

“The Hardest Struggle”

Women and Sweated Industrial Labor

A Unit of Study for Grades 7-12

Eileen Boris
Rita Koman

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INCLUDING THE COMPLETE FIRST LESSON

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

INTRODUCTION

APPROACH AND RATIONALE

The National Center for History in the Schools (NCHS) and the Organization of American Historians (OAH) have developed the following collection of lessons for teaching with primary sources. They represent specific “dramatic episodes” in history from which you and your students can pause to delve into the deeper meanings of selected landmark events and explore their wider context in the great historical narrative. By studying a crucial turning-point in history, the student becomes aware that choices had to be made by real human beings, that those decisions were the result of specific factors, and that they set in motion a series of historical consequences. We have selected dramatic moments that best bring alive that decision-making process. We hope that through this approach, your students will realize that history is an ongoing, open-ended process, and that the decisions they make today create the conditions of tomorrow’s history.

Our teaching units are based on **primary sources**, taken from documents, artifacts, journals, diaries, newspapers and literature from the period under study. What we hope to achieve using primary source documents in these lessons is to remove the distance that students feel from historical events and to connect them more intimately with the past. In this way we hope to recreate for your students a sense of “being there,” a sense of seeing history through the eyes of the very people who were making decisions. This will help your students develop historical empathy, to realize that history is not an impersonal process divorced from real people like themselves. At the same time, by analyzing primary sources, students will actually practice the historian’s craft, discovering for themselves how to analyze evidence, establish a valid interpretation, and construct a coherent narrative in which all the relevant factors play a part.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Within this unit, you will find: Teacher Background Materials, including Unit Overview, Unit Context, Correlation to the National Standards for United States History, Unit Objectives, and Lesson Plans with Student Resources. This unit should be used as a supplement to your customary course materials. Although these lessons are recommended for grades 7-12, they can be adapted for other grade levels.

The Teacher Background section should provide you with a good overview of the entire unit and with the historical information and context necessary to link the specific dramatic episode to the larger historical narrative. You may consult it for your own use, and you may choose to share it with students if they are of a sufficient grade level to understand the materials.

The Lesson Plans include a variety of ideas and approaches for the teacher which can be elaborated upon or cut as you see the need. These lesson plans contain student resources which accompany each lesson. The resources consist of primary source documents, any hand-outs or student background materials, and a bibliography.

In our series of teaching units, each collection can be taught in several ways. You can teach all of the lessons offered on any given topic, or you can select and adapt the ones that best support your particular course needs. We have not attempted to be comprehensive or prescriptive in our offerings, but rather to give you an array of enticing possibilities for in-depth study, at varying grade levels. We hope that you will find the lesson plans exciting and stimulating for your classes. We also hope that your students will never again see history as a boring sweep of inevitable facts and meaningless dates but rather as an endless treasure of real life stories and an exercise in analysis and reconstruction.

TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

Industrial expansion by 1900 created multiple problems for American wage earners. Women, in particular, were disadvantaged in the unskilled jobs which they were limited to by managers and factory owners. Most women, many of whom were immigrants, worked to keep themselves and their families alive. In 1890, 3.7 million women and 18 percent of the population of working age were employed. By 1900, 5,319,397 women, or one in five, worked. In New York City alone, more than 350,000 women were employed; 132,535 were making clothing items of which the bulk were shirtwaists (blouses). Most of the women were between fourteen and twenty-five years of age. They worked thirteen to fourteen hour days, six days a week during peak production seasons with wages averaging \$3.00 to \$6.00 a week. Their pay could be altered for lateness, breakage, misuse of machinery, thread, needles or mistakes. Discrimination was common as women received 68.5 percent of a man's salary and were considered expendable.

