

100 years since tragic blaze killed 146 garment workers

Triangle Fire on PBS's "American Experience": compelling documentary marred by liberal perspective

By Charles Bogle
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Directed by Jamila Wignot, written by Mark Zwonitzer

March 25 marks the 100th anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in New York City's Greenwich Village, which took the lives of 146 workers, 122 of whom were women and the children—some as young as thirteen—who worked beside them.

On February 28, the PBS "American Experience" series commemorated this workplace tragedy by airing *Triangle Fire*. Producer-director Jamila Wignot (director and/or producer of other "American Experience" episodes, including *Walt Whitman*, *The Supreme Court: The Rehnquist Revolution*, *Jesse James* and *The Massie Affair*) borrows Ken Burns's production techniques to compellingly recreate the workers' lives, their struggles against brutal conditions, the fire and its horrific consequences.

Wignot allows those involved in the tragedy to tell their stories through voiceovers in which portions of letters from victims, family members, and survivors of the fire are read out. The viewer learns that many of the victims and survivors belonged to the great wave of European immigrants who, as the documentary notes, "understood that their fragile hold on the American dream depended on a willingness to work in such places."

One also learns that many of these women were the sole supporters of large families. Following Burns's lead, Wignot correctly lets the moving stories speak for themselves.

The accounts and photos, along with comments by

contemporary historians, also help bring out the inhuman working conditions that led to the fire. The women worked 14-hour shifts on the 8th and 9th stories of a building at the corner of Greene Street and Washington Place in lower Manhattan (while the owners, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, Russian-born Jewish immigrants themselves, sat above them on the 10th floor) for \$2 a day. Because it was a shirtwaist (women's blouse) factory, rags and other highly flammable material littered the floor.

The documentary makers also point to the immediate economic causes of the tragic blaze, i.e., the rising cost of material and competition from rival factories led Blanck and Harris to increase the level of exploitation of their workers.

The owners' cost-cutting efforts included checking the women's bags for any "stolen" material before they left the factory. To ensure that no employee left work with pilfered items, the owners locked one of the two exit doors, forcing the women to leave in single file though one exit as supervisors checked their bags.

Similar conditions existed throughout the city's garment factories, and by the fall of 1909, mostly Jewish women workers at some 500 of the factories participated in "the Uprising of 20,000," the largest strike in New York City history. (At the time more than a quarter of a million garment workers in New York produced nearly two-thirds of the clothing sold in the US.) The owners responded by declaring the strike an attack on private property and "the American Dream," and hiring goons and bribing cops to beat striking workers and arrest them.

When public opinion began to shift to the side of the striking workers—due partly to the decision of Anne Morgan (daughter of J.P. Morgan) and several of her upper-class friends to go “slumming” and side with the workers—Blanck and Harris and the other owners made moderate wage and benefit concessions, but did not agree to improve working conditions or grant the right to organize. The striking workers initially rejected the offer, at which point Morgan and her friends showed their true class colors by withdrawing their support in fear of stoking “social upheaval.”

By February 1910 the strike was settled, leaving the workers without a union and no changes in working conditions. It was practically inevitable, then, that some disaster would occur, and the documentary’s depiction of the March 1911 fire is all the more powerful and disturbing for this reason.

Reenactments depict a single cigarette being dropped on a rag and the women leaving their work-stations and attempting to flee. Above them, the owners managed to leave through the roof, but the single unlocked exit through which the workers could escape was blocked by smoke and fire. (The owners were eventually acquitted of any legal wrongdoing.)

Some of the women did manage to get out, but those who couldn’t escape were left either to leap from windows—they are represented as little more than comet-like flames—or burn to death inside the factory. Photos of the charred, bloodied bodies resting in makeshift coffins capture agonizing deaths.

Unfortunately, *Triangle Fire*’s timid, liberal perspective results in a mistaken understanding of the Progressive movement’s role in 20th Century America. This misconception is especially apparent in the documentary’s final scene. “Following the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire,” we are told, “other workers saw the dangers of uncontrolled factories, resulting in 30 new laws. New York became a model [of reform] for the rest of the nation.”

But this “model” was not meant to fight the power of capitalism. In fact, Progressive reforms of this era were intended, in the final analysis, to solidify and protect the new economic order of monopoly capitalism and imperialist policies. They were also meant to defuse the increasing social tensions and crush the rise of socialism in early 20th Century America (and in particular among the immigrants on the Lower East

Side).

The history of the 20th Century, and especially the last several decades in the US, demonstrates the disastrous consequences of the belief that the present economic order can be modified in the interests of the working population. *Triangle Fire* offers a sympathetic portrayal of the victims of this fire, but the decision to end it so uncritically does a disservice to their memory and the audience’s understanding of the period. One wonders if the right-wing attacks on PBS might not be at least partially responsible for this decision.

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