

Clara Lemlich, "The Inside of a Shirtwaist Factory,"

Good Housekeeping 54 (March 1912), 367-369

Magazine article written by immigrant garment worker and labor leader, describing working conditions in New York City's garment factories and advocating votes for women



A photograph of Clara Lemlich taken at her desk at the address 230E 10th Street.

The Inside of a Shirtwaist Factory

An Appeal to Women Who Wear Choice and Beautiful Clothing

By

CLARA LEMLICH

EDITOR'S NOTE—Miss Lemlich is the remarkable young girl of New York's East Side who, with her eloquence and the power of her personality, led the great shirtwaist strike of a year ago. This appeal is expressed in her own words, whose simplicity and power afford a clue to the personality of the speaker. Her message is particularly interesting in view of the recent acquittal of the Triangle Shirtwaist manufacturers in whose building 130 girls lost their lives.

I THINK the women who buy and wear the beautiful clothes do not know how it is for the girl who makes them—what conditions she has—or they would care and would try to help her.

I will tell you about one place in which I work. It is on Fifth Avenue. It is a beautiful building on the outside, but this is the inside. He employs three hundred girls. In the room there are machines, partitions, that sort of thing—the space is all taken up. There is just room enough that a girl can handle her work. There is little air, for overhead the space is also taken up with the benches and table the girls used to eat

from once upon a time. But the boss he would put in more machines; it's costly to have another flat if he needs it, but it isn't costly to take away the tables so the girls shouldn't have anywhere to eat: then he puts in a hundred more machines and a hundred more girls.

They have a half an hour for lunch, but the lunches are not given out before twelve o'clock because it will take a few minutes of the boss's time. So there is a little room where the boy gives the lunches out; you don't go in the room; you just go to the door—the whole three hundred girls they crowd to that door to get their lunches, and it isn't

TLs Ed. Note: The rest of Lemlich's article, below, is edited for length. Full article can be accessed at http://hearth.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=hearth;rgn=full%20text;idno=6417403_1340_004;view=image;seq=65;cc=hearth;page=root;size=s;frm=frameset

. . . until fifteen or twenty minutes after twelve that they get their lunch. Some girl may get it the minute she comes, but it takes that long for the last one. There is only till half past twelve allowed, and when the bell rings every girl is to be at her place. . . . You have to eat near your machine.

The garments we work on are very beautiful, very costly—very delicate. Some of them sell for a hundred and fifty dollars. . . . You are in fear of spotting the garment If that happens . . . the first time you are charged for damages. If it happens twice, you are liable to be discharged. You cannot wash your hands after you eat. There is only one sink There are only two toilets, and these are cleaned but once a week. . . .

. . . you are expected to be in at eight o'clock. If you are three minutes late, you are locked out for half a day and lose a half day's pay. The working-girl is utterly dependent on her wages; she needs every cent she can earn; she can't afford to lose a day's wagesthe boss . . . makes them work night work three times a week, which makes an average of seventy-two or seventy-four hours a week.

There is one place that is a good deal worse than the Triangle. I know it. I was arrested once for giving out circulars there. It is still more crowded than the Triangle. And the bosses! They hire such people to drive you! It's a regular slave factory. Not only your hands and your time, but your mind is sold. Any man with radical ideas is thrown out. Why, anyone that will talk about unionism is discharged. He employs only foreign help—mostly Italians that can't speak the language.

He takes learners. The learners have to pay either five or ten dollars and then have to work two or three weeks . . . for no pay

I also worked in a factory that was called a model factory. . . . We want to organize the Italian girls. He said, "Go ahead and organize. I want my house organized!" But he tells the Italian foreman not to let the girls join; they will be discharged if they do. So when we try to talk to the girls . . . to tell them about the union, we could not get one girl. They seemed afraid to talk to us. When we went out on strike [in 1909], he told the Italian girls that the Jewish girls were striking because they hated Italians and didn't want to work with them. That was not true. . . .

