

La testimonianza in lingua inglese dell'accaduto, della commissione d'indagine che ne seguì, delle leggi che migliorarono la condizione di donne e minori

Conferenza di Frances Perkins, Collection / 3047, 30 settembre 1964, Cornell University, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Ithaca, NY.

“. . . Al Smith had never heard the words New Deal, he was governor of the State of New York, he had been in the legislature before. As a member of the legislature he was the majority leader he could have appointed anybody he wanted to the factory investigating commission, but he had himself appointed to the factory investigating commission so that he could see with his own eyes what was going on. As he said, this is too raw, we can't have any mistakes here, we can't make any blunders and I am going to sit there myself, I am not going to turn this over to somebody else. So he appointed himself to the factory investigating commission in 1911 which was the year of the great Triangle Fire in New York City, a terrible industrial accident which burned out the contents of a 9th and 10th floor loft building factory where they made light cotton shirt waists for women.

It caught on fire and the blaze spread very rapidly. There was only one means of exit available, the other two means of exits were the elevator which was ablaze almost immediately as the flames got into this open shaft and spread from floor to floor and the second exit was locked. It was an exit to the roof, not a very good means of exit at best but it would have saved most of the people in that building if it had not been locked.

It had been locked by the employer himself because he feared that on a Saturday afternoon which he was working just before Easter on a lot of shirtwaists for the market, he feared that some of the people in the shop might stroll out over the roof exit with a few shirtwaists rolled up under their jackets or that somebody might come in and take a few shirtwaists. In other words, he was - I only know what he said on the stand - he was afraid he would be robbed either by his employees or by the outsider. Not so much by the outsider, mostly afraid of his employees. I remember the judge in righteous indignation reproached him for his attitude toward his employees. It may have been a perfectly legitimate attitude. He may have lost goods that way, one

doesn't know, but it was at least bad judgement to tell it to the judge on that particular occasion.

At any rate, this was a terrible accident; 147 young people, they were all young men and women, were killed, lost their lives and a number of others were badly injured. Some of them were injured after the fire in the elevator shaft had gone out. Of course the boys that ran the elevator had gone, they had fled. Some of the people tried to get out by jumping into the elevator shaft and grabbing the cables and letting themselves down that way. Some of them fell, some of them were awkward and didn't grab right, don't you know, and couldn't hold on. Some of them merely blistered their hands, took the skin and flesh off their hands coming down on the cables and there were a number of people sadly injured. Everybody who jumped, and a good many did jump from the 9th and 10th floors, was killed. The other people who died were all people who were burned or smothered by the smoke in the factory itself.

This made a terrible impression on the people of the State of New York. I can't begin to tell you how disturbed the people were everywhere. It was as though we had all done something wrong. It shouldn't have been. We were sorry. Mea culpa! Mea culpa! We didn't want it that way. We hadn't intended to have 147 girls and boys killed in a factory. It was a terrible thing for the people of the City of New York and the State of New York to face.

I remember that, the accident happened on a Saturday, I happened to have been visiting a friend on the other side of the park and we heard the engines and we heard the screams and rushed out and rushed over where we could see what the trouble was. We could see this building from Washington Square and the people had just begun to jump when we got there. They had been holding until that time, standing in the windowsills, being crowded by others behind them, the fire pressing closer and closer, the smoke closer and closer. Finally the men were trying to get out this thing that the firemen carry with them, a net to catch people if they do jump, there were trying to get that out and they couldn't wait any longer. They began to jump. The window was too crowded and they would jump and they hit the sidewalk. The net broke, they _____ a terrible distance, the weight of the bodies was so great, at the speed at which they were traveling that they broke through the net. Every one of them was killed, everybody who jumped was killed. It was a horrifying spectacle. We had our dose of it that night and felt as though we had been part of it all. The next

day people, as they heard about it in all parts of the city, they began to mull around and gather and talk.

I remember that Al Smith, who was not a governor at that time but a member of the legislature, a majority leader in the assembly, found that many many of these young people were residents of the same district he was a resident of and he did the most natural and humane thing. As he said: Why I did it just as I would if they had died of anything else, you know, you go to see the father and mother to try to help them. He went to the places where they lived; he went to the tenement they had occupied to see their father and mother and tell them how sorry he was or their husband, as the case might be, or their wife, to tell them of his sympathy and grief. It was a human, decent, natural thing to do and it was a sight he never forgot. It burned it into his mind. He also got to the morgue, I remember, at just the time when the survivors were being allowed to sort out the dead and see who was theirs and who could be recognized. He went along with a number of others to the morgue to support and help, you know, the old father or the sorrowing sister, do her terrible picking out.

This was the kind of shock that we all had and the next Sunday a meeting was called in the Metropolitan Opera House, which was a large available place and thereby this time we got a little sense of organization of something must be done. We've got to turn this into some kind of victory, some kind of constructive action, so this meeting voted to accept a sum of money of \$25,000 which Mr. R. Fulton Cutting had telegraphed. He was ill in bed, somewhere in South Carolina with pneumonia, but he had telegraphed to one of the people who was getting up the meeting: "You must have a meeting. The citizens must take action about this. The citizens must do something and to start the ball rolling I will contribute \$25,000 now and others will give more to start it. We must stop it. We must make sure that this kind of thing can never happen again in New York City, in New York State," I think he said.

