



ECONOMIC RIGHTS

I AM A WORKING GIRL!:

Upheaval in the Garment Trades 1900-1915



OVERVIEW

Through viewing photographs, excerpts from documents, paintings, and speeches, students will learn about the strike by shirtwaist workers in 1909 and a devastating fire in 1911 that transformed New York City's labor movement.

STUDENT GOALS

- Through viewing historic photographs and paintings, students will draw inferences about the working conditions of garment workers in New York City at the turn of the century.
- Students will learn about key events that led to legislative change in workplace safety regulation.
- Through analyzing excerpts from newspapers and diary entries, students will consider the divergent reactions to these events.
- Students will analyze the rhetoric used by union leaders, like Rose Schneiderman, and discuss the power of oration.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

Grade 4:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

Grade 6:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

Grades 9-10:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D

Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

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KEY TERMS/VOCABULARY

- Factory
 - Garment
 - Industrial
 - Immigrant
 - Strike
 - Union
 - Uprising
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ACTIVISTS

- Jacob Riis
 - Clara Lemlich
 - Rose Schneiderman
 - Frances Perkins
 - Robert Wagner
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ORGANIZATIONS

- International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU)
 - Women's Trade Union League (WTUL)
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I AM A WORKING GIRL!: Upheaval in the Garment Trades 1900-1915**INTRODUCING RESOURCES 1& 2**

Resource 1: Richard Hoe Lawrence and Jacob A. Riis, *Two women sewing in Elizabeth Street den, ca. 1890*. Museum of the City of New York.

Resource 2: Jacob Riis. *A Ten Years' War: An Account of the Battle with the Slum in New York*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1900.

In the early 20th century, garment production would become the largest manufacturing business in America's largest industrial city, employing tens of thousands of mostly immigrant workers. Many labored in unsafe, crowded tenement apartments for contractors, often immigrants themselves, who operated in a highly competitive industry and sought to keep wages low and hours long to safeguard their profits. Other workers found employment in new loft factories, like the Triangle Waist Company in Greenwich Village.

New York working people had been organizing unions since 1794, when the city's industrial revolution began creating a group of wage workers distinct from business owners. But two pivotal events—a strike by shirtwaist makers in 1909 and a devastating fire in 1911—transformed the city's labor movement and ushered in a new era, one in which labor unions (and working women in particular) became central players in the city's daily public affairs.

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Richard Hoe Lawrence and Jacob A. Riis, *Two women sewing in Elizabeth Street den*, ca. 1890. Silver gelatin print. Museum of the City of New York.

“In the Astor tenements, in Elizabeth Street, where we found forty-three families living in rooms intended for sixteen, I saw women finishing pants at thirty cents a day . . . in one instance, in which two women, sewing from five in the morning till eleven at night, were able, being practiced hands, to finish forty-five pants at three and a half cents a pair, and so made together over a dollar and a half [a day].”

—Jacob Riis. *A Ten Years' War: An Account of the Battle with the Slum in New York*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1900.

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DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS

- Describe the work that the women are doing.
- What are they making and where are they working? Describe their surroundings.
- Read the accompanying passage published in newspaper reporter and social reformer Jacob A. Riis's *A Ten Years' War*. What additional information does Riis provide through written text that you would not know from viewing the photograph?
- How do you think he obtained this information?
- Imagine you are one of these workers. What might you want to change about your working conditions? What obstacles might you face in advocating for change?



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Excerpts related to “The Uprising of 20,000”--The New York Shirtwaist Strike of 1909

On November 22, 1909, garment workers crowded the Great Hall of Cooper Union to debate a proposed strike against the city’s shirtwaist manufacturers. Clara Lemlich of Local 25 of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) mounted the stage and demanded a vote. “I am a working girl,” she said in Yiddish, “one of those striking against intolerable conditions... I make a motion that we go out in a general strike.” The audience roared its approval and the “Uprising of the 20,000” was underway.

Most of the strikers were young immigrant Jewish and Italian women who wanted higher wages, shorter hours, overtime pay, and an all-union workplace. The ILGWU enrolled 10,000 new members and overnight became one of the leading organizations of American garment workers. In February 1910, manufacturers and workers settled the strike. The union won wage and hour concessions, while owners kept the right to hire non-union workers. Female garment workers had put themselves at the center of the city’s union movement, which between 1909 and 1913 grew from 30,000 to 250,000 members.

“If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may this hand wither from the arm I now raise.”

