

Eight Hours for What We Will



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Imagine her for a moment. Not one particular woman, but one of thousands whose stories followed some version of this path.

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She is seventeen, maybe eighteen. She crossed the Atlantic in steerage, which means she spent weeks below the waterline in a berth barely wide enough to turn over in, surrounded by hundreds of people who smelled like fear and salt and the country they were leaving behind. She carried a cloth bag with everything she owned. She spoke almost no English. She had a distant cousin in New York and an address written on a scrap of paper she had memorized in case she lost it.

She passed through Ellis Island. Within days, she was at a sewing machine.

This was not unusual. This was, in fact, the plan.

Between 1880 and 1920, more than twenty million immigrants arrived in the United States. They came from Southern and Eastern Europe: Italy, Russia, Poland, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Greece. They came from Ireland, still hollow from the memory of famine. They came fleeing pogroms and poverty and military conscription and a hundred different flavors of being unwanted in the place where they were born.

They came because America was supposed to be different.

What they found was that America was different, just not always in the ways they had imagined. The streets were not paved with gold. They were paved with ice in winter and garbage in summer and the particular exhaustion of people who worked without stopping. The neighborhoods they landed in, the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the North End of Boston, Little Italy, the Polish Hill in Pittsburgh, were crowded beyond what we can easily picture. Whole families in single rooms. Boarders sleeping in shifts. Children doing piecework by lamplight.

And yet, they built something in those neighborhoods. They built mutual aid societies, where members pooled money to cover funeral

costs, to support a family when the breadwinner got sick, to loan a new arrival enough to get started. They built synagogues and churches and social clubs. They built newspapers in a dozen languages. They argued about politics with a ferocity that came from people who had seen what happened when ordinary people had no power.

They were, in other words, already organizing. They brought that instinct with them across the water.

The factories were waiting.

The garment industry in New York City ran on immigrant labor, particularly the labor of young women. The shirtwaist, what we would call a blouse, was the fashionable item of the early 1900s, and the demand for them was insatiable. Factories called “shops” crowded into the upper floors of Lower Manhattan buildings, and inside them, women sat at sewing machines from before dawn until well after dark.

Twelve-hour days were standard. Fourteen-hour days were not uncommon. Workers could be charged for the thread they used, for the electricity that ran their machines. They could be fined for talking, for arriving a minute late... even if the foreman had kept them late the day before. If you got sick, you lost your job. If you organized, you lost your job and possibly your freedom.

The owners of these factories were not cartoon villains. Some of them had themselves been immigrants, had themselves been poor. They understood exactly what they were doing. They understood that the women at those machines had nowhere else to go, no safety net to fall into, no government agency to call. They understood that desperation is an excellent management tool.

What they did not understand, what they consistently and catastrophically underestimated, was that people who have survived what these women survived do not break easily.

The unions grew the way things grow in difficult soil: slowly, stubbornly, from roots that went deeper than anyone expected.

The Knights of Labor, founded in 1869 by a group of Philadelphia garment workers, was among the first major labor organizations in America. It was unusually inclusive for its time, admitting women and Black workers when many labor organizations did not. Its record on race and immigration was complicated and far from spotless, though, particularly concerning Chinese workers. At its peak in the mid-1880s, it had nearly 800,000 members and it believed and stated plainly that the interests of all workers were bound together.

The American Federation of Labor came next, more pragmatic and more focused on trade-by-trade organizing and concrete gains: wages, hours, safety. Samuel Gompers, its founder and longtime president, was a Jewish immigrant from London whose family settled in a Lower East Side tenement when he was thirteen, and he had worked as a cigar maker from childhood. He understood that idealism alone did not win contracts.

And then there were the garment workers themselves: the women, specifically, who kept getting left out of the larger organizing efforts and so built their own. The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union was founded in 1900, and by 1909 it had helped organize what became known as the Uprising of the 20,000.

That November, workers at two large shirtwaist factories went on strike. Within days, thousands of other workers, mostly young immigrant women, many of whom were teenagers, walked off the job

and joined them. They did this in the middle of a New York winter. They walked picket lines in the cold, sometimes for weeks. They were arrested. They were beaten by hired thugs. Judges lectured them from the bench about the importance of respecting the natural order.