Little skill was required to work in the sweatshops of garment production. Young girls hired as learners could pick threads, carry materials, and be on call to fetch piece goods. Workrooms were poorly lit, overcrowded, unsafe and unhealthy. The passage of legislation in New York to prevent fires was often ignored or adjusted to circumstances as witnessed by the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911. The bizarre circumstances which resulted in that fire had been widely publicized during the lengthy strike of women shirtwaist workers in the winter of 1909-10. The death of 145 young women, mostly single immigrant Jews and Italians, forced state authorities to investigate the outcries for change made by women workers. At the same time, nearly thirty thousand women throughout the garment district picketed and shut down most of the industry. When the strike halted, many industry promises to improve conditions turned out to be just promises.

Coinciding with the sweated work of women in factories was that of untold numbers of married women who worked around the clock in overcrowded tenements mainly on the city's East Side. While homebound workers did not strike, they sometimes protested low payments by withholding material and taking longer to finish their work. They also employed their children to increase their production, and this effectively eliminated childhood for many.

A study of the conditions under which mainly immigrant women were exploited in factories and at home can reveal the factors that drove key women to fight for change for their sweating sisters in the labor force. Descriptions of working conditions found in public records, speeches, and personal antidotes depict the rationale behind union organization and lengthy strikes to draw the attention of lawmakers and the public to their poor working conditions, low pay, and long hours.

Teacher Background Materials

Graphic photos had even greater impact. This unit is designed to involve students in the human element of early twentieth-century mass production. To know that women, considered to be the heart of the home, were frequently ignored for the price they paid to add a few dollars to the family income in order to survive, is momentous. The role of women in the labor picture, generally downplayed, needs exploration and understanding for full comprehension of societal complexities facing the nation in the twentieth century. Only when their predicaments are presented within the broader context of the Progressive Movement and the attempted advancement of labor can students discern the need to obtain a decent living wage for both men and women.

The evolution of laws today protecting men, women and children are a direct result of legislation and court decisions resulting from actions taken by women when faced with the conditions presented in these lessons. The primary materials which follow forcefully illustrate their impact.

*Based upon testimony, New York State Factory Investigating Commission, *Fourth Report*, Vol.5, p. 2810.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit should be coordinated with a study of the Progressive Movement of 1900–1920. These lessons provide insight into the working conditions of women in the metropolitan area of New York City in the early twentieth century. Through an analysis of these documents students should be able to empathize with the personal circumstances of women in factories and at home as they sweated over garment production. An understanding of working conditions will better enable them to appreciate the more immediate needs of women workers that Progressives attempted to meet through legislation and court decisions.

III. CORRELATION WITH THE NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR UNITED STATES HISTORY

The Hardest Struggle: Women and Sweated Industrial Labor offers teachers opportunities to use primary sources in examining political, economic, and social aspects of women in the industrial work force in early twentieth-century America. The unit provides teaching materials that specifically address **Standard 3** of **Era 6**, Development of the Industrial United States (1870–1900) and **Standard 1** of **Era 7**, The Emergence of Modern America (1890–1930), *National Standards for United States History, Basic Edition* (Los Angeles, National Center for History in the Schools, 1996). Students investigate working conditions of women within factories and tenements, analyze problems leading to strikes, unionization and legal interpretations, and draw their own conclusions regarding women’s accomplishments in the labor sphere.

The unit requires students to engage in historical thinking; to raise questions and to marshal evidence in support of their answers; to go beyond the facts presented in textbooks and examine the historical record for themselves. Students analyze cause-and-effect relationships, interrogate historical data by uncovering the so-

cial and political context in which it was created, and compare and contrast different sets of ideas and values. The documents presented in this unit help students to better appreciate historical perspectives by describing the past on its own terms through the eyes and experiences of those who were there. The unit challenges students to compare competing historical narratives and to hold interpretations of history as tentative, subject to change as new information is uncovered and new voices are heard.

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To understand the price paid by women workers on their jobs in order to advance industrialization.
- ◆ To experience vicariously the ways women workers reacted to conditions imposed upon them by industrialization.
- ◆ To comprehend attempts made by immigrant women workers to improve conditions through strikes, unionization, and the law, and why those attempts failed.
- ◆ To deepen the appreciation of the plight of women workers through the use of primary source documents and photographs.

