The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire and its impact on the Labor Movement

Focus/Summary
The purpose of this lesson is to explore and discuss the significance of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire on the labor movement. This event in American History dealt with the tragic incident which cost which claimed the lives of 146 young immigrant workers, is one of the worst disasters since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City. To many, its horrors epitomize the extremes of industrialism. The tragedy still dwells in the collective memory of the nation and of the international labor movement. This tragedy help the fight of the Ladies Garment Union, in their quest to improve the working conditions of its workers, but also to help support the rights of all workers.

Vital Themes and Narratives
Patterns of Social and Political Interaction
Reform
Diverse movements focusing on a broad range of issues, including anti-slavery, education, labor, temperance, women’s rights, civil rights, gay rights, war, public health, and government.

Habits of Mind
• Understand how things happen and how things change, how human intentions matter, but also how their consequences are shaped by the means of carrying them out, in a tangle of purposes and process
• Perceive past events and issues as they were experienced by people at the time, to develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness

Objectives:
• Explain the significance of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, and how this Fire helped improved the rights of the workers and their working conditions
• Using analysis to explain the impact of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire to the rise of the Labor Movement and the Progressive Era

Procedures:
Opening the Lesson:
Student will look at a floor plan of the Ninth Floor of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.
• Students will describe what they see from this floor plan.
• What can you say about the working conditions for the workers at the factory?
• Where are the exits located?
• Where is the fire escape located?
• What problems do you see with regards to the fire escape in case of a fire? Of the exits?

Developing the Lesson: Comparing life in the Sweatshops-Part 1:
Students will complete analysis guides about various oral accounts of life in the sweatshops.

- What are some things that you find similar when you read Clara Lemlich, Ruth Cohen, and Sadie Frowne?
- What are things that you find that may be different from these accounts?
- How would you describe the working conditions based on the accounts of Lemlich, Cohen, and Frowne?

**Developing the Lesson – Part II**

Students will complete analysis guide on the Triangle Walkout

- What was the reaction to what Samuel Gompers said to the union crowd at Cooper Union?
- What was the reactions to what Clara Lemlich said to the union crowd?
- Why did Clara Lemlich said what she said to the crowd?

**Concluding the Lesson:**

Students will describe what led to the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire and its aftermath.

- Students will discuss a power point presentation on the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire.
  - In the power point presentation, students will read and analyze various accounts and photographs of this tragic event in New York City
  - Students will write a short response to what are various reforms that came about due to the Fire and how it may helped the labor movement.

**Assessing Student Learning:**

Students after the lesson will have a great understanding of importance of unions in our society, especially, fighting for the rights of the workers. Students will examine how the labor movement had its various problems in convincing people to be a member of a union, because of the fear of many losing their jobs. Finally, students will assess the impact of the Progressive Movement in trying to bring major reforms in the American Democratic System.

**Primary Source Analysis Guide**

1. **Identify the Document**

   **Author(s) or source**

   **Title**

   **Date**

   **Type of document**
2. Analyze the Document

Main idea of the document
__________________________________________________________
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Preceding conditions that motivated the author
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Intended audience and purpose
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Biases of the author
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Questions to ask the author
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3. Historical Context

Important people, events, and ideas at time of document

Local: people, events, and ideas of the time
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National: people, events, and ideas of the time
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World: people, events, and ideas of the time
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There are two kinds of work—regular, that is salary work, and piecework. The regular work pays about $6 a week and the girls have to be at their machines at 7 o'clock in the morning and they stay at them until 8 o'clock at night, with just one-half hour for lunch in that time.

The shops. Well, there is just one row of machines that the daylight ever gets to—that is the front row, nearest the window. The girls at all the other rows of machines back in the shops have to work by gaslight, by day as well as by night. Oh, yes, the shops keep the work going at night, too.

There are no dressing rooms for the girls in the shops. They have to hang up their hats and coats—such as they are—on hooks along the walls.

The shops are unsanitary—that's the word that is generally used, but there ought to be a worse one used. Whenever we tear or damage any of the goods we sew on, or whenever it is found damaged after we are through with it, whether we have done it or not, we are charged for the piece and sometimes for a whole yard of the material.

My First Job

By Rose Cohen

The shop was on Pelem Street, a shop district one block long and just wide enough for two ordinary sized wagons to pass each other. We stopped at a door where I noticed at once a brown shining porcelain knob and a half rubbed off number seven. Father looked at his watch and at me.

"Don't look so frightened," he said. "You need not go in until seven. Perhaps if you start in at this hour he will think you have been in the habit of beginning at seven and will not expect you to come in earlier. Remember, be independent. At seven o'clock rise and go home no matter whether the others go or stay."

