

Social Studies 30-1

Unit Five: Liberalism and Economics

Key Question: How has economic liberalism evolved over time?

Assignment 5.5: Road to Modern Liberalism

Classical Liberalism's Evolution to Modern Liberalism

Annotate each excerpt and then prepare to discuss.

Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire (#1s)

On March 25, 1911, fire spread through the cramped Triangle Waist Company garment factory on the 8th, 9th and 10th floors of the Asch Building in lower Manhattan. Workers in the factory, many of whom were young women recently arrived from Europe, had little time or opportunity to escape. The rapidly spreading fire killed 146 workers.

The building had only one fire escape, which collapsed during the rescue effort. Long tables and bulky machines trapped many of the victims. Panicked workers were crushed as they struggled with doors that were locked by managers to prevent theft, or doors that opened the wrong way. Only a few buckets of water were on hand to douse the flames. Outside, firefighters' ladders were too short to reach the top floors and ineffective safety nets ripped like paper.

The Triangle factory, owned by Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, was located in the top three floors of the Asch Building in Manhattan. It was a true sweatshop, employing young immigrant women who worked in a cramped space at lines of sewing machines. Nearly all the workers were teenaged girls who did not speak English and worked 12 hours a day, every day. In 1911, there were four elevators with access to the factory floors, but only one was fully operational and the workers had to file down a long, narrow corridor in order to reach it. There were two stairways down to the street, but one was locked from the outside to prevent stealing and the other only opened inward. The fire escape was so narrow that it would have taken hours for all the workers to use it, even in the best of circumstances.

Blanck and Harris already had a suspicious history of factory fires. The Triangle factory was twice scorched in 1902, while their Diamond Waist Company factory burned twice, in 1907 and in 1910. It seems that Blanck and Harris deliberately torched their workplaces before business hours in order to collect on the large fire-insurance policies they purchased, a not uncommon practice in the early 20th century. While this was not the cause of the 1911 fire, it contributed to the tragedy, as Blanck and Harris refused to install sprinkler systems and take other safety measures in case they needed to burn down their shops again.

Added to this delinquency were Blanck and Harris' notorious anti-worker policies. Their employees were paid a mere \$15 a week, despite working 12 hours a day, every day. When the International Ladies Garment Workers Union led a strike in 1909 demanding higher pay and shorter and more predictable hours, Blanck and Harris' company was one of the few manufacturers who resisted, hiring police as thugs to imprison the striking women, and paying off politicians to look the other way.

Despite a good deal of evidence that the owners and management had been horribly negligent in the fire, a grand jury failed to indict them on manslaughter charges. To settle lawsuits against them, they eventually paid \$75 in compensation to each victim's family—a fraction of the \$400 per death that they were paid by their insurer.

The public outcry over what was clearly a preventable tragedy brought a renewed sense of urgency to the labor movement and to other groups working to improve women's and immigrants' rights in the workplace.

The Triangle factory fire remained the deadliest workplace tragedy in New York City's history until the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center 90 years later.

Rana Plaza Collapse (#2s)

On 24 April 2013, the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka, Bangladesh, which housed five garment factories, killed at least 1,132 people and injured more than 2,500. Only five months earlier, at least 112 workers had lost their lives in another tragic accident, trapped inside the burning Tazreen Fashions factory on the outskirts of Dhaka.

On April 23, 2013, garment workers were removed from the Rana Plaza building when cracks appeared in the building walls. The owner relayed, however, after an engineer inspection, the building was structurally sound.

The next morning, workers continued to express concern about the safety of the Rana Plaza building as cracks cut through weight-bearing structures of the building: the walls, pillars, and floors. Many told management they didn't want to enter the building because of the deep cracks. Still, management ordered garment workers to their usual posts inside, threatening their jobs and pay if they refused.

Early in the workday, the power to the building cut off, the cracks widened, and concrete fell onto workers sewing, buttoning, and fastening clothes. It took less than ninety seconds for the eight-story building to collapse and kill 1,134 workers and maim more than 2,500 others.

Parts of the building were constructed without proper permits from the city. The fifth through eighth floors were added onto the building without supporting walls. The heavy equipment from the garment factories was more than the structure could support. The foundation was weak, built on swamp land. As the cracks deepened, the building was destined to cave in.