V. LESSON PLANS

Lesson One	Working Conditions
Lesson Two	Women Workers Fight for Reform
Lesson Three	Progressives Make Reforms

VI. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Progressivism combined ideals of social justice with concepts of efficiency in an attempt to alleviate the dislocations of capitalist development. With roots in the social gospel and the language of religion, it was a movement of the new white professional and managerial class that hoped for democracy and the re-making of community in an urban, ethnically diverse world. Early twentieth-century reform thus appeared as a crusade against the forces of evil as much as a legislative agenda to promote labor standards and clean government, Americanize immigrants, replace tenements, and rationalize business. The wage-earning woman, whether factory girl or home-bound mother, stood at the center of the Progressive imagination as a victim of long hours and low wages, even as actual laboring women rejected being labeled “downtrodden.” Through cross-class organizations and their own collective action, often through unions, working-class women strove to improve living and laboring environments for themselves, their families, and their neighborhoods.

Progressives had inherited an ideal of domesticity that associated women with the home and assigned nurturing, intimacy, care, and morality to the female sex. Men were to be breadwinners, and women to be breadgivers. Women were to be

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protected because, as “mothers of the race,” they differed in physical and intellectual ways from men. However, the “New Woman” of the early twentieth century and a growing suffrage movement challenged these dichotomies, but the concept of women as different and better than men persisted. Moreover, the impact of this prevailing gender system depended on class and race or ethnicity. For white middle- and upper-class women, responsibility for home and children justified participation in public affairs. The resulting ideology of maternalism, as numerous scholars have argued, claimed that their position as nurturers and caregivers prepared such women to lead reform campaigns for the benefit of poor women and children. Women reformers relied on their position as mothers or potential mothers to engage in municipal housekeeping and fight for pure milk, maternal and infant health care, better housing, and mothers’ pensions—services that later became public programs.

The wage-earning of poor women challenged the domestic norm as did the entrance of better-off women into higher education and the professions. Instead of a place of rest and safety, the homes of the immigrant poor turned into manufactories of garments, foodstuffs, and a host of other items. Despite the prevailing rhetoric, all homes were actually sites of work, though some women hired other women to perform the cleaning, cooking, washing, and childcare associated with domesticity itself. Indeed, female responsibility for family and home disadvantaged most women in a sex-segregated labor market, where most jobs divided into men’s and women’s work. Women not only were paid less but also judged as temporary and unreliable laborers, who would quit employment for marriage or value domestic obligations over their jobs. Such notions ignored how women, like men, fulfilled family needs through earning wages, as historian Alice Kessler-Harris has argued.

A woman’s work varied by her place of residence, marital status, race, and ethnicity. Before World War I, U.S.-born single women typed in offices or clerked in the new department stores. Urban immigrant daughters tended machines, while their mothers hand sewed in tenements. African Americans cooked and cleaned for Southern households. Japanese labored on Hawaiian sugar plantations and in Californian truck gardens. Native Americans wove baskets while trying to eke out some subsistence on reservation farms. Mothers from many ethnic and racial groups also toiled in family businesses, large and small; they took in borders to lodge as well as goods to assemble, milked cows, and herded sheep. They migrated with their families to pick crops. Some even engaged in sex work.

In general, the wages of women’s work were low; this was especially true of those who brought manufacturing into the home. Most homeworkers were mothers, sometimes aided by their children, although male tailors and cigar makers also labored at home. Homework had developed as an integral part of industrialization; it was an economic system where foot power competed with the dynamo, where long hours and low wages undermined working conditions and threatened the profitability of factories with their higher overhead. Subject to unpredictable consumer demand, handmade and fashion dependent goods cost more to make inside factories, which lacked the flexibility of space and workforce that sending manufacturing into tenements provided. By 1910, a minimum of 250

thousand homeworkers existed in New York City, producing at least one hundred items, such as coats, knee pants, paper bags, umbrellas, feathers, artificial flowers, spaghetti, and ice cream. By 1911, inspectors had approved over fourteen thousand tenements for homework licenses that restricted who could manufacture the specified items. Even with mandated inspection of tenements, enforcement proved difficult as families moved, employees lacked knowledge of their rights, and laws could only monitor the surroundings of workers—not the manufacturers, subcontractors, or retailers who profited from their labor. Licensing against sweated labor stressed perils to the consumer rather than rights of workers; it focused more on conditions in workers' homes than on the particularities of the labor contract.

