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CWA

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THE LEGACY OF THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FACTORY FIRE, THEN AND NOW

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

Screams of “Don’t jump!” echoed through the tall buildings that tragic day as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory burned to the ground. New York City fire trucks failed to get close enough to raise their ladders next to the buildings, blocked by more than 50 bodies piling up in front of 23 Washington Square and littering the streets. The ladders from nearby Company 20 were too short to reach the eight, ninth or tenth floors of the burning Triangle Shirtwaist Company factory, even if they could have gotten close enough.

The flames, which were thought to be sparked by a cigarette tossed into a pile of cotton scraps on the eighth floor, rapidly spread to the floors above. The maelstrom of fire snuffed out the lives of 146 workers who were just minutes from heading home from their 52-hour workweek that sunny Saturday afternoon on March 25, 1911.

Almost all new immigrants, mostly women and girls – Italians, Russians, Hungarians and Germans speaking little English were victims of that inferno, 100 years ago.

Many stood on the narrow window ledges, waiting for rescue that never came, until they jumped or lost their balance and fell to their deaths. The fall was so far that the jumpers ripped through the safety nets as a circle of firefighters frantically moved back and forth on the street trying to catch them.

The fight to live was next to impossible. Thirty young girls’ dead bodies clogged the elevator shaft. The flimsy iron fire escape could not hold the weight of the first trying to flee. Dozens of bodies falling into the shaft immobilized the only elevator, even though many of the girls tried to shimmy down the grease-covered cables.

The main route to living were the exit doors, which were blocked by boxes of trash and fabric scrap, or even locked by the bosses to prevent their workers from stealing the fancy blouses the Triangle Shirtwaist sweatshop produced by the thousands.

Isaac Harris and Max Blank owned the factory at the time of the fire, and held staunch anti-union management principles close to heart. On the day of the tragedy, approximately five hundred workers were present, though Max and Isaac usually employed almost a thousand workers in busy seasons. Most of the victims were in their teens, and early twenty’s, though the youngest victim was only 11 according to the death reports. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company’s anti-union history began at the site of the famous 1909 Uprising of the 20,000 for union recognition organized by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). While some firms settled with

the workers, Triangle Shirtwaist Company refused to grant their demands, and discharged most union members.

Most important, the fire and the worker abuse it uncovered ignited a national debate, and produced a champion for a national system of worker safety regulations.

And yet, worker safety advocates cite with painful irony that, precisely 100 years to the month after the fire, the House of Representatives has passed a budget bill that would slash nearly \$100 million – about 20 percent – from OSHA's current budget. About 40 percent of those cuts will be to the agency's enforcement and safety inspectors – those on the front line of protecting workers.

“With conservatives in Congress decrying the supposedly “job-killing” effects of OSHA protection, we could be on our way to becoming a First World economy with Third World working conditions,” said Tom O'Connor, Executive Director of the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health, a federation of local and state committees or coalitions on occupational health and safety.

The United States is still 29th out of 30 industrialized nations when it comes to safety and health protection for workers, managing to beat only the country of Turkey.

Those that claim that such worker protections are no longer necessary in the 21st century are criminally turning a blind eye to the reality of injustice.

The deaths continue today. Look at what happened during one month in 2010:

- On April 2nd, seven workers were killed in an explosion at the Tesoro petroleum refinery in Anacortes, Washington.
- Three days later, in West Virginia, 29 miners died when Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch mine exploded.
- Fifteen days later, on April 20th, 40 miles off the Louisiana coast, the Deepwater Horizon offshore drilling unit exploded and killed 11 workers and injured 16 others.

This country suffers from a silent epidemic of workplace deaths that fails to elicit the outrage and attention it deserves. What protects the construction worker with no harness who falls to death from an unguarded roof? Who protects the worker's family? What about the sanitation worker with no protection or training who enters a confined space permeated with deadly chemical fumes? And what about the 18-year-old kid in his first week on the job who is buried alive in a collapsed trench?

The owners of the Triangle Factory were indicted by a grand jury on seven counts and were charged with manslaughter in the second degree under the U.S. Labor Code, which mandated that doors should not be locked during working hours. They avoided prison with the help of prestigious and highly-paid lawyers, as well as a judge in their pocket.

