

The dawn of reformism in the US

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Triangle: The Fire that Changed America, by David Von Drehle (2003, Atlantic Monthly Press, New York)

On March 25, 1911, in the heart of the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City, the Triangle Shirtwaist factory burned, claiming the lives of 146 workers. The Triangle Fire remains one of the most horrific disasters in US workplace history.

Washington Post writer David Von Drehle brings this tragedy back to public consciousness with his recently released *Triangle: The Fire that Changed America*. Based on extensive research of newspapers, court records, and historians' treatments of the subject, he offers a vivid recounting of the Triangle Fire and its aftermath. The work is well worth reading and offers the opportunity for serious historical discussion.

Von Drehle views the Triangle Fire as a cause in the dawning of the reformist era in US history, arguing that a new alliance emerged in the disaster's wake between urban Democratic machine politicians at Tammany Hall, represented by Al Smith (later governor of New York and Democratic presidential nominee) and Robert Wagner (author of the Wagner Act of 1935) and Progressive reformers, represented by Frances Perkins (secretary of labor under Franklin Roosevelt). This urban-liberal political alliance played an important role in the emergence of the FDR's New Deal during the 1930s and was a key element of twentieth century US liberalism in general.

For Von Drehle, the actions of Perkins, Smith and Wagner, coupled with the changed sympathies of a vaguely defined "public," brought on reformism and gave the Democratic Party its twentieth century character. However, though the work of these politically far-sighted individuals undoubtedly played a significant role in shaping reformism as it came to exist in the US, Von Drehle emphasizes it to the near-exclusion of the decisive factor that compelled the reformists' efforts: the growing threat of socialism.

Located on the eighth, ninth and tenth floors of the Asch Building, the Triangle factory proved a deathtrap for its workers, mostly young or teenage women of Jewish and Italian immigrant families. Littered with flammable scraps from the production process, the fire spread from its starting point in a bin on the eighth floor to the tenth floor in a matter of minutes.

Based on the testimony of survivors and witnesses, Von Drehle reconstructs the scene of the fire as it raged from floor to floor, the panic and heroism of the factory's workers, and the valiant and vain attempts at rescue.

Most workers on the eighth floor were able to reach safety by evacuating via staircases or elevators, and most on the tenth floor—including the factory's wealthy owners Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, the so-called "Shirtwaist Kings"—were able to flee to safety by way of elevators or by harrowing escape to the rooftop of a nearby building.

However, several factors coalesced to doom the majority of the workers on the ninth floor. All of these could have been easily avoided.

To prevent "theft" of the shirtwaists by the women who made them—a practice that amounted to no more than \$15 lost to the owners per year—Blanck and Harris allowed workers to exit through only one door,

where police could inspect the contents of their handbags and coats. Scores of workers died as they vainly attempted to pry open a door that, had it been unlocked, would have allowed for an easy escape. After the fire, a number of charred remains were found in the vicinity of the door, its lock still in place.

An inadequate fire escape led to many more deaths. The escape ran down a small open court in the center of the building but ended in mid-air, more than three stories above a basement skylight. The number of workers clinging to the ladder grew until it finally gave way, depositing broken and burnt bodies amidst twisted metal and shattered glass.

The New York City Fire Department, then considered the best and most technologically advanced in the world, was unable to rescue the ninth floor workers. Those firefighters who attempted to enter through the building were blocked by the blaze that had, by the time of their arrival, consumed the entire eighth floor.

Meanwhile, the Department's equipment proved woefully inadequate. Fire ladders were hoisted upwards toward the cornered workers, who were still calling for help from the ninth floor windows. But the ladders could reach only as high as the seventh floor.

Other firefighters unfurled nets to catch those jumping from the ninth floor. But the nets were overwhelmed by their assignment. Due to the distance of the fall and the number of jumpers, none who attempted this method of escape survived. Fire officials quickly ordered the nets away.