I ask the health inspector to come; the sanitary conditions are so bad. You take a drink of water that is provided for the girls to drink. It makes you sick all day! The health inspector comes. He makes the boss have the place cleaned—that is once. Next week, it is as bad as ever. If the boss finds out who sent for the health inspector, I am discharged.

. . . did it not need the lives of a hundred and forty-six girls to show them that a loft needs more than one fire escape; that the doors should not be locked I think it will need the sacrifice of many more lives before, in New York, we have no more firetraps as working places for girls.

The manufacturer has a vote; the bosses have votes; the foremen have votes; the inspectors have votes. The working girl has no vote. When she asks to have the building in which she must work made clean and safe, the officials do not have to listen. When she asks not to work such long hours, they do not have to listen. The bosses can say to the officials: "Our votes put you in office. To do what these girls want would reduce our profits. Never mind what they say. They don't know what they are talking about. Anyway, it doesn't matter; they can't do anything."

That is true. For until the men in the Legislature at Albany represent her as well as the bosses and the foremen, she will not get justice; she will not get fair conditions. That is why the working-woman now says that she must have the vote.

DOCUMENT 7.3

Gilded Age/Progressive Era

**The Emergence of
Modern America
(1880-1930)**

Document Title:

“The Inside of a Shirtwaist Factory” *Good Housekeeping*, 1912

Document Type: Magazine article

BRIEF DESCRIPTION: Clara Lemlich, an immigrant garment worker and labor leader, describes the dangerous and dehumanizing working conditions in New York City’s garment industry and makes a case for woman suffrage.

Document Selection and Teaching Guide by: Robyn Muncy, Department of History, University of Maryland, College Park

SOURCING THE SOURCE

The author of this article, Clara Lemlich, emigrated with her parents from the Ukraine in 1903. The family fled Eastern Europe because of anti-Jewish pogroms. On arrival in New York City, the 17-year-old Clara went to work in the garment industry and soon began organizing for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. In 1909, she helped to lead a massive strike by 20,000-40,000 female garment workers in NYC, which improved conditions in many shops and sparked similar strikes elsewhere. Lemlich remained a major force in New York’s labor politics through the 1910s and in left-wing community organizing for decades thereafter.

Intended Audience: In this 1912 article, written two years after the strike and one year after the deadly fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, Lemlich shared the story of her work in the garment industry with middle-class women who read *Good Housekeeping* magazine. No doubt, she hoped these middle-class women might support wage-earning women’s efforts to improve their working conditions.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE

Historical Context:

Clara Lemlich, author of “The Inside of a Shirtwaist Factory,” was one of the 23 million immigrants drawn to the United States between 1880 and 1920. Like many other Eastern European emigrants of the period, Lemlich and her Ukrainian Jewish family were pushed out of their home by the threat of anti-Semitic violence and drawn to the US by the promise of relative safety and economic opportunity. The latter promise was rooted especially in the emergence of the US as a major industrial power during the late nineteenth century, a power dependent on a vast supply of workers to staff the factories, mines, and mills that, by 1910, made the United States the world’s greatest industrial producer.

Lemlich belonged to the enormous and diverse working class created in the United States by the shift from entrepreneurial capitalism to corporate capitalism, from craft to mass production, and her experience exemplified that of millions of industrial workers in the early twentieth century. US industry’s insatiable need for workers did not translate into humane working conditions for factory operatives or miners. Instead, industrial enterprises, especially those in highly competitive industries like garment making, worked laborers as many hours a day as they could at the lowest possible wages. The garment industry, which burgeoned in most major US cities, employed women and girls

to do much of their sewing. And, its smallish enterprises were notorious for cramming too many workers into dank basements or stuffy tenements where workers sweltered in the summer and shivered in the winter. The working conditions that Lemlich described were not unusual.