The tragedy is still being commemorated by annual demonstrations, by gatherings of women workers, and by union events, emphasizing the importance of the Occupational Safety and Health Act. Considered the worst disaster in New York City until the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire remains one of the most vivid symbols for the American labor movement the essential need to ensure a safe workplace environment.

100 years ago, it was women who sparked the fire for workplace rights. They were mothers, sisters, wives and daughters. Today, women continue to face too many obstacles defending our voice and rights against constant attack. Women can again spark the fire before any more tragedies occur. Once again, there are numerous issues that adversely affect women and opportunities where women can become primary benefactors.

AT&T and T-Mobile Merger

The merger between AT&T and T-Mobile provides a real opportunity for women in expanding good jobs in the wireless industry, accelerating the deployment of high-speed internet, narrowing the digital divide and improving the quality of wireless service. In the heavily unionized workforce of customer service in wire line telecommunications, two-thirds of whom are women, union workers earn an average of \$63,500 a year. In the heavily non-union wireless industry, customer service representatives earn 40% less, averaging \$37,800 annually. The difference is noteworthy, since this job category makes up a significant share of the non-management workforce in the wireless industry, a growing and dynamic segment of telecommunications.

For years, CWA has actively worked with T-Mobile workers in the upward struggle to gain a voice at work. Like almost all of the major employers in wireless, T-Mobile maintains an active and vigorous “union-free” policy, making organizing an agonizing process. The only exception is AT&T.

The merger presents a shift, a game-changer, in the wireless industry. AT&T’s CEO, Randall Stephenson, at the Wall Street merger announcement, publicly declared that the policy of neutrality and card check would extend to the T-Mobile workforce. Should the T-Mobile workers voluntarily choose to join CWA, they would join the unionized AT&T Mobility workers in creating – for the first time - a majority *unionized* wireless industry. This could be a critical step in making the wireless industry another exception to the rule of low-pay for women’s work.

In short, the merger will benefit women both as workers and consumers, as well our communities, and move further towards supporting a middle class that is struggling for survival in these difficult times.

Battleground States

There is a full frontal attack on collective bargaining in this country, the likes of which have never been seen. And while these attacks are guised as budget proposals and economic plans, the widespread epidemic hurts middle class workers – women and minorities most of all.

Earlier this year, our brothers and sisters in Wisconsin made headlines with their unbelievable mobilization around the attacks on public sector workers – demonstrating how to engage coalition partners, friends, family and neighbors in the fight for the middle class. Governor Walker, a puppet for the infamous Koch brothers, arrogantly and systematically continues his attempts to do away with collective bargaining rights in the public sector – and his efforts to blame union workers for budget problems has been exposed.

The fight for the public sector has just begun. The legislative attacks include reducing or removing contracts and collective bargaining rights, Right to Work laws, paycheck deception, restricting or removing dues deductions, reducing unemployment compensation, privatization of public sector agencies, elimination of extended sick leaves, wage and COLA freezes, restrictions on arbitration rights, caps on mandatory subjects of bargaining, taxes on benefits and pensions, forced furloughs, threats of layoffs, repeal of minimum wage laws, and adding insult to injury – amending a state constitution to ban teacher strikes and impose \$5,000 on strike leaders coupled with a two-day pay fine for every day on the picket line.

Of particular note are the headline battles in New Jersey, where CWA represents the largest segment of public workers. Governor Christie has written a new playbook on public sector attacks, disguised as state budget cutting measures in a bargaining year. On top of expectations that public workers should double and triple their work loads, he demands restrictions on collective bargaining rights, reductions in wages and cost shifting in health care and pensions – all in the beginning of a bargaining year. Unfortunately, the Senate President, a Democrat, joined forces with Christie and introduced legislation to increase employees benefit and pension contributions, a move that does nothing to contain costs, simply shifts costs to workers. CWA has been attempting to bargain health benefits, even offering to pay more and save the state millions of dollars. Yet Christie arrogantly refuses to bargain over healthcare and he wants it legislated.

Meanwhile, corporations and the wealthy continue to reap the benefits of lower taxes.

It doesn't end there. Redistricting of congressional lines is being drawn to disadvantage the candidates and friends we currently have in both the statehouse and Congress. It has been said the stroke of a legislator's pen can erase years of bargaining history, and we are seeing it unfold before our eyes.