“Sweating” characterized the entire ready-made clothing industry. Behind sweating lay competition, an oversupply of untrained labor, and the ability of small shops to produce cheaper than larger ones. At the turn of the century, the U.S. Department of Labor ignored location when defining sweating as “a condition under which a maximum amount of work in a given time is performed for a minimum wage, and in which the ordinary rules of health and comfort are disregarded.”¹ But conditions in the clothing industry grew not solely from the desires of employers to make a maximum profit or the over supply of labor. Tenement workshops and homework built upon the preference among some Jewish immigrants to work at home and took advantage of social and cultural restraints on the labor of married women with children, especially among Italians. It developed in the context of rising land values, population overcrowding, a preexisting stock of buildings, and worker organization.

Subject to more strikes than most other industries, the clothing trade underwent walkouts, lockouts, and other confrontations from the mid-1880s into the 1910s. Unions were unstable and took numerous forms prior to the formation of the International Ladies' Garment Workers of America (ILGWU) in 1900 and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) in 1914. (These merged to form UNITE, the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees in 1995.) Though the precise ethnic and sexual composition of the labor force varied across cities, Jewish and Italian men—generally holders of the best jobs in the trade—dominated the unions.

Self-interest combined with social justice and moral conscience characterized campaigns to end the sweatshop from the 1890s through the first World War. Trade unionists wanted to eliminate low-waged competitors. Male leaders also fought for the family wage, a wage large enough for a man to support his wife and children. If men gained higher wages, the argument went, then wives and children would not need to supplement the family economy through homework. The middle class women who formed the National Consumers' League (NCL) and joined the National Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) desired to improve the lives of those they judged the most vulnerable. Although calling for fair wages

1. Henry White, “The Sweating System,” *Bulletin of Department of Labor* 4 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1896), n.p.

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and decent working conditions, women reformers initially emphasized the protection of the consumer and the preservation of the home. Protecting the family, then, lay behind both the demands of male trade unionists and women reformers alike.

Organized in 1898, the NCL tapped the moral righteousness of prosperous women by exhorting them to purchase goods made under sweatshop-free conditions. It issued a “white label” to manufacturers who both met the League’s labor standards—obedience to state factory laws, production on the premises, no overtime, and no children employed under sixteen—and passed inspections conducted by the League or by state departments of labor. Eschewing individual solutions to removing the germs thought lurking in clothes, the NCL would protect consumers by improving the conditions of producers.

Investigation, education, publicity, mobilization, and legislation became weapons of choice for reformers who would politicize consumption and turn to legislatures for relief against sweating. Under its energetic secretary Florence Kelley, the white label offered a symbol around which the League organized to win government-enforced labor standards. Through numerous state campaigns it secured maximum hour and minimum wage laws for women and curbs on child labor. It also helped develop state enforcement bureaus, staffing such agencies with its members, and defended these laws in the courts, researching and writing legal briefs that defined the field of sociological jurisprudence, notably for *Muller v. Oregon* (1908) in which the Supreme Court upheld the setting of maximum hours for women. Between 1912, when Massachusetts established the first minimum wage board, and 1923, when the Supreme Court struck down the District of Columbia’s law in *Adkins v. Children’s Hospital*, fifteen states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico provided minimum wages for women. The NCL spearheaded this drive, aided by the WTUL, social workers, settlement house residents, trade unionists, and male industrial relations specialists. Laws curtailed child labor, fourteen-hour days for women, and factory night work by women and minors, but these practices often remained legal if performed in the home, though in 1913 New York extended child labor prohibitions to homework.