For the onlookers who gathered to watch the tragedy unfold from the street, the most chilling spectacle, however, was the sight of dozens of workers jumping toward their deaths to avoid the fire. Bodies littered the Manhattan streets below Triangle.

Factory owners Blanck and Harris were later completely exonerated for the deaths of the workers, in a trial Von Drehle covers in his final chapter. The parvenu factory owners, themselves of Jewish immigrant background, hired New York City's most prestigious and highly paid attorney for their defense, Max Steuer. But most important for their acquittal were the actions of the presiding judge, Thomas C.T. Crain, who gave jurors instructions that all but ensured the not guilty verdict.

The author's treatment of the factory women exhibits a commendable level of sensitivity. For example, he tracks the factory's Jewish and Italian workers back to Russia's Jewish Pale and Italy's *Mezzogiorno*, considering some of the major economic and political changes that propelled them to New York City. Von Drehle humanizes these major transitions by offering case studies of two Triangle workers whose lives straddled both old country and new, and who would both eventually die in the Triangle Fire.

Von Drehle likewise paints brief portraits of a number of figures who had some association with the disaster or its aftermath. He does so not solely to add color or "human interest" to the story, but to personalize some of the historical forces at play in this episode of US history, such as Progressive era reformism and Democratic machine politics symbolized by Tammany Hall.

Von Drehle approvingly notes the belated efforts of the corrupt Democratic regime at Tammany Hall, in the wake of Triangle, to embrace social reform as a keystone in their growing alliance with middle-class

progressives. This is portrayed as a noble and shrewd cooperation, ultimately based on a series of decisions made by a few outstanding individuals such as Perkins, Smith and Wagner. However, progressivism specifically, and reformism more generally, are much more complicated in their origins.

The vague political tendency known as “progressivism” was not merely the innovative new idea of crusading middle-class reformers, but the broad and eclectic reformist response in the US to the profound social crisis of the late nineteenth century. The US—like other industrialized states—had witnessed a protracted deflationary period, lasting from 1873 to 1897 and enveloping two depressions, brought on by constantly diminishing profit returns on the growth of commodity production. The capitalism of the era was characterized by cutthroat competition, dominated by “robber barons” such as Vanderbilt, Gould, Carnegie and Rockefeller.

Steadily falling profit rates intensified the class struggle in the US, resulting in a period of heightened industrial unrest. It is enough to list the names of only a few of the more famous workers’ struggles: the Great Railway Strike of 1877, Haymarket, Homestead, Pullman. Simultaneously, the immense deflationary pressures on farmers had brought about a significant, but ultimately futile, political challenge to the two-party system in the guise of Populism, which was absorbed by the Democratic Party in 1896.

The political establishment was virtually immobilized by the magnitude of the crisis: between the split Hayes-Tilden election of 1876 and until Republican William McKinley’s drubbing of William Jennings Bryan’s Democratic/Populist fusion ticket in 1896, presidential elections were decided by razor-thin margins. More troublesome, a broad chasm separated the political establishment from the growing working class. This was confounded by a cultural distance; the great cities such as New York, Chicago and Boston were overwhelmingly populated by foreign-born or the children of foreign-born, and it was the despised political machine that exercised control in the metropolis.

The Progressive era was the age in which US elites sought to right the capitalist ship by various means, both political and economic. The most characteristic feature of the period was the ascendance of finance capital and the full-fledged emergence of monopoly capitalism. Perhaps the best-known instance of this is the transformation of Andrew Carnegie’s steel empire, along with several lesser competitors, into the massive US Steel, dominated by financiers led by J.P. Morgan.

As Lenin showed, the transition to monopoly capitalism led inexorably to imperialism. Upon solidifying control of domestic markets, finance capital was compelled to seek markets for its goods overseas. Indeed, by setting up and winning a war with the beleaguered Spanish Empire (which resulted in US control over Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines), through the acquisition of Hawaii and other Pacific possessions, and through the construction of the Panama Canal, the US had emerged as an imperialist power by the turn of the century.

