

Clara Lemlich, "The Inside of a Shirtwaist Factory," 1912

This article appeared in the March 1912 issue of *Good Housekeeping* three years after the 'Uprising of the 20,000' strike by women garment workers, and one year after 146 workers died in the fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City. The author, Clara Lemlich, was an immigrant garment worker and labor leader.



A photograph of Clara Lemlich taken at her desk at the shirtwaist workers' strike headquarters

The Inside of a Shirtwaist Factory

An Appeal to Women Who Wear Choice and Beautiful Clothing

By

CLARA LEMLICH

EDITOR'S NOTE—Miss Lemlich is the remarkable young girl of New York's East Side who, with her eloquence and the power of her personality, led the great shirtwaist strike of a year ago. This appeal is expressed in her own words, whose simplicity and power afford a clue to the personality of the speaker. Her message is particularly interesting in view of the recent acquittal of the Triangle Shirtwaist manufacturers in whose building 130 girls lost their lives.

I THINK the women who buy and wear the beautiful clothes do not know how it is for the girl who makes them—what conditions she has—or they would care and would try to help her.

I will tell you about one place in which I work. It is on Fifth Avenue. It is a beautiful building on the outside, but this is the inside. He employs three hundred girls. In the room there are machines, partitions, that sort of thing—the space is all taken up. There is just room enough that a girl can handle her work. There is little air, for overhead the space is also taken up with the benches and table the girls used to eat

from once upon a time. But the boss he would put in more machines; it's costly to have another flat if he needs it, but it isn't costly to take away the tables so the girls shouldn't have anywhere to eat: then he puts in a hundred more machines and a hundred more girls.

They have a half an hour for lunch, but the lunches are not given out before twelve o'clock because it will take a few minutes of the boss's time. So there is a little room where the boy gives the lunches out; you don't go in the room; you just go to the door—the whole three hundred girls they crowd to that door to get their lunches, and it isn't

TLS Editors' Note: The rest of Lemlich's article, below, is edited for length. The full article can be accessed through Cornell University Library Digital Collections, [here](#)

. . . until fifteen or twenty minutes after twelve that they get their lunch. Some girl may get it the minute she comes, but it takes that long for the last one. There is only till half past twelve allowed, and when the bell rings every girl is to be at her place. . . . You have to eat near your machine.

The garments we work on are very beautiful, very costly—very delicate. Some of them sell for a hundred and fifty dollars. . . . You are in fear of spotting the garment If that happens . . . the first time you are charged for damages. If it happens twice, you are liable to be discharged. You cannot wash your hands after you eat. There is only one sink There are only two toilets, and these are cleaned but once a week. . . .

. . . you are expected to be in at eight o'clock. If you are three minutes late, you are locked out for half a day and lose a half day's pay. The working-girl is utterly dependent on her wages; she needs every cent she can earn; she can't afford to lose a day's wages . . . the boss . . . makes them work night work three times a week, which makes an average of seventy-two or seventy-four hours a week.

There is one place that is a good deal worse than the Triangle. I know it. I was arrested once for giving out circulars there. It is still more crowded than the Triangle. And the bosses! They hire such people to drive you! It's a regular slave factory. Not only your hands and your time, but your mind is sold. Any man with radical ideas is thrown out. Why, anyone that will talk about unionism is discharged. He employs only foreign help—mostly Italians that can't speak the language.

He takes learners. The learners have to pay either five or ten dollars and then have to work two or three weeks . . . for no pay

I also worked in a factory that was called a model factory. . . . We want to organize the Italian girls. He said, "Go ahead and organize. I want my house organized!" But he tells the Italian foreman not to let the girls join; they will be discharged if they do. So when we try to talk to the girls . . . to tell them about the union, we could not get one girl. They seemed afraid to talk to us. When we went out on strike [in 1909], he told the Italian girls that the Jewish girls were striking because they hated Italians and didn't want to work with them. That was not true. . . .

I ask the health inspector to come; the sanitary conditions are so bad. You take a drink of water that is provided for the girls to drink. It makes you sick all day! The health inspector comes. He makes the boss have the place cleaned—that is once. Next week, it is as bad as ever. If the boss finds out who sent for the health inspector, I am discharged.

. . . did it not need the lives of a hundred and forty-six girls to show them that a loft needs more than one fire escape; that the doors should not be locked I think it will need the sacrifice of many more lives before, in New York, we have no more firetraps as working places for girls.

The manufacturer has a vote; the bosses have votes; the foremen have votes; the inspectors have votes. The working girl has no vote. When she asks to have the building in which she must work made clean and safe, the officials do not have to listen. When she asks not to work such long hours, they do not have to listen. The bosses can say to the officials: "Our votes put you in office. To do what these girls want would reduce our profits. Never mind what they say. They don't know what they are talking about. Anyway, it doesn't matter; they can't do anything."

That is true. For until the men in the Legislature at Albany represent her as well as the bosses and the foremen, she will not get justice; she will not get fair conditions. That is why the working-woman now says that she must have the vote.

Source: Clara Lemlich, "The Inside of a Shirtwaist Factory," *Good Housekeeping* 54 (March 1912), 367-369. Edited for LAWCHA by Robyn Muncy, Department of History, University of Maryland, College Park.