--Yiddish Oath to Strike, November 1909

“We cannot understand why so many people can be swayed to join in a strike that has no merit. Our employees were perfectly satisfied, and they made no demands. It is a foolish, hysterical strike, and not 5 per cent of the strikers know what they are striking for.”

--Unnamed Manufacturer quoted in “Waist strike grows,” *The New York Times*, November 25, 1909

“It has been shown that the manufacturers are not altogether as black as painted. They have thrown their shops open to inspection, and the conditions are good according to the standard of the trade, although doubtless they might be bettered. They have declared that although the wages are low they are not as low as has been asserted, and are all that solvency allows. They have offered arbitration, and the strikers have declined, standing for the “closed shop,” that un-American thing...”

--“Labor’s cruelty to labor,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 1909

“It was funny to see the few men among us but I give them credit for coming out... The pity of it is that us working people don’t really realize what a power we are... Our bosses couldn’t get about without us working people.”

--Theresa Malkiel, *Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker*, 1910

Excerpts related to “The Uprising of 20,000” -- The New York Shirtwaist Strike of 1909



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DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS

- Read the introductory text before reading the excerpts above. Describe the different perspectives in response to the New York Shirtwaist Strike of 1909.
- According to the excerpts from *The New York Times*, what opposition did the strikers face? Who are the authors of these articles supporting?
- What is the message conveyed by the workers in the oath they took to strike? Why do you think it was necessary to take this oath? What does this tell us about the commitment of these strikers?
- According to Theresa Malkiel's diary entry, how did the strikers show their power? And who were the strikers that she describes?

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I AM A WORKING GIRL!: Upheaval in the Garment Trades 1900-1915**INTRODUCING RESOURCE 4****Victor Joseph Gatto, *Triangle Fire, March 25, 1911, 1944-45*. Oil on Canvas. Museum of the City of New York.**

On March 25, 1911, an accidental fire raced through the top three stories of a building in Greenwich Village, all occupied by the Triangle Waist Company. Hundreds of blouse makers escaped on elevators and stairs. Others were blocked by a locked exit door or trapped on the collapsing fire escape. Firemen's ladders were not long enough to reach the windows and dozens of people jumped to their deaths. Within half an hour, 146 workers were dead or dying.

In the fire's wake, activists and reformers, including labor leader Rose Schneiderman and activist Frances Perkins, joined forces with State Assembly leader Al Smith and State Senator Robert Wagner, Sr. to press for change. Their Factory Investigating Commission (1911-1915) uncovered unsafe and abusive work conditions throughout the state. Charles Murphy, "boss" of New York City's Tammany Hall political machine, realized that backing reforms would win the support of city voters, so Tammany became a driving force behind the cause. The legislature in Albany passed over 20 new laws and the city enacted 30 ordinances regulating safety, hours, and conditions in thousands of factories, bakeries, canneries, and sweatshops, making New York the nation's leader in workplace safety regulation.

In 1911, 21-year-old pipefitter Victor Joseph Gatto witnessed the fire at Triangle Waist Company from a vantage point in Washington Square Park. Over 30 years later, he painted this vivid depiction of the fire from memory.



Victor Joseph Gatto, *Triangle Fire, March 25, 1911, 1944-45*. Oil on Canvas. Museum of the City of New York.



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DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS

- What story does Victor Joseph Gatto tell in his painting? Describe the actions he captures.
- Gatto painted this scene over 30 years after he had witnessed the fire in 1911. Why do you think revisits this memory in his painting?
- Read the introductory text for the painting. What changes occurred after the fire?
- Like Victor Joseph Gatto, labor and consumer advocate Frances Perkins also witnessed the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire from a nearby street. She served on the Factory Investigating Commission and would later become Franklin D. Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor, the first woman to serve in a cabinet post. She referred to the fire as the "the day the New Deal began." What did she mean by that statement?

**ECONOMIC RIGHTS****I AM A WORKING GIRL!:** Upheaval in the Garment Trades 1900-1915**ACTIVITY**

After the Triangle Waist Company factory fire, trade unionist Rose Schneiderman delivered a powerful speech at the Metropolitan Opera House on April 2, 1911.

Read Schneiderman's speech (below) with deliberate emotion. Before the speech is read, ask the students to imagine that they are sitting in the audience at the Metropolitan Opera House. They should define who they are as a member in the audience, and they should consider the gender, race, age, class, and profession of the person they are representing.