The notion that progressivism generally acted to combat the power of big business—a misapprehension that Von Drehle seems to operate under—is simply incorrect. Whatever the intentions of this or that individual reformer, Progressive era economic reforms tended to cement, rather than limit, the consolidation of this new economic order.

However, monopolization of industry, the implementation of new production techniques, the return of business prosperity after 1897 and the turn toward imperialism did not solve the intractable problems of capitalism. After defeating Spain, the US attempt at colonization in the Philippines faced a guerrilla insurgency that required a brutal and costly three-year war to quell, resulting in the deaths of more than 200,000 Filipinos and approximately 4,000 US deaths. Furthermore, the growing global ambitions of US capitalism set it on a collision course with rival imperialist powers, and eventual entry into both WWI and WWII.

And while a period of relative labor peace seemed to have been achieved, in fact, conditions were being created for a workers’ revolt in the late nineteen-teens of far greater dimensions than anything seen in the nineteenth century. This was based especially on the meteoric growth in the numbers of unskilled industrial workers, a section of the working class heavily made up of international, “new immigrant” workers from eastern and southern Europe, such as the Jewish and Italian workers of the Triangle factory.

Though Von Drehle includes the New York City garment workers’ strike of 1909, “The Uprising of 20,000,” as part of the same story as the Triangle fire, he largely presents that strike and Triangle in terms of their ability to nurture middle-class support and trigger reform. As Von Drehle puts it, “The challenge for the strikers was to get New York to pay attention to the mistreatment of poor immigrants” (page 52). In other words, Von Drehle posits that the only viable avenue for the working class is an appeal to liberalism, rather than the perspective of independent political action.

In fact, The Uprising of 20,000 was but one crucial struggle in the midst of a massive upsurge of the working class both in the US and internationally. Major struggles of immigrant garment workers would soon follow those of New York City: in Chicago, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and in Paterson, New Jersey, to name but a few important examples. The struggles in New York and Chicago gave birth to new “industrial unions”—the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA). Meanwhile, the strikes in Lawrence and Paterson were led by the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which began to compete with the AFL for the allegiance of industrial workers. The upsurge in working class militancy that had begun in the textile industry soon spread to every sector of the US economy, culminating in 1919 with major strikes in the steel and coal industries that witnessed hundreds of thousands workers involved in bitter and violent struggles.

Events in the US were affected incalculably after 1917 by the Russian Revolution—which established the first workers’ state. Meanwhile, nearly every major industrial country experienced similar eruptions from below after the war, even “victorious” France and Britain. In Italy, workers occupied factories, but for want of effective leadership were unable to move toward a consolidation of a workers’ state during the “two red years.” In Germany, a workers’ revolution failed to consolidate power due to the active treachery of the Social Democrats and the trade unions.

This is the historical context that must be considered to understand progressivism, and later the New Deal. The progressive-reformist milieu, of which Frances Perkins was an example, sought to ameliorate the conditions of the US working class in order to avert revolutionary change. Reformists sought to hold out the prospect of reforms in order to prevent the development of an independent political challenge to capitalism by the working class, and to keep the working class movement confined within the framework of the two-party system.

Von Drehle presents Tammany’s role in the reforms enacted after Triangle as a mysterious change of heart on the part of machine boss Charles F. Murphy. Prior to that, city Democrats had played a consistently antagonistic role toward political reform. This is of central importance, because Tammany’s embrace of progressive-reform was a key element in the emergence of twentieth century liberalism.

The urban political machine, of which Tammany Hall was the *sine qua non*, was the social mechanism, the political power broker, that mediated between federal power and US capitalism, on the one hand, and the urban, immigrant working class, on the other.

Big-city politics were notoriously corrupt and functioned according to a system of patronage: votes were bought, political offices and police commissions sold, and most city jobs doled out according to political loyalty, and along racial and national lines in order to divide the working

class into hostile and competing sections. The big-city machines were crime-ridden bureaucracies that essentially bought off and promoted small numbers of the urban poor within their ranks, with the most sought-after jobs found in the corrupt and brutal police departments.