In 1909-10, tens of thousands of women and girls in New York City's garment industry shocked the nation, including men in their own communities, by staging a strike that demanded, among other things, higher wages, shorter hours, and reduction of fire hazards as well as union recognition. Lemlich's fiery oratory helped to ignite that strike, and it was sustained by her organizational savvy as well as that of such colleagues as Rose Schneiderman and Pauline Newman, who were also young garment workers from Eastern Europe. During the several months of the strike, pickets from both Eastern Europe and Italy faced violence from police but won support from many middle-class and elite women, some of whom walked picket lines with the strikers and aided them in the courts when they were arrested. At the conclusion of the strike, many garment shops met some, **but not all**, of the workers' demands. Beyond that, the strike represented a turning point in the labor movement: garment workers from Chicago to Philadelphia were so inspired that by 1919 around half of workers in the garment industry were unionized, and women were more visible than before in the union movement.

In 1911, the profound need for the safety provisions workers did not win in 1909-10 was made horrifyingly clear. One of New York City's largest garment factories—the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in Greenwich Village—caught fire, and 146 workers died in the conflagration, most of them women and girls. Many jumped to their deaths from upper stories of the imposing brick building. As the editor's preface to Lemlich's article mentioned, the owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory were not held legally responsible for those deaths. Nevertheless, the fire eventually led to over 50 factory safety laws in New York.

Those laws represented a victory of Progressive reform. The Progressive movement began as a diffuse set of local reform efforts in the late nineteenth century, generated by middle-class women and men aghast at the human suffering created by the expansion of industrial corporations. These reformers sought to ameliorate the worst effects of industrialization through public policies such as minimum wage laws, maximum hour laws, and factory safety laws. In 1903, some middle-class reformers, including Jane Addams, founder of Hull House in Chicago, and Lillian Wald, head of the Henry Street Settlement in New York City, joined with labor leaders, including Leonora O'Reilly and Mary Kenny O'Sullivan, to form the National Women's Trade Union League. The National WTUL and state WTUL chapters brought together working-class and middle-class women determined to improve industrial working conditions. The WTUL used tactics of both unionization and legislation. This vital cross-class alliance, though fraught with tension, was one of the reasons that the editors at *Good Housekeeping* could imagine that their readers might be receptive to Lemlich's essay, and Lemlich could think it worth her time to reach out through this mass-circulated magazine to women whose lives were so different from her own.

Lemlich concluded her article with a powerful argument for women's enfranchisement at a moment when the woman suffrage campaign had grown into a mass movement. Although the woman suffrage campaign had begun in the mid-nineteenth century, it expanded dramatically in the early twentieth precisely because of the emergence of corporate capitalism. Changes wrought by the reorganization of the US economy drew millions of women into the wage-labor force, prompting women like Lemlich to see the vote as necessary to the improvement of their own working conditions. Those same economic changes prompted millions of middle-class women to see the vote as crucial to protecting their families from such corporate irresponsibility as the sale of impure food and drugs as well as to preventing child labor and limiting the working hours of wage-earning mothers. The inequalities of wealth and power created by the emergence of corporate capitalism in the late nineteenth century spurred millions of both working-class and middle-class women to participate in progressive reform initiatives for which they came to see their own enfranchisement as a necessity. Ultimately, Lemlich's argument was not in vain. In 1917, New York fully enfranchised its women, a victory important to passage and ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment shortly thereafter.

□ **Meaning and Significance of the Source**

Lemlich's article is significant for illuminating the meanings of industrialization in the early twentieth century. It shows especially that industrialization in its corporate form created a massive and diverse working class in the United States. The article demonstrates further the meanings of that diversity: When Lemlich writes "When we went out on strike [in 1909], he told the Italian girls that the Jewish girls were striking because they hated Italians and didn't want

to work with them. That was not true,” she is explaining how employers used ethnic and religious differences to pit workers against each other in order to prevent collective action among them. But workers sometimes overcame their differences to improve the conditions of their labor. The article reveals what those conditions were. Lemlich describes conditions that would be horrifying if forced on *Good Housekeeping’s* middle-class women readers: no clean air; garment workers eating at the machines where beautiful dresses are sewn, with no ability to wash their hands; workers forced to lose a half- to full-day’s pay for being three minutes late; 72-hour work-weeks; no safe water to drink; lack of adequate fire escapes and sprinklers; and bosses who drive workers like a “regular slave factory. Not only your hands and your time, but your mind is sold.”