Now only I felt frightened, and waiting made me nervous, so I tried the knob. The door yielded heavily and closed slowly. I was half way up when it closed entirely,
leaving me in darkness. I groped my way to the top of the stairs and hearing a clattering noise of machines, I felt about, found a door, and pushed it open and went in. A tall, beardless man stood folding coats at a table. I went over and asked him for the name (I don't remember what it was.) "Yes," he said crossly. "What do you want?"

I said, "I am the new feller hand." He looked at me from head to foot. My face felt so burning hot that I could scarcely see.

"It is more likely," he said, "that you can pull bastings than fell sleeve lining." Then turning from me he shouted over the noise of the machine: "Presser, is this the girl?" The presser put down the iron and looked at me. "I suppose so," he said, "I only know the father."

One girl tittered, two men glanced at me over their shoulders and pushed their chairs apart a little. By this time I scarcely knew what I was about. I laid my coat down somewhere and pushed my bread into the sleeve. Then I stumbled into the bit of space made for me at the table, drew in the chair and sat down. The men were so close to me at each side I felt the heat of their bodies and could not prevent myself from shrinking away. The men noticed and probably felt hurt. One made a joke, the other laughed and the girls bent their heads low over their work. All at once the thought came: "If I don't do this coat quickly and well he will send me away at once." I picked up the coat, threaded my needle, and began hastily, repeating the lesson father impressed upon me. "Be careful not to twist the sleeve lining, take small false stitches."

**Days and Dreams**

*by Sadie Frowne*

My name is Sadie Frowne. I work in Allen Street (Manhattan) in what they call a sweatshop. I am new at the work and the foreman scolds me a great deal. I get up at half-past five o'clock every morning and make myself a cup of coffee on the oil stove. I eat a bit of bread and perhaps some fruit and then go to work. Often I get there soon after six o'clock so as to be in good time, though the factory does not open till seven.

At seven o'clock we all sit down to our machines and the boss brings to each one the pile of work that he or she is to finish during the day--what they call in English their "stint." This pile is put down beside the machine and as soon as a garment is done it is laid on the other side of the machine. Sometimes the work is not all finished by six o'clock, and then the one who is behind must work overtime.

The machines go like mad all day because the faster you work the more money you get. Sometimes in my haste I get my finger caught and the needle goes right through it. It goes so quick, though, that it does not hurt much. I bind the finger up with a piece of cotton and go on working. We all have accidents like that.
The Cooper Union Meeting (The Triangle walkout, sparked by grievances common throughout the shirtwaist industry, exploded into a general strike. First published in the Call, November 23, 1909)

Gompers was given an ovation when he was introduced by Chairman Benjamin Feigenbaum. The vast crowd rose to its feet and cheered him very enthusiastically for several minutes.

"A man would be less than human," said Gompers, in opening, "if he were not impressed with your reception. I want you men and women not to give all your enthusiasm for a man, no matter who he may be. I would prefer that you put all of your enthusiasm into your union and your cause."

Continuing, Gompers said: "I have never declared a strike in all my life. I have done my share to prevent strikes, but there comes a time when not to strike is but to rivet the chains of slavery upon our wrists."

Speaking of the possibility of a general strike, Gompers said: "Yes, Mr. Shirtwaist Manufacturer, it may be inconvenient for you if your boys and girls go out on strike, but there are things of more importance than your convenience and your profit. There are the lives of the boys and girls working in your business."

Appealing to the men and women to stand together, he declared: 'If you had an organization before this, it would have stood there as a challenge to the employers who sought to impose such conditions as you bear.

"This is the time and the opportunity, and I doubt if you let it pass whether it can be created again in five or ten years or a generation. I say, friends, do not enter too hastily but when you can't get the manufacturers to give you what you want, then strike. And when you strike, let the manufacturers know you are on strike!"

"I ask you to stand together," said Gompers in conclusion, "to have faith in yourselves, to be true to your comrades. If you strike, be cool, calm, collected and determined. Let your watchword be: Union and progress, and until then no surrender!"

This was greeted with a storm of applause.

Clara Lemlich, who was badly beaten up by thugs during the strike in the shop of Louis Leiserson, interrupted Jacob Panken just as he started to speak, saying: "I wanted to say a few words." Cries came from all parts of the hall, "Getup on the platform!" Willing hands lifted the frail little girl with flashing black eyes to the stage, and she said simply: "I have listened to all the speakers. I would not have further patience for talk, as I am one of those who feels and suffers from the things pictured. I move that we go on a general strike
Triangle Shirtwaist Fire and the Labor Movement

Second-Order Document