Make no mistake about it – if it has not affected your state, it will. Form or join coalition partners in this fight for the future of collective bargaining and the middle class. It is critical to get involved at every level. To borrow from Pastor Niemoeller, first they came for women and I did not speak out because I wasn't a woman. Then they came for people of color and I did not speak out because I wasn't a minority. Then they came for the trade unionists – and as never before, it is time for us to speak and act out loud before it is too late.

The Healthy Families Act

A good example of a progressive initiative and positive opportunity for women exists in The Healthy Families Act. The Healthy Families Act was originally introduced in Congress in 2007 (S 910 and HR 1542). As proposed, the legislation would require employers to provide seven (7) paid days per year to workers to care for their own or family member's medical needs. The Act would apply to employers with 15 or more employees. The legislation did not pass.

While most workers covered by a collective bargaining agreement have paid sick days, those that aren't are generally out of luck. Two-thirds of lower-income private sector workers do not have a single paid sick day, and the percentage is even higher amongst workers in certain industries. Yet paid sick days protect the public health. A recent survey of public workers states that many report to work while sick putting their colleagues and everyone else they come into contact with under an increased risk of illness.

With unions and collective bargaining under attack, these benefits are increasingly at risk which creates greater pressure at the bargaining table. Today, middle class working families are struggling to get by and no one can risk missing a paycheck or losing a job. Yet everyday many workers face the fear that they, or a family member, may get sick or need medical care and do not have the ability to take paid time off to deal with their medical needs.

Paid sick days will protect working families by ensuring that an illness won't mean a lost paycheck or long weeks in the unemployment line due to a personal illness.

Women, in particular, face the challenges of managing careers and families, and the labor movement has never shied away from promoting policies necessary to support genuine family values.

This common-sense bill would help parents, improve public health, and save employers money. Coalition partners such as the Labor Project for Working Families, MomsRising, Interfaith Worker Justice, 9to5/National Association of Working Women and the National Partnership for Women & Families congratulate Connecticut for being the first state in the nation to pass paid sick days legislation.

But we must continue on a federal level with our allies and coalition partners. The Healthy Families Act was re-introduced in the 112th Congress on May 12, 2011 by Senator Tom Harkin (S. 984) and by Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro (HR 1876). As Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro stated, "It is in the best interests of our nation, and especially our families, to ensure American workers have access to paid sick days."

CEDAW

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is a landmark international agreement that affirms principles of fundamental human rights and equality for women around the world. It recognizes that women's rights are human rights, seeking to end sex trafficking and violence against women, prohibiting forced marriage and child marriage, expanding access to education, ensuring a women's right to vote, and fighting maternal mortality and putting an end to workplace discrimination against women. It continues to help millions of women around the world.

Countries that have ratified CEDAW have partnered with their governments to improve the status of women and girls in their social and economic climates. The United States is one of only seven countries in the world that has not ratified CEDAW, followed by countries such as Iran, Sudan and Somalia. The passage of the bill would send a clear message of support to both female communities in the United States and around the world. Having been trapped during the last session of Congress, it has *never* been brought to the Senate floor for a vote, even though ratification has no financial cost.

CEDAW would provide an additional tool for the United States to address issues that affect women, such as: domestic violence, where 2 million women a year report injury from current or former partners; health care, where the United States ranks 41st out of 184 countries on maternal deaths during pregnancy and childbirth; and economic security where American women continue to lag behind men in income.

Finally, ratification of CEDAW would combat human trafficking. Estimates suggest that there may be 20,000 women, men and children trafficked into the United States each year.

We must adopt CEDAW through ratification in Congress and the President's signature. The United States must examine areas of persistent discrimination against women and develop strategies for solutions. CEDAW provides the platform to do so, both in this country and globally. As a movement, we are committed to ending all forms of discrimination. We are your mothers, your sisters, your daughters, your wives. We deserve nothing less.

Social Security & Medicare

Attempts to “fix” Social Security and Medicare are in preparation, and women struggling to support their families are set to pay some of the highest costs! Let’s straighten this out before anyone gets hurt!

Social Security is a government program that provides economic assistance to seniors and persons with disabilities. This program is primarily funded through payroll contributions of workers and employers. Medicare is health insurance coverage for people over the age of 65 and those who are disabled or who meet special criteria. These benefits are important to keep people out of poverty.