They kept walking.

The strike lasted several months and won real improvements in wages and hours for many workers. However, the victories were incomplete. Some factory owners eventually took their workers back with higher wages and shorter hours, while refusing to recognize the union or accept some of its demands. The fight was not finished. And one of the factories where workers returned without full protection was the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, on the top three floors of the Asch Building in Greenwich Village.

Remember that detail.

March 25, 1911 was a Saturday.

The workday was nearly over. About 500 employees of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company were in the building. The majority of them were young Jewish and Italian immigrant women ranging from teenagers to women in their thirties. The floor was littered with scraps of fabric and tissue paper patterns. Bins of material sat under the worktables. The air was full of lint.

At around 4:40 in the afternoon, a fire broke out on the eighth floor. No one knows exactly how though speculation says it was probably a cigarette near one of those fabric bins. The building itself was supposed to be fireproof. It was not the building that killed anyone.

One of the crucial exit doors was locked.

The owners did this as a matter of practice, to prevent unauthorized breaks and to control who left with what. It was considered reasonable. It was considered business. And when the fire started and the women rushed the exits, one of the doors they needed did not open.

Some made it out through the stairwells, down nine flights of stairs in a burning building. Elevator operators made run after run until the heat made it impossible. Some workers on the tenth floor escaped across the rooftop to neighboring buildings. But for many on the ninth floor, the options ran out fast.

The fire escape which was already inadequate and in violation of standards, pulled away from the wall under the weight of the people on it. The New York Fire Department arrived quickly, but their ladders only reached the sixth floor. The women were on the eighth, ninth, and tenth.

Some burned.

Some, faced with that choice, jumped.

A New York University professor working in a building across the street watched from his window. He said afterward that the bodies fell so fast and so many that he thought at first they were bolts of cloth being thrown out to save them from the fire. Then he understood.

In about eighteen minutes, 146 people were dead. The youngest victims were fourteen years old. Many of the bodies were so badly burned they could not be identified. They were laid out on the sidewalk. Their families walked past them to find their daughters, their sisters, their mothers.

Some 400,000 New Yorkers took part in or watched the mourning procession in the rain on April 5th.

Six weeks after the fire, at a memorial meeting at the Metropolitan Opera House, a labor organizer named Rose Schneiderman stood up to speak.

Rose Schneiderman had come to America from Poland as a child. She had gone to work in a factory at thirteen. She had helped organize the Uprising of the 20,000. She knew women who had died in the fire. She was thirty years old, five feet tall, and she was done being polite about it.

She looked out at an audience full of wealthy reformers who had come to express their sorrow and their solidarity, and she said:

"I would be a traitor to these poor burned bodies if I came here to talk good fellowship. We have tried you good people of the public and we have found you wanting."

And then:

"The life of men and women is so cheap and property is so sacred."

She was not wrong. And she was also not done. Rose Schneiderman spent the next fifty years of her life organizing and agitating and advising, eventually serving on the New York State Industrial Commission and helping shape the New Deal labor policies of the Roosevelt administration. She never stopped being angry. She never stopped working. She died in 1972, at ninety years old.

In the aftermath of the Triangle fire, New York City and State ultimately enacted dozens of new workplace and fire-safety laws. Safety inspections increased. Fire-safety and exit requirements were strengthened. Factory doors could no longer be locked against workers. Working conditions and hours came under far greater regulation.

The reforms were real and they mattered.

But they mattered because people had already been dying for them for decades. They mattered because women had already been walking picket lines in snow. They mattered because the labor movement, imperfect, fractious, sometimes corrupt, and always underfunded, had been making the same argument for fifty years: **that a human being is not a unit of production**. That there has to be something more.

Which brings me to this day. The one we're spending right now.

Labor Day became a federal holiday in 1894, right in the middle of one of the largest labor conflicts in American history. That summer, workers at the Pullman Palace Car Company in Illinois walked off the job after devastating wage cuts, and railroad workers across the country refused to handle Pullman cars in solidarity. Rail traffic ground to a halt across much of the country.

