

Lessons from a 'horrific tragedy'

BY JANMARIE TOKER

In November 1909, roughly 20,000 garment factory workers went on strike in New York for safer working conditions, better pay and stronger protection from fire.

Three months later, the strike ended with very few concessions from the businesses. Everyone went back to work. The businesses continued to focus on making profits, and the workers went back to making sure they could keep roofs over their heads.

Two years later, on March 25, 1911, 146 of those workers — mostly women and girls — died when a fire broke out in their factory and they found themselves trapped on the ninth floor. Their employer had locked the exit doors to keep the workers from taking unapproved breaks or stealing material. Within 15 minutes those workers burned, suffocated or jumped to their deaths. They were making less than 10 cents an hour at the time.

Following the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, a host of new regulations to protect workers were enacted.

Unfortunately, our workers are still being exploited and injured by companies more interested in profit than people. If you can't imagine that an event like the Triangle Shirtwaist fire would happen today, think again. Just 20 years ago, 25 poultry workers died and 54 workers were injured during a fire at the Imperial Foods chicken plant in North Carolina where, once again, the employer had locked the fire doors.

On this, the 100th anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, when workers are caught in a



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clash between the bad economy and a new governmental focus on improving the business culture, we need to remember that laws and regulations enacted to protect workers grew out of abuses by corporations. There seems to be a desperate and frantic need to get rid of the regulations that supposedly have been hampering businesses' and our economy's growth. The lack of short-term memory in this plan is startling, considering that the very lack of regulations in our financial system was the reason for our country's economic collapse.

Nevertheless, while our government takes its hatchet to cut these regulations supposedly impeding business growth, they attack our people — our workers — at the same time.

Not only is our government looking at taking away regulations protecting our workers, but they are also looking to chip away at workers' very ability to protect themselves — the unions. Gov. LePage has proposed "right to work" legislation in Maine.

It's a bad idea. As Martin Luther King Jr. stated "we must guard against being fooled by false slogans." "Right-to-work" provides no rights and no work. Its purpose is to destroy labor unions and the freedom of collective bargaining.

Whether or not you are a union member, if you work, you most likely have been impacted by our country's unions. In fact, many of the protections all workers enjoy nationwide — such as the standard eight-hour day, workers' compensation, workplace safety, overtime pay, paid vacations, child labor laws, medical and dental insurance, and cost of living adjustments — were first initiated by unions. When the government looks to reduce workers' abilities to stand up for themselves through unions, we all lose the important protections we take for granted.

When profitability comes before safety, when businesses come before people, and when a select few can take away the power of many, our democracy is meaningless, our economy crumbles and, as evidenced by the horrific tragedy of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, innocent people die.

Before our state government starts haphazardly stripping regulations protecting workers or taking away the rights of workers to stand up for themselves through unions, it should consider all of the consequences of its actions. Please make sure your voice is heard and let your legislators know how important worker safety and rights are to you.

It took 15 minutes for 146 workers to die 100 years ago. Just think how much damage can be done in four years.

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