

BY: M. of A. Joyner

COMMEMORATING the 110th Anniversary of the
Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire on March 25, 2021

WHEREAS, It is the sense of this Legislative Body to commemorate the 110th Anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire; to observe this event, Workers United/SEIU will be hosting a virtual commemoration on Friday, March 25, 2021, in remembrance of the workers who died at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory and the ongoing fight to enhance workplace safety and workers' rights; and

WHEREAS, It is the further intent of this Legislative Body to recognize the ongoing efforts of Workers United/SEIU, the sons and daughters of the Union of Needle trades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE), the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), whose origins were born out of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, in striving to make working conditions for the American people the safest in the world; and

WHEREAS, Another organization, the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition, supports the annual remembrance activities to memorialize the tragedy which occurred on March 25, 1911, and its impact upon workplace safety regulations and workers' compensation in New York State and across the country; and

WHEREAS, The Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition also seeks to educate the public about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire through its on-going projects, educational outreach, and social media sites; and

WHEREAS, The Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition is currently working to establish a permanent art memorial to honor the legacy of the factory workers who died in the fire, so that their sacrifice will never be forgotten; and

WHEREAS, The women's shirtwaist was valued for its ready-to-wear, workplace appeal and was the first civilian garment made simple and loosely fitted enough to be produced in factories by the dozens, instead of custom-made one at a time by dressmakers or tailors; and

WHEREAS, By the early 1900s, shirtwaists were being made in modern factories, at long rows of sewing machines powered by electricity; their production was a competitive industry, and Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, the owners of the million-dollar Triangle Waist Company with operations in both New York and Philadelphia, were "the shirtwaist kings"; their biggest factory occupied the top three floors of a new, fireproof building one block east from Washington Square in New York City, and employed about 500 people; and

WHEREAS, The employees of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory were putting on their hats and coats at quitting time on Saturday, March 25,

1911, when someone noticed smoke curling from the long rag bin under the cutting tables along the windows at the northeast corner of the eighth floor; the month's accumulation of linen and muslin scraps caught fire, followed by the fabric that was laid out on the tables, then the paper patterns strung open on the wire above them, and the big wicker baskets full of bundled work that stood by each sewing machine; and

WHEREAS, There were no sprinklers or alarms in the building; only three weeks before, an association of property owners had met to oppose the fire department's campaign to require them; and

WHEREAS, In the fire, all but one of the terrified seamstresses and cutters on the eighth floor were able to escape, whether by one of the two small elevators or down one of the building's two narrow stairways, each wide enough for only one person to descend at a time; somebody telephoned a warning to the executives on the 10th floor, where the fire quickly spread, and many workers from the offices and the pressing and shipping rooms on the 10th floor, including the shirtwaist owners themselves, caught an elevator or escaped over the roof; and

WHEREAS, Tragically, there was no way to warn workers on the ninth floor; by the time they became aware of the fire, they were caught between fires on the floors above and below them; some workers ran for the elevators, others for the doors to the stairs; one set of doors to the Washington Place stairway was locked to keep girls from leaving early and to allow managers to check their purses for theft; the doors to the other stairway opened inward, and almost immediately, the terrified crush of escaping workers made it impossible to open them; soon the stairs were cut off by the fire; and

WHEREAS, The elevator operators did their best, each making seven or eight trips through the smoke and flames, but as the fire grew, it forced the girls and young women to leap into the open shaft, until finally the elevators could not rise because they were jammed by bodies; and

WHEREAS, The rest of the ninth floor workers were forced to the window; they stood on the ledges for as long as they could, waiting for the fire ladders; but the city's longest ladder reached only to the sixth floor, and as the fire reached out the windows after them, they began to jump, many holding hands, to their deaths on the sidewalks and fences below; and

WHEREAS, The date March 25th holds a special significance for all working people because of this tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in New York City that took the lives of 146 garment workers, a tragedy that occurred on March 25, 1911, and led to the first major workplace safety reforms in the country; and

WHEREAS, The deaths of 146 garment workers, 123 women and girls and 23 men, the majority of whom were Italian and Jewish immigrants, at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire started a movement to fight sweatshops and improve factory safety standards which continues to this day; and

WHEREAS, Upon the occasion of the 110th Anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, it is the sense of this Legislative Body to join with Workers United/SEIU, the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition, the New York State Department of Labor, and the New York State Legislature, in commemoration of a tragic event, of such meaningful significance to the history and purpose of the American labor movement; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That this Legislative Body pause in its deliberations to commemorate the 110th Anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire on March 25, 2021.