On June 28, with the conflict still spreading, President Grover Cleveland signed legislation making Labor Day a federal holiday.

Days later, his administration sent federal troops into Chicago. Violence followed. Workers were killed. Eugene Debs, the strike's leader, was arrested. The strike was eventually crushed, and Debs served his prison sentence the following year.

The timing of the holiday was not accidental. The federal government formally honored American workers at almost exactly the same moment it was preparing to use federal power against one of the country's largest labor actions. It was a peace offering and a suppression, delivered in the same breath.

The holiday had actually been celebrated since 1882, when workers in New York City organized the first Labor Day parade. On Tuesday,

September 5th, somewhere between ten and twenty thousand people joined the procession through Manhattan, publicly making the point that they existed, that they had numbers, that they were not invisible.

That's what we inherited. That's what this day is.

And now. Now we go to the lake. We have the cookout. We buy the mattress on sale. The news runs the segment about it being the unofficial end of summer, the last weekend before fall really kicks in, back to school, traffic on the highway, white after Labor Day. The department stores loved it from the start and they love it still.

There's nothing wrong with the cookout. There's nothing wrong with the lake. Rest was exactly what the labor movement was fighting for: the right to have a Saturday that doesn't belong to your employer, a Sunday that doesn't belong to your employer, a Monday that belongs to you and your family and your potato salad and whatever lake is closest.

But I think it's worth knowing what you're actually resting inside of. I think it's worth pausing, even for a minute, in the middle of the long weekend, and understanding that the three days you have were not inevitable. They were not natural. They were demanded, and organized for, and marched for, and in some cases died for, by people who had far less than most of us have now and who knew exactly what they were asking for when they asked for it.

The eight-hour movement, which had been building since the 1860s, had a chant that workers sang and marched to:

"Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will."

I want to sit with that last part. Eight hours for what we will.

Not eight hours for more work. Not eight hours to recover so you can work better tomorrow. Eight hours for what *we will*. For desire, for rest, for beauty, for prayer, for sitting still and staring out a window, for reading something that has nothing to do with your job, for being a person rather than a function.

That was the radical claim. Not just that workers deserved better wages, though they did. Not just that they deserved safer conditions, though they desperately did. But that they deserved time. Time that belonged to them. Time that had no economic purpose. Time for the interior life, whatever that meant for each person, whatever small or large thing lived inside them that had nothing to do with what they produced.

One hundred and forty-six people died in about eighteen minutes because the dignity and safety of workers had been treated as less important than production and profit. Their deaths cracked something open in this country. And underneath all the legislation that followed, underneath all the strikes and the organizing and the losses, was that same insistent claim: **a human being is more than what they make.**

I think about that when I think about why I do the work I do.

There is still a version of this fight happening every day. The pressure to optimize every hour, to monetize every interest, to be productive and available and switched on. It is a different kind of locked door. And the resistance to it, the choice to go inward, to sit in stillness, to insist that your interior life has value is still, in its way, an act of defiance.

The women who walked off the job in November 1909 were fighting for wages, hours, safety, and the right to organize. But underneath those documented demands was something we can still recognize: the

insistence that a worker is a whole human being, not simply a source of labor.

I think they would understand, those women, what it means to want that. I think they would have something to say about a culture that tells you rest is laziness and stillness is waste. I think Rose Schneiderman would have a few words.

The weekend you have right now was not given to you. It was taken. By people who had far less than most of us do now, who knew exactly what they were asking for when they asked for it.

Use it. Use it for rest, for beauty, for sitting on the porch and letting your mind go quiet. Use it to remember who you are when no one is asking anything of you.

That's what it was for.

If you want to go deeper: David von Drehle's *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America* reads like a novel and will wreck you in the best way. Rose Schneiderman's autobiography *All for One* is another good read. Cornell University's *Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation* holds an extraordinary archive of labor history materials, including Triangle fire records, if you want to go all the way down the rabbit hole.

And if you ever find yourself in New York, *the Asch Building is still standing at 23–29 Washington Place*. It's called the Brown Building now and belongs to NYU. There's a plaque. It's worth stopping.

A note from the porch: This is the first essay published here at The Porch Swing Stories. I'm glad you're here.

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