

LESSON 6: THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FIRE

Student Handout 3

OUTCOMES

The reformers first tried option 1. They went to the New York (state) Legislature to tell the legislators they wanted to set up the independent commission headed by the “finest people” in the state. But when they talked with Al Smith, a member of the legislature, he advised them to let the legislature set up the investigating commission. He told the group the “finest people” in the state had too many other interests and wouldn’t be able to focus on this issue long enough to make it successful; even if they did have the time or interest, these people had too little influence over lawmakers. The reformers didn’t like Smith’s recommendation, but they didn’t have much of an alternative, so they accepted his suggestion.

That meant the reformers ended up choosing option 2, which worked very well. Three months after the fire, the governor of New York signed a law creating the Factory Investigating Committee. The committee, composed of five members from the legislature and four appointed by the governor, had sweeping powers. Robert Wagner and Al Smith ran the committee, which required factories to make significant safety improvements, including mandatory sprinklers and fire doors. The committee also spread its New Deal philosophy—that of protecting workers and the downtrodden—to the Democratic Party. The formation of the Factory Investigating Committee is a very important event in U.S. 20th-century history, as it ensured significant improvements in workplace conditions.

Option 3 didn’t work out. The two factory owners, Blanck and Harris, were found not guilty of manslaughter. The owners hadn’t broken any laws concerning fire safety. They had a fire escape (though it proved inadequate) and weren’t required by law to have fire doors or sprinklers. So it all came down to the locked door. The defendants had the best lawyer in New York take their case. In a previous court case, the judge had been accused of not having done enough as a government official to protect workers in a previous fire. He thought these suits were wrong. He told the jury that they had to find that Blanck and Harris knew the escape door was locked *at the time of the fire* in order to render a guilty verdict. Since there was no evidence as to what the owners knew at the time of the fire, the jury had to find the defendants not guilty. Some economists believe liability lawsuits are the best way to bring about safety precautions. Faced with the possibility of large monetary judgments or criminal punishments, businesses are likely to take the necessary actions to prevent future liabilities. This didn’t happen in this case, however, and the owners got off the hook without paying a dime.

Option 4 isn’t helpful, since the owners hadn’t broken any safety laws. Safety laws are under the jurisdiction of the state legislature, not the city or federal governments, so it makes sense to go to the state legislature.

Option 5 ended up incorporated by the commission formed under option 2. The commission published names of companies that weren't meeting safety standards. The boycotts that followed influenced many of the companies to reform.

Option 6 is socialism and wasn't tried. (Is the capitalist system so weighted toward owners that it must be overthrown?)

Option 7 was accomplished through favorable legislation, such as the Wagner Act passed during the New Deal. Some labor leaders felt that building a stronger labor movement was the best way to achieve safer conditions for workers. They felt that forming stronger unions would be much more effective than passing laws that businesses would somehow avoid or get around.