While these failures explain the collapse of the building, it's the failure to respond to known dangers that caused the deaths and injuries that came with it. Despite garment workers being coerced back into the building, the bank and shops located on the lower levels did remain evacuated due to the dangers of the cracks discovered the previous day. Garment factory management was as aware of the risks as the banks and the shops were.

Unfortunately, factories' interests in filling orders came before the safety of those doing the work.

Ten years on from the disaster, much has changed. Today, the industry is safer and the capacity of the Bangladeshi Government to oversee compliance is much stronger. This is not to say Bangladesh's garment industry has been incident-free. The International Labor Organization reported that, between Rana Plaza's collapse and 2018, at least 35 further accidents in clothing factories had resulted in 27 deaths.



If the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire was a **watershed** moment in America, do you think the Bangladesh factory collapse is a global watershed moment regarding sweatshops?

Winnipeg General Strike (#3s)

On May 15, 1919, Winnipeg stopped working. It was the first day of the Winnipeg General Strike, the climax of many years of workers' frustration and anger. They shut down Canada's third largest city for six weeks. Workers went on strike for recognition of their unions and the right to bargain collectively for their wages and working conditions. Factories, stores, restaurants, offices, public transportation, fire departments, newspapers, telephone, postal system—everything stopped. First the metal workers walked out; their bosses had refused to give them a raise, a nine-hour day, and union recognition. Then the firemen, postal workers, and telephone operators struck. They were joined by office clerks, railway workers, streetcar drivers and conductors, delivery people, and garbage collectors. In all but two of the 96 unions in Winnipeg, every member walked off the job. Thousands of World War I veterans demonstrated in support of the strikers. Tens of thousands of workers in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and the Atlantic provinces staged sympathy strikes.

Even the Winnipeg policemen publicly supported the strikers. All 240, including the chief, were fired, and a special force of 2000 untrained anti strike constables took over. Late on the night of June 6, the federal cabinet rammed through a change in the immigration act permitting the arrest and deportation of "**enemy aliens.**" On June 18, six British-born strike leaders and a few strikers born in other European countries (who were later deported) were arrested and taken to Stony Mountain Penitentiary. The workers and many thousands of non-union people who supported them were outraged. They held a parade and rally the following Saturday, June 21. On that day, "**Bloody Saturday,**" the Winnipeg General Strike exploded in riots, violence, and death. A troop of Mounties galloped again and again into the crowd, firing their guns. The special constables, swinging baseball bats, came behind them, forcing the workers into the back streets.

By nightfall, one person was dead, one was dying, and more than a hundred were injured. In one way, the Winnipeg General Strike failed. The workers had gained nothing and lost much (including, in many cases their jobs). Winnipeg unions were nearly destroyed. But in another way, the strike succeeded. In the years that followed many of the strikers' demands became law, and many of the strike leaders were elected to the provincial and federal governments. One of those leaders was J.S. Woodsworth. In 1933, he founded a new political party, the **CCF—the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation**. The CCF was sympathetic to workers, farmers, and the poor; it later became the New Democratic Party (NDP). And in 1969, 50 years after the Winnipeg General Strike, Manitoba elected an NDP government. The Winnipeg General Strike was the most complete general strike in North American history.

How should the Winnipeg General Strike be remembered?

"It should be remembered - as the crisis essentially (the moral crisis of a liberal, capitalist, social order) ignored or oppressed, working people within that social order... that caused ordinary, average, working class people, not revolutionaries, not ideologues to sustain a strike for six weeks that caused suffering for both working and non working people that ended in riots and did this essentially as a moral protest of the condition which they were in...these were working men who were embarrassed because they could not provide for their families. They had children with no shoes. They had wives who were sick and they couldn't provide medicine. They worked seven days a week, for twelve hours a day. It was morally reprehensible."

-**Tom Mitchell** Emeritus University Archivist, Brandon University, author of *When the State Trembled: How the Citizens' Committee of One Thousand Broke the Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).



How should the Winnipeg General Strike be remembered? Do you agree or disagree with Tom Mitchell's assessment?