At the same time, Lemlich reveals how some workers responded (bravely risking dismissal to pass out union leaflets, calling in health inspectors), thus explaining both the growth of the labor movement and the emergence of Progressive reform in the early twentieth century, the latter a political movement that aimed to enlist governmental power as a counterbalance to the power of corporations on behalf of workers and consumers.

The last two paragraphs of Lemlich’s piece show, moreover, why working-class women joined the suffrage movement and by doing so help to explain why woman suffrage achieved its greatest victories in the early twentieth century. She recounts the power of manufacturers, bosses, foremen, and inspectors, exposing the reality that officials “do not have to listen” to working women who cannot vote, and concluding that “until the men in the Legislature at Albany represent her as well as the bosses and the foremen, she will not get justice; she will not get fair conditions. That is why the working-woman now says that she must have the vote.”

GLOSSARY

Enfranchisement – Gaining the right to vote.

Foremen—Supervisors who directly oversaw workers in the factory.

Garment industry – Collection of enterprises (businesses) that manufacture clothing.

Learners—Unskilled workers yet to be taught how to use the machines and other work processes in a garment factory.

Legislature at Albany—Albany, New York was where the New York state legislature met.

Lower East Side—Densely populated immigrant neighborhood in New York City.

Shirtwaist—Version of a men’s shirt tailored for women; a popular fashion worn by middle- and upper-class women in the early 20th century.

Pogroms – Organized massacres of particular ethnic groups. In this case, the terms refers to Tsarist Russian government sanctioned, community-wide attacks against Russian Jews. Between 1880-1924 millions of Jews fleeing pogroms and repression in Russia and Eastern European immigrated to the United States.

Progressive reform—a political movement that aimed to use public policy at the local, state, and federal level as a counterbalance to the power of corporations on behalf of workers and consumers.

The Triangle—Triangle Shirtwaist factory was a modern shirtwaist factory in Greenwich Village, a neighborhood in New York City, where 146 workers, mostly women and girls, were killed in an infamous fire in 1911.

QUESTIONS -- DISCUSSION POINTS

Source Specific

- Why did Clara Lemlich believe that working women needed the vote?

- Why do you think the labor leader Clara Lemlich agreed to write this article for a middle-class women’s magazine, and how did she appeal to her middle-class readers?
- How did employers maintain power over workers in New York’s garment industry?

Historical Era – essential questions

- From Lemlich’s description of conditions in New York’s garment industry, what do think industrialization meant for women workers? For instance, was wage-earning liberating for young immigrant women? An opportunity? A necessity? Oppressive? Some of each? Explain.

Labor & Working Class History – essential questions

- In what ways did wage-earning women attempt to improve their working conditions in the Progressive Era?
- Why was it hard for wage-earning women to unionize in the early twentieth century? What strategies did employers use to prevent workers from organizing?
- What conditions prompted workers to strike and unionize in the early twentieth century?

CITATION & FAIR USE

Lemlich, Clara. “The Inside of a Shirtwaist Factory,” *Good Housekeeping* 53, (March 1912), 367-369.
 Edited for LAWCHA by Robyn Muncy. This piece is in the public domain because it was published in 1912.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

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CURRICULAR & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONNECTIONS

Curricular Connections:

NCHS ERA 6 Standard 3: The rise of the American labor movement and how political issues reflected social and economic changes.

This document reveals how dangerous and exploitative working conditions led immigrant garment workers to organize into a trade union, as well as for women labor leaders to seek alliance and support from middle-class women for workplace and political reform.

NCHS US ERA 7 Standard 1: How Progressives and others addressed problems of industrial capitalism, urbanization and political corruption.

This document reveals the ways in which industrial capitalism created the working conditions that motivated Progressives to seek both protective legislation to regulate business and women's enfranchisement.

Common Core Standards: <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/>

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.rh.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5 Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6 Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8 Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.