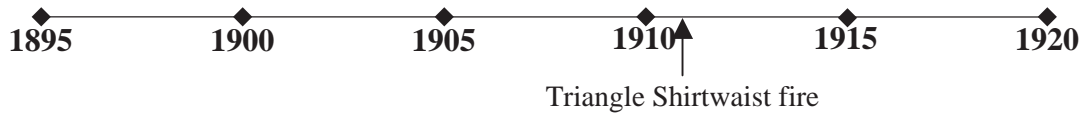


LESSON 6: THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FIRE

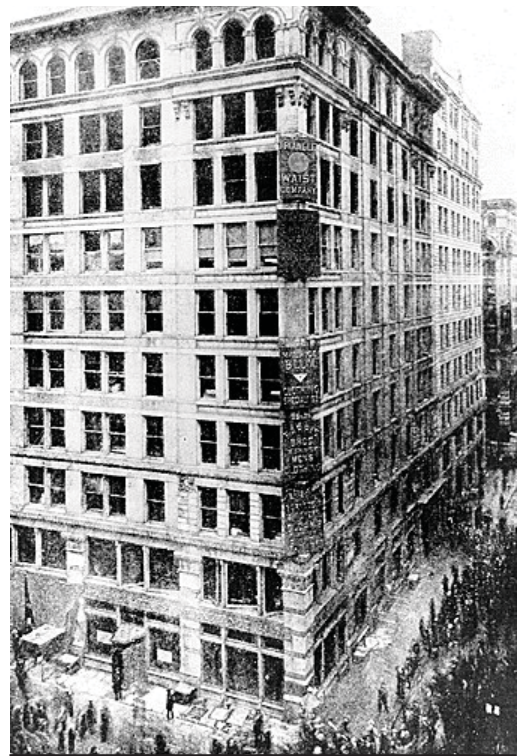
Student Handout 1



PROBLEM

The year is 1912, and you are Frances Perkins, a leader of a reform group. For years you and many other reformers have been fighting to improve working conditions in the New York City garment industry. Many employees work long hours for low pay in overcrowded and dangerous conditions. Reformers have been fighting to shorten working hours and raise safety requirements. In the sweatshop era of the 1880s and 1890s, many workers cut and sewed cloth 12–15 hours per day, every day of the week, in poorly lit, poorly ventilated tenements, while their pay was constantly driven down. Now more factories are using power-driven sewing machines. The large number of workers in these factories has led to more union activity and more strikes. Conditions are still unsafe.

A large strike took place in 1909, but it didn't prevent one of the greatest disasters in U.S. labor history. On March 25, 1911, just before closing time, a fire broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company that resulted in the death of more than 140 workers. Most workers on the eighth and tenth floors escaped, but many on the ninth floor were trapped because one of the doors was locked to prevent workers from stealing cloth and carrying it out through the door. The locked door trapped many workers as the flames quickly spread across the cloth-strewn floor. Many workers were overcome by the smoke; others succumbed to the flames. Still others fell to their deaths when the fire escape collapsed. Some pried open the elevator doors and jumped to their deaths down the elevator shaft. Eventually, so many bodies accumulated on top of the elevator car that it couldn't go back up to rescue anyone. One man helped several women to a windowsill, held them away from the building, and then dropped them. He embraced and kissed a fourth girl who was apparently his sweetheart, dropped her, and then jumped as well. You,



The building that housed the factory (note Triangle sign at eighth storey)

Frances Perkins, saw this happen, since you live only a block from the factory. But you and the other onlookers were helpless to stop the tragedy.

The fire department saved many people, but their ladders could only reach as high as the sixth floor. Obviously, the fire escape was inadequate, and the factory lacked automatic sprinklers and fire doors, both of which are in widespread use but aren't required by law.

Middle-class reformers in New York City want to do something to reform the city's factories. Generate a list of at least five options to prevent this kind of tragedy from occurring again, and explain which ones you would put into action.



Bodies of Triangle workers lie on the sidewalk outside of the factory