Long before Triangle, the Northern big city machines proved themselves adept at channeling working class support behind the Democratic Party and its most reactionary elements. Indeed, the very birth of the Democratic Party depended upon this phenomenon. In the 1828 election, Tammany politicians led by Martin Van Buren were able to channel working class resentment against Northern capitalists into an alliance with the large slave owners of the South, led by Andrew Jackson, and thereby absorb the first significant political movement of the US working class, the Workingmen's Party. After Reconstruction, the political alliance of the machines and the Southern oligarchs resumed.

Von Drehle presents the post-Triangle collaboration of machine politicians Al Smith and Robert Wagner with Frances Perkins as a harbinger of the New Deal and a fortuitous example of "strange bedfellows." However, while Perkins and the "Tammany twins" may have been moved to action, to some degree, by Triangle, and while it is doubtless that the three were politically astute and far-sighted individuals, they were nonetheless responding to growing social tensions that threatened to erupt and radically alter the political landscape. Socialism was gaining enormous support, particularly among Jewish workers in the Lower East Side, while the strikes of immigrant workers became increasingly acrimonious, often running headlong into civic authority. The Triangle Fire and its aftermath threatened to accelerate these processes.

Furthermore, a central aim of progressives had been to undermine the strength of the machines by replacing the cities' patronage system with one based on merit in allocating civil service positions. Caught between external pressures from progressive reformers and upheaval from the working class below, Tammany embraced the former in order to maintain its position above the latter.

Von Drehle's afterword seems to suggest that a new period of reform in US history may be possible, if far-sighted politicians act under pressure from "the public." However, serious efforts at social reform are completely absent, even as social conditions deteriorate, resembling more and more those that existed before WWI.

Reformism in the twentieth century in its various guises—first progressivism, then Fordist "welfare capitalism," then the New Deal, and finally the Great Society—arose not primarily because politicians and business leaders were more politically astute and far-sighted than their cotemporary counterparts—although any honest comparison will show that this is unquestionably the case.

Instead, earlier periods of reform were made possible by the relative strength of US capitalism in the early and middle parts of the twentieth century. Secondly, reformist measures have always been used as a means of diverting the US working class from revolutionary change and co-opting its leadership—in this way functioning as the "carrot" to the "stick" of direct state repression.

Modern US capitalism, instead, is characterized by both a worsening relative position vis-à-vis its rivals and declining rates of profit. These trends had clearly emerged by the late 1960s and culminated in 1971 with Richard Nixon's unilateral scrapping of the Bretton Woods financial system. Those years marked the definitive end of reformism in the US, while the intervening period has seen a steady rollback of the gains the working class achieved throughout the first two thirds of the twentieth century. Facing an intensifying deterioration of its relative global economic standing and relentless downward pressures on profits, US capitalism turns increasingly to secure gains by undoing all the reformist measures from years past. The current attack on Social Security marks an acceleration of this process.

In lock step, the entire political establishment has lurched sharply to the

right—both Democrats and Republicans. *There is no constituency for reform within the Democratic Party or moribund American liberalism*, although there is no shortage of "left" charlatans who specialize in falsifying precisely this reality. The 2004 election and the call for "anybody but Bush" provides only the most recent, and obvious, example.

Indeed, readers of *Triangle* will be struck both by the tragedy itself and by reformers' serious attempts to repair the capitalist system in order to save it from the consequences of its own excesses. A sense of optimism characterized those efforts—a belief that society's problems could be addressed and reformed, so long as public attention were drawn to individual social ills and serious efforts were made to understand their origins in the social environment. In this way, progressive reformism attempted to fashion itself as a serious competitor to socialism.

Reading of the efforts of a reformer like Frances Perkins nearly 100 years ago starkly demonstrates the impotence of the erstwhile liberal-reformist milieu today. Indeed, the contemporary political establishment will not even seriously address, let alone offer solutions to, the crises that are now, once again, creating the conditions for revolutionary change.



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