We Shall Not Be Moved: The Women's Factory Strike of 1909 Short Guide

We Shall Not Be Moved: The Women's Factory Strike of 1909 by Joan Dash

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Overview

We Shall Not Be Moved: The Women's Factory Strike of 1909 tells the dramatic story of a crucial American labor action: the strike by almost thirty thousand newly unionized women to fight miserable wages, long hours, and unsafe working conditions in shirtwaist factories. It is also the story of the fledgling Local 25 of the ILGWU, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and its attempts to organize and educate its members, many of whom were young and unskilled. Jewish immigrant factory workers, most of them no more than sixteen to eighteen years old, joined forces with suffragists, female college students, and society matrons to battle for improved working conditions in the garment factories on New York's Lower East Side. They proved, perhaps for the first time on this scale, that despite tremendous differences of social class, language, and levels of education, women could unite with a view to a common goal and succeed in their aims to this end.

Striking took grit, resolve, and fortitude.

The strikers faced hunger and cold exposed on the picket lines, plus many other obstacles—everything from the widely held belief that women were passive creatures unsuited to working, let alone striking, to widespread corruption and harassment on the part of the police and courts. Strikers were frequently arrested, fined, and even beaten and jailed. Young women went without paychecks, adequate food, and proper winter clothes because they thought the strike was worth the hardship they endured.

Despite these cruelly daunting obstacles, the union finally obtained significant reforms in the shirtwaist factories, particularly after a tragic fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory killed 146 workers well over a year after the strike began, driving home, albeit belatedly, the hazards of working under such conditions. It also had an impact on the labor movement and especially the garment industry, inspiring broader strikes that finally achieved closed union shops throughout the trade.

About the Author

Joan Dash was born in Brooklyn, New York, on July 18, 1925, graduated from Barnard College, and currently resides in Seattle, Washington, with her physicist husband, Jay Gregory Dash. They have three children.

Dash, in addition to her writings for young adults, is the author of two adult nonfiction titles. These are A Life of One's Own: Three Gifted Women and the Men They Married (1973), which was later published as A Life of One's Own: Margaret Sanger, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Maria Goeppert-Mayer (1988), and Summoned to Jerusalem: The Life of Henrietta Szold (1979). She is also the author of several short stories and journal articles.

Her first book, A Life of One's Own, contains a biographical sketch of Maria Goeppert-Mayer, who won the Nobel Prize for her work in theoretical physics. Researching and writing about Goeppert-Mayer deepened Dash's interest in women scientists and the obstacles they faced working in what has always been a predominately male field. This interest brought about her next work, The Triumph of Discovery: Women Scientists Who Won the Nobel Prize.

Dash next focused her attention on women's social activism, which resulted in We Shall Not Be Moved: The Women's Factory Strike of 1909. This book made both the Young Adult Library Services Association's 1997 "Best Books for Young Adults" list and the Children's Bookseller's "Best of the Spring Releases" list for 1996.

Setting

Dash begins We Shall Not Be Moved by describing what it meant to work on the eighth floor of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in 1909, along with hundreds of other young women, most of whom were recent immigrants to the United States, unfamiliar with the language, customs, rights, and responsibilities of their new homeland. The Triangle factory was thought to be modern because the workers used electric sewing machines, yet safety was apparently not a consideration. At the time of the Triangle fire (and despite the striker's struggle over the previous year) the factory had never even held a fire drill. Stairwells were locked to prevent theft; workers were never informed of what to do in case of emergency.

Among row upon row and floor upon floor of sewing machines, the shirtwaist girls worked long hours, some for as little as three dollars a week. No talking was permitted, workers went without lunch breaks during particularly busy periods, and being five minutes late meant the offender forfeited half a day's pay.

The common perception was that these women were only working for "pin money" until they got married. Dash demonstrates that in reality most desperately needed the money to help support their impoverished families and even to feed themselves. On an average of four to six dollars for an up to sixty-hour week, young immigrant women paid for a place to sleep in a shared tenement and for meals, leaving very little money for anything else. Some women by great thrift and good fortune managed to save a few dollars for their education or to send back to families in Europe.

The workers mostly lived in blocks of grim wooden tenements on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Virtually all workers shared apartments with their families or other co-workers, dwellings without plumbing in which many shared beds and even slept in shifts. Dash, while portraying the hardships faced by working women of the day, also conveys a vivid sense of the thronging bustle and excitement that surged through the Lower East Side streets at the turn of the century.

Social Sensitivity

The considerable social significance of the 1909 women's strike cannot be overstated, and Dash emphasizes the fact that women of various educational and ethnic backgrounds as well as social classes came together to strive toward a common goal: to improve the lot of those employed in the shirtwaist industry, many of whom were poor, young immigrants. The striking women surmounted language barriers and triumphed over economic and class differences in order to bring their cause to a national audience, the most helpful of which was the "the mink brigade," rich socialites who felt compelled to lend a hand (and a purse) to the strikers in a fight for nothing less than social justice for all working women. This struggle is at the heart of the origins of the women's movement in the United States.

It is interesting to contrast the considerable support the strikers received from the print media— particularly the New York Times, the New York Call, and the Yiddish press, who reported often on the strikers' side of the story—with their treatment at the hands of the police and the judicial system. Strikers faced brutality and harassment on the picket lines, and many strikers were imprisoned on trumped up charges in an attempt to break their resolve and intimidate them into quitting.