Labor laws for women had only a limited impact; they never covered agriculture and domestic service where women of color were concentrated. However, restrictive laws prohibited women from working at night, lifting heavy weights, and laboring in a given occupation. Regulatory laws sought to improve working conditions, increase wages, lower hours, and end health hazards. In raising the cost of hiring women, regulatory laws often restricted job possibilities in mixed sex occupations at a time before legal remedies existed for sex discrimination. For those working in female-dominated industrial jobs, that is, for the majority of women in industry, such laws improved conditions. Those who argued for restrictive laws highlighted the sexual danger of women being out at night or the inappropriateness of women laboring in specific types of work, like foundries. Judged dependent, women before suffrage came under the police power of the state in ways that the Court refused to extend to men, whose right to contract it considered sacred. According to historian Kathryn Kish Sklar, when blocked from gender neutral labor standards after *Lochner v. New York* (1905), which struck

down a law restricting the hours of male bakers, reformers concentrated on gaining protections for women as an entering wedge for all workers.

By 1915, the NCL boasted eighty-nine locals in nineteen states, of which thirty-four were in universities, colleges, and schools. A year later membership stood at thirty-three thousand. By World War I, however, unions had brought some order to the chaotic garment industry. The 1910 “Protocol of Peace” not only solidified unionization of women’s garments but also initiated the New York Joint Board of Sanitary Control to monitor conditions. Three years later, the ILGWU and the Joint Board asked the NCL to help them compose a new label agreement. But during the strike-torn war years, manufacturers who sought to stymie unions promoted the NCL label, whose standards then lagged behind those negotiated through collective bargaining. The League responded by dropping the white label in 1918 but continued to seek labor standards legislation to supplement union contracts, especially for women in unorganized industries and Southern workers. As historian Landon R.Y. Storrs has shown, the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, which covered men as well as women, culminated the NCL’s quest for regulation of hours, wages, and child labor.

To focus only on middle-class reformers or male trade unionists silences the self-activity of working women themselves. Working-class women took to the streets repeatedly to protest the cost of food and housing. The Working Women’s Society of New York City initiated the chain of events that led to the founding of the NCL when it approached charity reformer Josephine Shaw Lowell in 1886 for aid in organizing. Laboring women, like bookbinder Mary Kenney O’Sullivan and garment maker Leonora O’Reilly, were central to the formation of the WTUL at the 1903 convention of the American Federation of Labor, where only four women sat out of 496 delegates. Few women were in unions at that time, although over five million were wage earners. As a cross-class organization of women wage earners and middle class “allies,” the WTUL had a dual agenda: it trained organizers and sought to unionize women and it pushed for labor legislation as a tool to facilitate organizing as well as to improve conditions in the workplace.

“The Uprising of the Thirty Thousand,” the great 1909 strike in New York’s women’s garment industry, brought wage-earning women into prominence within the WTUL. Jewish immigrant garment workers, like Rose Schneiderman and Pauline Newman, became its core. According to historian Annelise Orleck, they were “industrial feminists,” who envisioned a transformed world on both the shopfloor and in the community. They were also socialists of various persuasions and seasoned activists. Numerous smaller strikes, some confined to one shop, and shop-to-shop organizing prepared the way for the “Uprising.” Organizers like Clara Lemlich (see “Dramatic Moment”) worked long to overcome ethnic tensions fanned by management, which sought to pit Italian against Jew, immigrant against U.S. born. This was a protest led and sustained by factory girls, the majority still in their teens, with the aid of “mink brigade” suffragists, the WTUL, male unionists, and the Socialist Party. The strikers turned to their allies to expose the thugs who beat them and the police who arrested them, nearly eight hundred in the first month alone. Employers tried to discredit picketers by calling them “streetwalkers” at a time when starvation wages

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were a major reason that women turned to prostitution. Socialites on the picket line generated publicity and funds and also restrained the police. Though the strike rejuvenated labor and strengthened the ILGWU, the resulting settlement ironically contributed to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory tragedy two years later. Pushing for better pay and union recognition, the male ILGWU negotiators gave way on demands for safe working conditions without consulting the strikers. During the next decade, however, half of all women garment workers would become union members.

