



Teaching Guide

SEGMENT 7, WEBISODE 9

Please note: Each segment in this Webisode has its own Teaching Guide



Segment Overview



Let's Discuss

In the late 1800s, many workers faced hard physical labor, long hours, a six-day work week, low pay, and dangerous and unsanitary working conditions. Workers—often women and children—received no compensation for illness or injury, and feared losing their jobs if they complained or joined unions.

Samuel Gompers dedicated his energies to improving the lives of the American worker. Gompers, who immigrated with his Dutch Jewish parents at age thirteen, took up his father's trade of cigar making. He became active in the Cigarmakers Union as a young man, eventually serving as its president. In 1886, he spearheaded the formation of the American Federation of Labor and served as its first president. He held the post for most of the next thirty-eight years, building the union into an important power in industry.

Teacher Directions

1. Ask the students the following questions.

- What conditions did American workers face in the late 1800s?
- How did Gompers differ from other labor leaders?
- What character traits made Samuel Gompers successful in the difficult task of labor organizing?
- Why did cigar makers pool their wages to pay a reader? What does this say about them?

2. Make sure students understand the following points in discussing the questions.

In the late 1800s, many American workers faced unsafe conditions with low pay and few benefits. While many labor leaders were anarchists or socialists, Gompers was not. He did not involve the union in politics. Gompers was intelligent, eager to learn, good-humored, a good speaker, and practical. He worked hard and studied hard. The cigar makers paid a reader because they wanted to learn and keep their minds busy to help the time pass more quickly.



History Sleuth

Teacher Directions

1. Distribute the Student Sheet: *The Triangle Factory Fire*. Explain to students that the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City demonstrated the tragic consequences of exploited workers and dangerous working conditions.
2. After reading the background information and the eyewitness account of the fire, students discuss the following questions in their small learning teams.
 - How could this disaster have been prevented?
 - How do you think the factory owners should have been punished?
 - What effect do you think the Triangle fire had on union organizing?
3. Students share their responses in a class discussion.
4. Share with students the results of the Triangle fire. Explain that in spite of widespread outrage against the shop owners and the dangerous working conditions that contributed to the huge loss of life, little was done to punish those responsible. Shortly after the fire, the owners offered to pay one week's wages to the families of the dead girls—"as though it were summer and they are giving them a vacation!" fumed one union organizer. Three days after the fire, the company placed an ad in the newspaper which read: "Notice, the Triangle Waist Co. begs to notify their customers that they are in good working order. Headquarters now at 9-11 University Place." When city officials inspected the building the next day, they found that it was not even fireproof, and that the exit to the only fire escape was blocked by two rows of sewing machines. Although the owners of the company were charged with manslaughter, they were acquitted. Eventually, they were ordered to pay damages of seventy-five dollars to each of the twenty-three victims' families who had sued. The Triangle tragedy, however, mobilized support for union organizing, especially the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union.

Teacher Directions

Students discuss the following question.

- If you had witnessed the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, how might you have responded? Would the fire have convinced you of the need to start or join a union?



What do you
Think?



Moving Toward Freedom



Connections

Teacher Directions

1. Students discuss the following question.
 - How did Samuel Gompers move our nation toward freedom?
2. Students design an ABC book that highlights important milestones in the nation's labor history.

Each book should contain:

- a decorated cover with the student author's name
 - each letter of the alphabet on a separate page
 - a word or term relating to labor history for each letter
 - an explanation or definition of each word
 - an illustration for each word, either drawn, traced, or cut from a magazine
3. Students share completed books with the class.

Teacher Directions

Use the following activities with your students.

Art — Students analyze political cartoons about the Triangle Factory fire. Students create their own political cartoon about the fire.

History — Students create a timeline of the early labor movement.

Science — Students research the history of cigar making and tobacco use, and the harmful effects of tobacco.

Language Arts/Library — Students discuss the role of a free press in shaping public opinion. How did newspaper coverage of the Triangle Fire change people's beliefs about working conditions? Students bring in examples of similar exposés from current newspapers.

Math — If the families of all one hundred forty-six workers who died in the fire had sued the Triangle owners and been awarded seventy-five dollars each, how much would this have cost the owners? If this event had happened today, and a jury had awarded the plaintiffs one million dollars, how much would each family receive?

