A Factory Fire that Changed America

By Mel Lavine

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A century ago, 146 people, almost all of them women, died in a fire in New York City. It is known to history as the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire.

The workers were trapped on the three top floors of the 10-story loft building close to Washington Square. Doors to the stairwell were locked. There were no fire escapes. Some 100 were burned alive; the others jumped or fell to their deaths.

The conflagration was sparked by a cigarette and spread quickly.

In his fine 1989 book, “A First-Class Temperament: The Emergence of Franklin Roosevelt,” Geoffrey C. Ward wrote that there was a trial but no one was found legally at fault. The building’s owners were permitted to get about $65,000 in insurance. “Twenty-three families of the dead sued and received a total of $1,725 — $75 per life lost.”

The horrible deaths led to demands for reform. In those days, it was not uncommon for people to work 12-hour days, six days a week. Nonetheless, it would take years before legislation was enacted to regulate working hours and conditions, abolish child labor, establish building codes, and enact laws providing for workers’ compensation.

The urban New York Democrats — in particular Al Smith and Robert Wagner — took the lead in pressing for labor legislation. Franklin Roosevelt, a wealthy young state senator from an upstate rural district, did little, if anything, to advance the reform bills. His metamorphosis from one who showed little interest in the problems of the working class to one of its champions would come later in his life after his battle with polio. John Gunther, the journalist and author, would one day say of Roosevelt: “He did more for the under possessed than any American who ever lived.”

The fire — it occurred on March 25, 1911, a Saturday — was one of those events by which the

world keeps time. It influenced standards for the protection of public safety, health, the structural safety of buildings, and much else throughout the country. Two decades later, lessons learned from the Triangle Shirtwaist disaster would help shape Roosevelt's New Deal.

In the days when Social Security was being designed, FDR insisted on the placing of a tax for unemployment and old-age benefits. Several years later, in 1941, an expert on these matters suggested to Roosevelt that it might have been a mistake to levy those taxes during the depression.

Roosevelt said, "I guess you're right on the economics, but those taxes were never a problem of economics. They are politics all the way through. We put those payroll contributions there so as to give the contributors a legal, moral and political right to collect their pensions and the unemployment benefits. With those taxes in there, no damn politician can ever scrap my Social Security program…"

Maybe not. But, in our own time, Republicans, drunk with power, are resolved on cutting so-called entitlements, including Social Security, to the point of privatization.

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