

# Worker safety 100 years after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire

On behalf of Johnston, Moore & Thompson

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On March 25, 1911, a fire broke out in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, a sweat shop in Greenwich Village, New York. Everything went wrong -- no one warned the workers of the fire, firefighting equipment couldn't reach high enough on the building and, worst of all, the exits had been locked to prevent the workers from smoking during breaks. 146 workers -- mostly teenaged immigrant girls -- died as a result of the fire, most within the first half-hour.

The deadly industrial fire was a watershed moment for the labor and worker safety movements in America. In 1913, the Department of Labor was established, partly in response to the tragedy. The first comprehensive [workers' compensation](#) law was passed in Wisconsin in 1911. Union membership and pro-labor lobbying surged, resulting in many of the worker safety laws we have today.

In anticipation of the 100th anniversary of the fatal accident, newspapers across the nation have featured stories on the Triangle fire. While there is no doubt that workers have more health and safety protections than 100 years ago, preventable workplace injuries and fatalities still happen with alarming regularity. How much better off are we?

## OSHA's third-largest fine ever issued for construction accident just last year

On February 7, 2010, an explosion killed six people on the construction site of Kleen Energy power in Middletown, Connecticut. The deadly accident was entirely preventable -- OSHA cited the contractors and construction companies building the plant with 370 worker safety violations -- 223 of which were classified as "willful," which OSHA defines as "committed with plain indifference to or intentional disregard for employee safety and health." OSHA fined the companies \$16.6 million, the third largest fine OSHA had ever proposed.

In 2005, an explosion at a Texas City, Texas, oil refinery owned by BP killed 15 workers and injured 170 others. In 2009, after completing its investigation, OSHA cited BP for 271 "willful and egregious" safety violations because it had previously been cited for the violations and had failed to correct them. The fatal accident resulted in OSHA's largest-ever proposed penalty of \$87 million.

## Sources:

- The Hartford Courant, "[Triangle Fire: A Century Later, Workers Still Need Protection](#)," Susan Campbell, March 20, 2011
- The New York Times, "BP Faces Record Fine for '05 Refinery Explosion," Steven Greenhouse, October 30, 2009