The Triangle Factory Fire



FDR Library

One hundred and forty-six women and girls died in the fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory on March 25, 1911. It was the worst factory fire in the history of New York City.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory occupied the top three floors of a ten-story building and employed over five hundred people. Most workers were young women. Some were only fifteen years old, and many were recent Italian or Jewish European immigrants. They did not speak out against dangerous and unfair working conditions because they feared they would lose their jobs. One employee later wrote,

The day's work began at seven-thirty...(and) was supposed to end at six in the afternoon. But, during most of the year we youngsters worked overtime until 9 p.m. every night except Fridays and Saturdays. No, we did not get additional pay for overtime. ...the Triangle Waist Co. (gave) us a piece of apple pie for supper instead of additional pay! Working men and women of today...will find it difficult to understand and to believe that (we accepted) such conditions of labor without protest. However, the answer is quite simple—we were not organized and we knew that individual protest amounted to the loss of one's job.

Most of the deaths could have been prevented. The owners had locked exit doors to keep the women at their machines, and the building had only one fire escape, which quickly collapsed from the weight of the panicked girls. There was just one elevator, which held only ten people. There had been no fire drills or instruction to tell the employees how to act in the event of a fire. The workers were packed into a large loft, with sewing machines placed closely together. Thousands of pounds of fabric bolts and scraps littered the factory floor, and shirtwaists draped from overhead lines.

The fire probably started when a match or cigarette was carelessly thrown in one of the many piles of fabric on the floor. It spread rapidly. The building had no sprinkler system. Most of the deaths occurred on the ninth floor, where workers were unable to force open the locked door. Some panicked workers escaped to the roof, where students from an adjoining law school helped them cross over to safety. Most of the young women jumped to their

deaths rather than be burned alive. Some waited until the last possible moment, and jumped with burning hair and clothes streaming behind them. The ladders of the fire department extended only to the sixth floor, and the women bounced off or broke through the life nets held by the firemen. In less than fifteen minutes, one hundred forty-six women died.



FDR Library

Newspaper reporter William G. Shepherd wrote about the fire.

I was walking through Washington Square when a puff of smoke issuing from the factory building caught my eye. I reached the building before the alarm was turned in. I saw every feature of the tragedy visible from outside the building. I learned a new sound—a

more horrible sound than description can picture. It was the thud of a speeding, living body on a stone sidewalk.

Thud—dead, thud—dead, thud—dead, thud—dead. Sixty-two thud—deads. I call them that, because the sound and the thought of death came to me each time, at the same instant. There was plenty of chance to watch them as they came down. The height was eighty feet.

...I looked up—saw that there were scores of girls at the windows. The flames from the floor below were beating in their faces.... I even watched one girl falling. Waving her arms, trying to keep her body upright until the very instant she struck the sidewalk, she was trying to balance herself. Then came the thud--then a silent, unmoving pile of clothing and twisted, broken limbs.

...I looked up to the seventh floor. There was a living picture in each window—four screaming heads of girls waving their arms. "Call the firemen," they screamed—scores of them. "Get a ladder," cried others. We cried to them not to jump. We heard the siren of a fire engine in the distance. The other sirens sounded from several directions.

"Here they come," we yelled. "Don't jump; stay there." One girl climbed onto the window sash. Those behind her tried to hold her back. Then she

dropped into space. I didn't notice whether those above watched her drop because I had turned away. Then came that first thud. I looked up, another girl was climbing onto the window sill; others were crowding behind her. She dropped. I watched her fall, and again the dreadful sound. Two windows away two girls were climbing onto the sill; they were fighting each other and crowding for air. Behind them I saw many screaming heads. They fell almost together, but I heard two distinct thuds. Then the flames burst out through the windows on the floor below them, and curled up into their faces.

The firemen began to raise a ladder. Others took out a life net and, while they were rushing to the sidewalk with it, two more girls shot down. The firemen held it under them; the bodies broke it...

The firemen raised the longest ladder. It reached only to the sixth floor. I saw the last girl jump at it and miss it. And then the faces disappeared from the window...

...I looked upon the heap of dead bodies and I remembered these girls were the shirtwaist makers. I remembered their great strike of last year in which these same girls had demanded more sanitary conditions and more safety precautions in the shops. These dead bodies were the answer.



FDR Library

Inside the factory after the fire