About 1 in 4 households in the US receive Social Security benefits. Women rely on Social Security and Medicare more than men and are over 56% of Social Security beneficiaries. For older women, Social Security averages half of their income. Also noteworthy is that women have longer life spans than men and have a greater chance of exhausting other sources of income. Social Security is not just for retirees - there are survivor benefits and benefits for the disabled as well. Social Security is the nation’s largest children’s program and provides benefits to children or to the families that have children in the household.

The average annual Social Security income received by women over 65 years and older was \$11,377 compared to \$14,822 for men. This is important to note when you listen to the politicians who are trying to overhaul Medicare and change it to a voucher plan. Under the Ryan Budget, there is an attempt to change Medicare that would result in out-of-pocket expenses doubling to \$12,000. Many women Senators, Democrats and Republicans, are against this plan because it will directly “cut health care for women”.

Politicians are trying to create a sense of urgency in order to make changes to this program. It is important to note that Social Security did not cause the federal deficit. It has a surplus and it cannot borrow to go into debt. Social Security can pay all benefits through 2036 at the current levels. This year Social Security benefits paid and administrative costs will exceed the amount of payroll contributions. This is not surprising with the current economic slump we are experiencing. This has happened 17 times since 1958 and does not mean there is a crisis. Social Security administrative expenses are less than 1% of every dollar paid in benefits.

The economy, the federal deficit and jobs will be a priority for all politicians in the near future. Medicare proved to be a pivotal factor in a recent mid-term election in N.Y. and assisted in the democratic victory.

When representatives in your states talk about these topics, do not let them fool you that changing the current Medicare system will save the nation money. Do not let them tell you that Medicare is in crisis and make sure you tell them that the current proposed changes will have a disproportionate negative impact on women and children.

Paycheck Fairness Act

How long must women wait for fair pay?

Women's rights coalition partners applaud President Obama and Congress for moving quickly to enact the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act. However, the bill is only a down payment on making real progress in the wage gap and fair pay for women. The Paycheck Fairness Act is a much needed update of the 45 year old Equal Pay Act, and is a crucial companion to the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. Ledbetter herself commented that it would do little good without the Paycheck Fairness Act.

This comprehensive bill strengthens the Equal Pay Act by taking meaningful steps to create incentives for employers to follow the law, help women to negotiate for equal pay, and strengthen federal outreach and enforcement efforts. Specifically, the Paycheck Fairness Act would: prohibit employer retaliation, improve equal pay remedies, increase training, research and education, and establish salary negotiation skills-training and improve collection of pay information.

The initial Paycheck Fairness Act passed in the House in January 2009, but ultimately was defeated in the Senate in November 2010, falling short by 2 votes, which was primarily due to Senate Rules that CWA fought so hard to change – rules that would have allowed legislation to be heard, debated and voted on instead of being held up for petty political reasons. We were unable to effectuate change in the Senate Rules and the Paycheck Fairness Act was one of the victims.

The latest bill, which is identical to the previous one, has been introduced in both the Senate and the House. The legislation would make it difficult for employers to prevail on the EPA, expose employers to compensatory and punitive damages, make it easier for plaintiffs to bring class action lawsuits, expand the definition of "same establishment," impose more obligations on the EEOC and the Department of Labor to bring remedies for pay inequality.

Chances of passage in a Republican-controlled House of Representatives this time are considered slim, unless a significant lobbying process is undertaken. This means we, as CWA women in action, have our work cut out for us. Let's spark some action, get fired up and mobilize for passage!

Conclusion & Call to Action

The CWA National Women's Committee would urge all women and men, all CWA Locals and Sectors, individually and collectively, to be the spark that starts the fire once again and fight for progress on these key issues.

We urge our Sisters & Brothers to:

- Support organizing by contacting your legislators to support the AT&T/T-Mobile merger and other campaigns,
- Support representation by backing candidates that support a worker's right to bargain collectively, and get involved in primary and recall campaigns for those who don't,
- Support legislation by getting involved with our coalition partners and natural allies like:
 - The Labor Project for Working Families to partner on bills like The Healthy Families Act,
 - The Coalition of Labor Union Women to stay informed on Paycheck Fairness & women's health issues,
- Support stronger communities by helping educate our members on the importance of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and
- Fight to protect programs that impact working families like Social Security and Medicare.

Together, and in memory of the 146 women and minorities that lost their lives 100 years ago in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, we can build a stronger union and a stronger country.

Respectfully submitted,

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