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Bee Column
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LEGACY OF CENTURY-OLD SHIRTWAIST FACTORY FIRE ENDURES TODAY

Every year on Labor Day we pay special respect to the value of labor in our society. This year we should also particularly remember a tragedy that occurred in our state a century ago.

This March marked the 100th anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in New York City that killed 146 garment workers, most of them young immigrant women between the ages of 14 and 39. This tragic event was a pivotal moment in United States history, because from the ashes of the fire came the development of fire prevention legislation, factory safety laws and even the birth of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. The fire also led to the eventual adoption of the Occupational Safety and Health Standards Act (OSHA).

The employees of Triangle in 1911 worked under appalling conditions. Even worse, during working hours, managers would lock the doors to the stairwells and exits to keep workers from leaving during their shift. Because the workers were unable to escape the fire, many leapt to their deaths from the eighth, ninth and tenth floors of the building in midday as people watched in horror from the street.

Coincidentally, on the day before the catastrophe at Triangle, the New York State Court of Appeals had ruled that a workmen's compensation law, which had been passed in 1910, was unconstitutional because it interfered with the due process rights of employers to have their liability adjudicated in court. As a result of Triangle, and the justifiable outrage from the victims' survivors' inability to receive compensation, our state Constitution was amended in 1914 to include a workers' compensation law. By 1915 every highly industrialized state had some form of compensation laws; in 1900 there had been none.

Frances Perkins, who witnessed the Triangle fire, was instrumental in the analysis conducted by the New York State Factory Investigating Commission, which shed light on deplorable manufacturing workplace conditions. She later became the Commissioner of Labor in New York State and the nation's Secretary of Labor under Franklin D. Roosevelt. Perkins made it her mission to advocate for workers' rights, wage and hour laws and other labor protections. It wasn't until the Nixon administration, however, and after a series of other preventable tragedies, including an explosion at a coal mine in West Virginia that trapped and killed 78 miners, that the Federal Government enacted the Coal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1969 and the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970. At that time, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) was

created to conduct research and make recommendations for the prevention of work-related injury and illness.

In the ensuing 40 years, even greater progress has been made in reducing workplace injuries and deaths. Standards have been established to limit workers' exposure to toxic substances that can lead to diseases. As research and the effects of exposure to chemicals become known, our laws continue to evolve to further protect workers.

New York State continues to be committed to ensuring that preventable tragedies like the one at Triangle on March 25, 1911 never happen again. This Labor Day we should pause and reflect on the lessons and legacy of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.

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