northern corner of Washington Square East. Low wages, excessively long hours, and unsanitary and dangerous working conditions were the hallmarks of sweatshops.

Even though many workers toiled under one roof in the Asch building, owned by Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, the owners subcontracted much work to individuals who hired the hands and pocketed a portion of the profits. Subcontractors could pay the workers whatever rates they wanted, often extremely low. The owners supposedly never knew the rates paid to the workers, nor did they know exactly how many workers were employed at their factory at any given point. Such a system led to exploitation.

The fire at the Triangle Waist Company in New York City, which claimed the lives of 146 young immigrant workers, is one of the worst disasters since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. This incident has had great significance to this day because it highlights the inhumane working conditions to which industrial workers can be subjected. To many, its horrors epitomize the extremes of industrialism. The tragedy still dwells in the collective memory of the nation and of the international labor movement. The victims of the tragedy are still celebrated as martyrs at the hands of industrial greed.

All photos from <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/photos/default.html>















