

Sweatshops in the United States?

Tessa Devins

PRE-READING: Read the definitions of these terms and share what you know about them:

SWEATSHOPS: See the box on the next page.

INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION: This was a period of massive change in U.S. history when the economy moved from manual labor to machine-based manufacturing.

MINIMUM WAGE: In the 1930s, the U.S. government made a law saying that employers had to pay a minimum of 25 cents per hour. Currently, the federal minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour. States are allowed to set their own minimum wage as long as it is higher than the federal minimum wage. In Massachusetts, the minimum wage is \$8.00.

OVERTIME LAWS: In the 1930s, the labor movement fought for the 40-hour work week and won it when The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1937 was passed. Non-exempt employees who work more than 40 hours in a week, should be paid time-and-a-half for the overtime hours.

The word sweatshop brings to mind a hot, dark, and overcrowded room where manufacturing takes place. Sweatshops are factories that make clothing, shoes, and toys. We have had them in the United States since the industrial revolution, and we still have them now.

There is a famous story about a sweatshop called the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. It was a factory that employed 500 workers – mostly young women immigrants. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory was in an old building with small dark rooms. The supervisors locked the doors so that the workers could not leave.

On March 25, 1911, the building caught fire on the 9th floor and 146 people died. Many people chose to jump out of the window rather than die in the flames.



Mural by Ernest Fiene (1938) for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union

Three weeks after the fire, the owners of the building were acquitted of any charges. In a second trial, eight months after the fire, the owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory were fined \$75, which they had to pay to each family that had a member that died.

Garment workers' unions have fought for better conditions, and people have fought for better labor laws that protect workers. Still, many garment factories today don't obey the law. Recent studies made by the U.S. Department of Labor found that 67% of garment factories in Los Angeles and 63% in New York City violate minimum wage and overtime laws. In Los Angeles, immigrants were paid 69 cents an hour and threatened with rape and murder.

More action should be taken to make sweatshops comply with labor laws because too many people have suffered.



From the documentary "Made in LA," which tells the story of Los Angeles sweatshop workers organizing for their rights <www.madeinla.com>.

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Sources: <www.corpwatch.org>; <www.heartsandminds.org>.