The “girl strikers,” as they were called, smashed the myth that women were unorganizable and would not be good trade unionists. Their utopian imagination projected a self-identity forged from popular culture and the culture of consumption that rejected the status of victim. Instead, the young women in the garment factories became “girls of adventure,” as historian Nan Enstad has named them, who forged the status of ladyhood out of dime novels and nickelodeons. They desired French heels and fashionable shirtwaists. Like the Lawrence textile strikers of 1912, they would have roses as well as bread. Like Boston telephone operators and Tennessee textile operatives, their youth culture, displayed on the picket line, provided a basis for collective action. Rather than the starving, serious, and “thinly clad” waifs of the labor press, they were ladies who demanded to be valued both as women and as workers. In time, they changed the sweating system by moving beyond the boundaries of maternalist reform.

DRAMATIC MOMENT

“I want to . . . go out on strike!”

In the fall of 1909 there were three major shirtwaist shop strikes in New York City to improve the working conditions of women employees. All were limited in scope, not well organized in effort, and squashed by owners. Known as the center of the garment industry, there were over six hundred shirtwaist and dress factories in the city. None were unionized as the major union, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), did not believe organizing women was a worthwhile endeavor. The failure of the three strikes energized many of the young women workers to attempt to organize every shop they could to act in unison. In early December, a mass meeting of immigrant women workers

and the small, newly-formed International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), an AFL division, was called by word of mouth to the Cooper Union.



Five striking women having lunch.

New York, 1909

George Grantham Bain Collection (Library of Congress)
LC-USZ62-78093

The hall was packed to overflowing with many standing outside in the cold. For two hours labor officials, including AFL leader Samuel Gompers, spoke. All urged caution and stressed moderate action urging an all-out strike only as a last resort. Each received mild applause. Finally, in sheer frustration, a young, diminutive woman of five feet in height and barely over twenty years old, leaped to her feet shouting in Yiddish “I’m tired of listening to these speeches. I want to know if we’re going to go out on strike!” She was Clara

Lemlich, already a seasoned organizer, who had just been released from the hospital after a brutal beating received on a picket line in front of her workplace, the Leiserson Shirtwaist Factory, scene of one of the previous strikes. She then demanded a vote to strike.

Instantly, the crowd was on its feet yelling and cheering its support for an industry-wide strike. When the chair William M. Feigenbaum called for a vote, three thousand voices shouted unanimous approval as they waved hats, handkerchiefs and other objects. He then asked them, “Do you mean faith? Will you take the old Hebrew oath?” All right arms went up in the air as voices repeated “If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may this hand wither from the arm I now raise.”

So began the thirteen weeks of the “Uprising of 20,000” sweated women workers of New York City!

Source: Philip S. Foner. *Women and the American Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Eve of World War I* (New York: Free Press, 1979), p. 328.

TIME LINE

- 1890 General Federation of Women's Clubs founded
- 1899 Florence Kelley gives speech on "Working Woman's Need of the Ballot"
- 1900 International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) founded
- 1901 McKinley assassinated; Theodore Roosevelt becomes President
- 1903 National Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) founded
- 1905 Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) founded
Lochner v. New York
- 1908 *Muller v. Oregon*
Lewis Hine photographs tenement home work conditions
- 1909-10 Massive shirtwaist factory shops begin series of strikes
- 1910 "Uprising of 20,000" women shirtwaist workers
- 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire occurs
Rose Schneiderman addresses mass meeting
- 1912-13 New York State Factory Investigating Commission meets
- 1913 Woodrow Wilson becomes President
Paterson Silk Strike occurs
- 1914 Elizabeth Gurley Flynn addresses the New York Civic Club Forum
- 1917 U.S. becomes involved in World War I
- 1918 *Hammer v. Dagenhart*
- 1920 Nineteenth Amendment grants women suffrage
- 1923 *Adkins v. Children's Hospital*

LESSON ONE

WORKING CONDITIONS

A. OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To understand why young women worked as unskilled factory employees.
- ◆ To empathize with immigrant households forced to supplement income through sweated labor.
- ◆ To appreciate early legislative efforts to regulate the industry despite their limited success.