So almost immediately at this meeting, people spoke, and I'll never forget this was the first time I ever had heard Rose Schneiderman speak. I think it is the first time I had ever seen her, as a matter of fact. She was an unknown little girl, a little red headed girl; she couldn't have been, - well, she couldn't have come up to my shoulder. Very small type but with red hair, fiery red hair, and blazing eyes and pretty too, I mean. She had a ___ but a voice that carried in

the Metropolitan Opera House. Wonderful what a speech she made, and I remember how moved we all were by this girl who was a member of that union, you see, the Ladies' Dress and Waist Union. She was a member of that union and most, not all of these members because it wasn't a union shop, not all of these members but many of them were members of her union. Anyhow they were all eligible for membership in her union, and she took them all in with the most beautiful speech. I think it still exists. I had a copy of it once and I put it in somebody's archives somewhere. But it was - it was a most moving speech and should be looked at because this was what a young girl, not in this country very many years, but she spoke very good English, she had had good training somewhere and she spoke without a trace of an accent. She made a remarkable speech which really stirred people.

At any rate that was that and we decided to, we appointed a committee of course to carry on. We decided to ask the legislature to create a commission and this is where Al Smith came in. I went to see him and another woman went with me, and one man. We went privately, we didn't want to have it known that we were going to see him about this, but I went to ask him his advice. Because his advice was always good and if you didn't ask it, he didn't like it. But it was always good, you could afford to take it. So I went to ask his advice and he gave me the most useful piece of advice, I guess, we've ever had. It was this: "You're going to form a commission, that's all right, that's a good idea, but let me tell you. Don't get started asking the governor to appoint a commission, or anybody else to appoint a commission of citizens. Citizens is all right," he said, "but they have got to be where they belong. If you want to get anything done, you got to have this, a legislative commission. If the legislature does it, the legislature will be proud of it, the legislature will listen to their report and the legislature will do something about it. But if the governor appoints the commission, they will just give it the cold shoulder; they won't pay any attention to it."

Well I thought that was absurd at the time. But I learned by long experience that it is not absurd; it's the way to do it. This is the way that the legislatures are persuaded to act. They appear to have taken the lead and once they have said, "All right go ahead," then it's their responsibility to do something about it, and the New York State legislature did exactly that. They appointed the commission, they asked the governor to appoint two members - two citizens to

represent him, so we had citizen representation and we had a citizen council, Abraham Elkus and the two citizens were Mary Drier, a devoted, what would be called a New Dealer today, but a devoted, you know, public, private servant, interested in and devoted to the promotion of the welfare of the people. Abraham Elkus was the counsel, a man who was not a government man, but was a governor's appointment, and the others were members of the Senate and members of the Assembly, and we had both Democrats and Republicans in equal numbers. "That is the way to do it," said Al. "That's the way to do it because you can't get these laws through unless you have, you know the support of both of them."

So we proceeded and it proved to be a most educative experience. This factory investigating commission was continued from year to year until it sat for four years and its report, is a, a - I think its got seven volumes. It's as long as that on my shelf, and it's in great detail, it's all there, the whole report is there, the recommendations, the testimony. We went all over the state. I was a young person then and certainly not fit for service on any super commission but I was the chief - I was the investigator, and in charge of the investigations and this was an extraordinary opportunity, you see, to get into factories to make a report and be sure it was going to be heard.

Because you made the report publicly to the governor or to the commission which sat every Saturday morning for four years, except I guess in mid summer we adjourned, something of that sort. But it was a very very useful commission while they were at it. Although their commission was to devise ways and means to prevent accidents by fire in the State of New York, we went on and kept expanding the function of the commission 'till it came to be the report on sanitary conditions and to provide for their removal and to report all kinds of unsafe conditions and then to report all kinds of human conditions that were unfavorable to the employees, including long hours, including low wages, including the labor of children, including the overwork of women, including homework put out by the factories to be taken home by the women. It included almost everything you could think of that had been in agitation for years. We were authorized to investigate and report and recommend action on all these subjects. I may say we did.

So that beginning with that report coming in as it did in 1915, it was laid on the table before the legislature, and by this time, Al Smith was the speaker of

the House and well on the way to be governor. We had a very favorable audience and much of the legislation was enacted into law, oh, within a couple of years, I mean, you know, hearings and so forth, and bringing up the supporters, and modifying the bill.

So that we really got a big draw out of that one episode, which, as I have thought of it afterwards, seems in some way to have paid the debt society owed to those children, those young people who lost their lives in the Triangle Fire. It's their contribution to the people of New York that we have this really magnificent series of legislative acts to protect and improve the administration of the law regarding the protection of work people in the City of - in the State of New York. . . ."

Lectures of Frances Perkins, Collection /3047, 30 September 1964, Cornell University, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Ithaca, NY.