Before the speech is read, students should be given the following questions to consider:

1. What is the speaker's basic argument?
2. Did the speech have an emotional impact on you? If so, how?
3. What is the speaker's attitude toward manufacturers? Public officials? Protesters? And ordinary citizens?
4. According to the speaker, what is her recommendation for workers? What strategy did she use to persuade you?
5. How do you imagine your character considered the issues of workers differently after hearing this speech?

After hearing Rose Schneiderman's oration, students should draw from the questions above and record their reactions. After they reflect on their observations, ask the students to create a memoir recalling their experience listening to this speech.



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I would be a traitor to these poor burned bodies if I came here to talk good fellowship. We have tried you good people of the public and we have found you wanting. The old Inquisition had its rack and its thumbscrews and its instruments of torture with iron teeth. We know what these things are today; the iron teeth are our necessities, the thumbscrews are the high powered and swift machinery close to which we must work, and the rack is here in the firetrap structures that will destroy us the minute they catch on fire.

This is not the first time girls have been burned alive in the city. Every week I must learn of the untimely death of one of my sister workers. Every year thousands of us are maimed. The life of men and women is so cheap and property is so sacred. There are so many of us for one job it matters little if 146 of us are burned to death.

We have tried you citizens; we are trying you now, and you have a couple of dollars for the sorrowing mothers, brothers and sisters by way of a charity gift. But every time the workers come out in the only way they know to protest against conditions which are unbearable the strong hand of the law is allowed to press down heavily upon us.

Public officials have only words of warning to us—warning that we must be intensely peaceable, and they have the workhouse just back of all their warnings. The strong hand of the law beats us back, when we rise, into the conditions that make life unbearable.

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.

—Rose Schneiderman. "Meeting to protest the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire." Speech.
Metropolitan Opera House, New York, NY, April 2, 1911.



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ACTIVITY 2

Drawing from the primary sources above and the newspaper articles in the additional reading section below ask student to take on the voice of a garment worker and create diary entries to tell a larger story.

- Diary Entry #1: Imagine you have returned from a day's work. Describe the day in the life of your character.
- Diary Entry #2: Imagine you either witnessed or participated in the New York Shirtwaist Strike of 1909 (The Uprising of 20,000). What were your reactions? Describe your decision to either participate or abstain and why.
- Diary Entry #3: Imagine you either returned from a protest after the fire or the trial of the factory owners. Record your reflections of this historic moment and the long-term outcome you would like to see after this tragedy.



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ADDITIONAL READING

THE NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLES

“Girls Strikers Dance as Employers Meet,” November 28, 1909, claims that strike leaders made “exaggerated statements...describing conditions which do not exist.”

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9F05E1DC143EE033A2575BC2A9679D946897D6CF>

“Charge Girl’s Death to Factory Owners,” April 18, 1911, announces the verdict of the trial that found Isaac Harris and Max Blanck of the Triangle Waist Company responsible for the girl’s death “because of criminal negligence in failing to observe the required legal precaution of leaving the Washington Place door unlocked.”

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9F07E6DC1031E233A2575BC1A9629C946096D6CF>

“Indict Owners of Burnt Factory,” April 12, 1911, explores the court proceedings for the Harris and Blanck of Triangle Waist Company.

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9807EFDE1031E233A25751C1A9629C946096D6CF>

CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS

“U.S. Flouts Its Own Advice in Procuring Overseas Clothing” by Ian Urbina, December 22, 2013, examines work conditions in overseas manufacturing plants.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/23/world/americas/buying-overseas-clothing-us-flouts-its-own-advice.html>



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SOURCES

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Guglielmo, Jennifer. *Living the Revolution: Italian Women's Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

Kosak, Hadassa. *Cultures of Opposition: Jewish Immigrant Workers, New York City, 1881-1905*. State University of New York Press, 2000.

"Labor's cruelty to labor," *The New York Times*, December 28, 1909.

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Malkiel, Theresa, Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker, 1910. In *Cultures of Opposition: Jewish Immigrant Workers 1881-1905*, by Hadassa Kosak, p. 113. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.

Riis, Jacob A., *A Ten Years' War: An Account of the Battle with the Slum in New York*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1900.

Schneiderman, Rose, "Meeting to protest the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire." Speech. Metropolitan Opera House, New York, NY, April 2, 1911. In *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy*, edited by Leon Stein, p. 196-197. New York: Quadrangle/New Times Book Company, 1977). First published in *The Survey*, April 8, 1911.

"Waist strike grows," *The New York Times*, November 25, 1909.