B. LESSON ACTIVITIES (Two days)

Within the context of presenting the Progressive Movement as the first modern reform movement to bring order and social justice to all workers, set the stage for an examination of women as sweated industrial laborers with **Documents A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H.**

Divide students into four groups. Provide each group with two of the documents—A and B, C and D, E and F, G and H. **Photos One, Two, Three, Four, Five, and Six** should be given to the groups (three for each) receiving **Documents E and F** and **Documents G and H.**

Documents:

- A. Working at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory
 - B. Fifth Avenue Sweatshops
 - C. Story of a Sweatshop Girl
 - D. What a \$6.00 a Week Wage Means
 - E. The Problem of Sweating in America
 - F. The Wreck of the Home
 - G. New York Factory Investigating Commission Public Hearing
 - H. Report of the New York Factory Investigating Commission
- Lewis Hine Photos 1 through 6 depicting families doing home work

Lesson One

Each group should examine their documents carefully, seeking details of the work situations described. A spokesperson from each group will report the cumulative information to the entire class orally. A discussion should follow focusing on these issues:

1. How to improve working conditions and tenement squalor.
2. The conundrum facing women in sweatshops and at home: how to unify to remedy low pay and poor working conditions without losing their jobs so necessary to support their families.

WORKING AT THE TRIANGLE SHIRTTWAIST COMPANY

Pauline Newman was born in Lithuania around 1890 and came to the U.S. in 1901. She began working at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company shortly thereafter. In 1906, at age 15, she joined the Socialist Party. By 1909, she was working over 52 hours a week at Triangle until hired by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) as an organizer. She was actively involved in the 1909–10 series of strikes. She worked for ILGWU for four years traveling to 14 states to organize workers. She also worked closely with Rose Schneiderman and the National Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) for a few years. Newman remained on the ILGWU staff for over 70 years.

“I went to work for the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in 1901. The corner of a shop would resemble a kindergarten because we were young, eight, nine, ten years old . . . The hours were from 7:30 in the morning to 6:30 at night when it wasn’t busy. . . . No overtime pay, not even supper money. There was a bakery in the garment center that produced little apple pies the size of [an] ashtray and that was what we got for our overtime instead of money.

“It [Triangle] was probably the largest shirtwaist factory in the city of New York. By the time I got there they had something like two, more than two hundred operators. And they had collars, examiners, finishers. Altogether probably, they had about four hundred people. And that was a large staff. And they had two floors.

“My wages as a youngster were \$1.50 for a seven-day week. I know it sounds exaggerated, but it isn’t; it’s true. . . . I worked on the 9th floor with a lot of youngsters like myself. When the operators were through with sewing shirtwaists, there was a little thread left, and we youngsters would get a little scissors and trim the threads off. And when the inspectors came around, do you know what happened? The supervisors made all the children climb into one of those crates that they ship material in, and they covered us over with finished shirtwaists until the inspectors had left, because of course we were too young to be working in the factory legally.

“The Triangle Waist Company was a family affair, all relatives of the owner running the place, watching to see that you did your work, watching when you went into the toilet. And if you were two or three minutes longer than foremen or foreladies thought you should be, it was deducted from your pay. If you came five minutes late in the morning because the freight elevator didn’t come down to take you up in time, you were sent home for a half a day without pay.

“The hours remained, no matter how much you got. The operators, their average wage, as I recall—because two of my sisters worked there—they averaged around six, seven dollars a week. If you were very fast—because they worked piece work—if you were very fast and nothing happened to your machine, no breakage or anything, you could make around ten dollars a week. But most of them, as I remember . . . they averaged about seven dollars a week. Now the collars are the skilled men in the trade. Twelve dollars was the maximum.

“The early sweatshops were usually so dark that gas jets [for light] burned day and night. There was no insulation in the winter, only a pot-bellied stove in the middle of the factory. . . . Of course in summer you suffocated with practically no ventilation. There was no drinking water, maybe a tap in the hall, warm, dirty. What were you going to do? Drink this water or none at all.

