

LESSON 6: THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FIRE

Student Handout 4

Primary Source: Speech by Rose Schneiderman on April 3, 1911, at the Metropolitan Opera House (as reported in the *New York Times*)

“I would be a traitor to these poor burned bodies if I came here to talk good fellowship. We have tried you good people of the public and we have found you wanting. The old Inquisition had its rack and its thumbscrews and its instruments of torture with iron teeth. We know what these things are to-day: the iron teeth are our necessities, the thumbscrews, the high powered and swift machinery close to which we must work, and the rack is here in the firetrap structures that will destroy us the minute they catch on fire.

This is not the first time girls have been burned alive in the city. Every week I must learn of the untimely death of one of my sister workers. Every year thousands of us are maimed. The life of men and women is so cheap and property is so sacred. There are so many of us for one job it matters little if 143 of us are burned to death.



Rose Schneiderman

We have tried you citizens; we are trying you now, and you have a couple of dollars for the sorrowing mothers and brothers and sisters by way of a charity gift. But every time the workers come out in the only way they know to protest against conditions which are unbearable the strong hand of the law is allowed to press down upon us.

Public officials have only words of warning to us—warning that we must be intensely orderly and must be intensely peaceable, and they have the workhouse just back of all their warnings. The strong hand of the law beats us back when we rise against the conditions that make life unbearable.

I can't talk fellowship to you who are gathered here. Too much blood has been spilled. I know from my experience it is up to the working people to save themselves. The only way they can save themselves is by a strong working-class movement.”

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What caused the tragedy of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, according to Schneiderman?
2. What does she say should be done, and why does she think this the best option?
3. Which of the seven options from Handout 2 is she recommending?