

Triangle Shirtwaist Fire

(ANSWER KEY)

On March 25, 1911, a small fire broke out in a bin of rags at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory on New York City's Lower East Side. The profitable business heralded as a model of efficiency operated in a modern fireproof building. Yet in less than an hour, 146 people—most of them young immigrant Jewish and Italian women in their teens and early 20s—died, trapped by blocked exit doors and faulty fire escapes.

The Tragedy. Identify six factors that contributed to the deaths of the 146 workers.

- *Fire equipment had difficulty getting close to the building due to the dead and injured lying in the street. Inside the building helped fuel and spread the fire.*
- *Water buckets inside the building were not adequate to cope with the fire. No sprinkler systems existed.*
- *There was no alarm system inside the building to warn of fire delaying escape.*
- *Exits were locked or blocked making it impossible for*
- *Rescue equipment (i.e., ladders, hoses and nets) was inadequate to deal with a fire in the high-rise building.*
- *Flammable materials and crowded conditions some victims to escape.*
- *Fire escapes were inadequate.*
- *A worker threw a match or cigarette near flammable materials.*
- *Some workers panicked.*

Government Responds. Public outcry after the fire prompted New York City to impose tougher building codes and more stringent factory inspections to be sure the rules were being followed. List four of the new city codes for factories.

- *All doors must open outwards.*
- *No doors can be locked during working hour.*
- *Sprinkler systems must be installed if a company employs more than 25 people above the ground floor.*
- *Mandatory fire drills for buildings lacking sprinkler systems.*

New York State created a commission in 1911 to investigate both the Triangle fire and industrial working conditions in general. The commission's 1914 report called for widespread changes. After initially balking, the state's legislature eventually approved additional guidelines to ensure the safety of New York workers. Many other states followed.

The Role of Unions. Before and after the fire, workers also looked to unions to help them address health and safety concerns. Identify two actions the unions took to increase worker protections.

- *Organized workers to negotiate with employers for improved working conditions*
- *Conducted strikes to protest working conditions*
- *Lobbied and marched for women's suffrage to help elect politicians supporting worker interests.*