“The condition was no better and no worse than the tenements where we lived. You got out of the workshop, dark and cold in winter, hot in summer, dirty unswept floors, no ventilation, and you would go home. What kind of home did you go to? Some of the rooms didn’t have any windows. I lived in a two-room tenement with my mother and two sisters [Her father died shortly after arriving in the U.S.] and the bedroom had no windows, the facilities were down in the yard, but that’s the way it was in the factories too. We wore cheap clothes, lived in cheap tenements, ate cheap food. There was nothing to look forward to, nothing to expect the next day to be better. Someone asked me once ‘How did you survive?’ And I told him, ‘What alternative did we have?’ You stayed and you survived, that’s all.”

Source: Joan Morrison and Charlotte Fox Zabusky. *American Mosaic: The Immigrant Experience in the Words of Those Who Lived It* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), 1993. Reprinted:
<http://web.gsuc.cuny.edu/ashp/heaven/newman.html>



Yard of tenement, New York, N.Y.
Laundry hangs between the buildings
ca. 1900-1910
Library of Congress (Detroit Publishing Co.) LC-D4-36489

FIFTH AVENUE SWEATSHOPS

A weekly bulletin of the clothing trade union in New York reported on a warning issued by the Fire Chief regarding the danger of fire in the "Sweatshop District." The article appeared two months prior to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and called for an immediate remedy to correct the problem and protect factory workers.

"Fifth avenue workshops are nothing but high class sweatshops, and they're all the more dangerous because they are fireproof buildings. The law doesn't require fireproof buildings to have fire escapes, and the people in these shops are in constant danger."

The above statement was made . . . by the chief of the greatest fire fighting force in the world, Fire Chief Edward F. Croker, of the New York Fire Department. We have always been led to believe that our Fifth avenue shops and factories were models for safeguarding the lives and limbs of the people who are compelled to obtain a livelihood within their walls and that the only place in which workers were menaced with the fire danger was in the so-called congested or sweating district. . . . This understanding is now changed, and we are told that a district in which no thought of the sweatshop danger and evil was ever connected is really a more dangerous place for the workers to follow their vocation in than the so-called sweating district. . . .

It may be within the law to have people employed in a fireproof building without erecting fire escapes, and while the erection of fire escapes may be an expense to the owner of the property and the employees may never have need for them, we have known of instances where fires have occurred and death resulted in alleged fire-proofed buildings, these deaths being preventable if suitable fire escapes had been on the buildings.

The factory law gives the Labor Commissioner power to order the installation or erection of fire escapes on a building three or more stories in height when the building is occupied as a factory. This being the case, it is hoped that an early move in this direction will be made by him in the newly discovered sweating and firetrap district of Fifth avenue.

It has always been our policy to co-operate with the Labor Department in any and all reforms in which it has been engaged, and if the Labor Commissioner decides to take action along the lines suggested by Chief Croker to safeguard the lives of the workers in the Fifth avenue firetraps and sweatshops he is assured in advance of our hearty aid and co-operation until the evils complained of are replaced by conditions satisfactory to all interested parties.

But with or without the aid of the Labor Department or any other recognized authority in the premises, the employees of these shops have the power to remedy these conditions through a thorough organization. If immediate steps are not taken by the authorities to change the conditions complained of by Chief Croker or failure to abolish them results after a determined effort is made, then the employees would and have every right to strike until such time as they are assured their lives and limbs are amply protected by the erection of a sufficient number of fire escapes on every factory on Fifth avenue.

Source: *The Weekly Bulletin of the Clothing Trades*, Friday January 13, 1911; published by the United Garment Workers of America General Executive Board.

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Questions?

National Center for History in the Schools, UCLA

Marian McKenna Olivas, Coordinator

Gary B. Nash, Director

6265 Bunche Hall

Los Angeles, CA 90095-1473

(310) 825-4702

FAX: (310) 267-2103

<http://nchs.ucla.edu>

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