

RS#05: Frances Perkins Lecture

(Excerpt from lecture given September 30, 1964 by Frances Perkins.)

Frances Perkins was across the street on the day of the fire and witnessed nearly the entire tragedy. She said it transformed her life and she became a dedicated labor activist. She was appointed to the Fire Investigating Commission and declared sweatshops throughout New York City “death traps.” Later, she would become the first woman to serve on a president’s cabinet as Secretary of Labor under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. This speech was given 53 years after the fire.

It [the factory] 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 judgment 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.

Perkins, Francis. *The Triangle Factory Fire*.

<http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/primary/lectures/FrancesPerkinsLecture.html> (accessed June 29, 2010).