Literary Qualities

Dash's account of the 1909 women's strike does not build dramatically to a climax and wrap up neatly as if it were a television drama; rather, it emphasizes how difficult, grueling, and protracted this lengthy strike actually was. Dash points out that the strike nearly ended by attrition several times because of hunger, hardship, and harassment by police and the courts, but the strikers somehow persevered. The book's descriptive prose vividly conveys what workingclass women's lives were like at that time, and its powerful feminism and humanity make it all the more real to us today.

Much of Dash's information about the 1909 strike appears to be culled from newspapers and magazines of the day and, while sources are usually not cited within the text, the book contains a useful index and bibliography. It also includes fascinating photographs of events and personalities of the movement and an epilogue that follows up on what some of the key figures went on to do after the strike. A number of them continued to devote their lives to various social activist causes after the strike—fighting for the vote for American women, socialism, or worker's rights.

Themes and Characters

While the Triangle fire became a powerful symbol of unsafe labor practices, the struggle for better working conditions began much earlier, with the beginnings of the Local 25 of the ILGWU, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, when spirited individuals like Clara Lemlich, an independent Jewish immigrant, stood up at a union meeting when she had heard enough talk and called for action.

Born in a small Ukrainian village where Jews were not permitted to attend school, Lemlich disregarded her parents' objections and learned to read Russian and became "familiar with revolutionary literature that declared the rights of workers, even women workers." When her family immigrated to New York, she became a shirtwaist girl, studying at the public library after elevenhour work days to become a doctor. Dash focuses on the life histories of key individuals like Lemlich who fought for social change either out of desperate want, suffragette ideals, or moral conviction to tell the story of the strike. Another Jewish laborer who rose to prominence in this movement, Rose Schneiderman, became the union's most active fund-raiser, speaking to groups and drawing support from across the nation, a role she never would have imagined for herself before the strike.

The strike also drew the support of legendary labor activist Mary Harris Jones, more commonly known as Mother Jones, who came to Philadelphia to help launch a supporting strike there. Other supporters were college students who picketed with the workers, sold informational papers about the strike to raise money for its support, or handed out cards to strikebreakers, trying to convince them to join in the strike. Among them, Inez Milholland, a graduate of Vassar, who planned to go on to law school, was particularly active, picketing with the strikers, traveling to Philadelphia to support the strike there, and consequently getting herself arrested for "causing a crowd to assemble."

Several chapters are devoted to describing what came to be known on the picket line and in the press as "the mink brigade," society women who took up the cause and picketed with the workers, helping to fund as well as publicize their cause. Among the most colorful and effective was Mrs. O. H. P. Belmont, a society leader who transformed herself into a suffragist at the age of fifty-six and brought many others on board to support the 1909 strike. Anne Morgan, daughter of the banker J. P. Morgan, also played a significant role in supporting the strike and making the strikers' cause known among the rich and powerful of New York.

Topics for Discussion

1. What conditions or factors brought the shirtwaist workers to strike?

2. How was the strike portrayed by the newspapers of the day? What effect did the reporting have on the strike's progress?

3. How was the strike viewed by the general public? By male labor unions?

4. What role did law enforcement and the judicial system play in the struggles faced by strikers?

5. What impact did the various social classes, educational backgrounds, and ethnic origins of the strikers and their supporters have on the strike specifically and the women's labor movement generally?

6. How does the garment workers' struggle compare to other more recent social unrest, such as the Civil Rights movement in the United States? Can you think of other similar struggles occurring today?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What were garment factory working conditions like in the early twentieth century? How do they compare to working conditions today in the United States? In developing countries where much U.S. manufacturing now takes place?

2. The strikers and their supporters employed a variety of techniques to promote compromise on the part of the factory owners. What did they try and would those same techniques work for strikers today?

3. Would the strike have had more support or been resolved more quickly if the strikers had not been primarily impoverished immigrant women? How would the strike have been different?

4. Workers had to pay for their own equipment while earning very little, lost half a day's pay if they were five minutes late, and regularly worked almost twelvehour days. Would factory owners have been able to take advantage of their employees in this way if had they been better educated? If they had been men?

5. Striking required a great deal of sacrifice on the part of the workers, but it was worth it to them to do so to improve their situation. What kind of event or situation would spur you to make such a sacrifice for the common good? Would you have been willing to strike if you had been in their situation?

6. Do you think that young women today fully appreciate the difficulties faced by their predecessors to gain equality?

For Further Reference

"Joan Dash." In Contemporary Authors. Gale Literary Databases. http://www.galenet.com. Nonfiction writers are rarely included in many of the standard literary resources; this provides some much needed biographical information on Dash.
Review of We Shall Not Be Moved. Publishers Weekly (January 1,1996): 71. Summarizes the events of the book, emphasizing the great odds the laborers were up against in their struggle.

Rochman, Hazel. "Books for Older Readers." Booklist (January 1, 1996): 804.

Rochman summarizes We Shall Not Be Moved and comments on the book's powerful feminism.

Review of We Shall Not Be Moved. School Library Journal (February, 1996): 116-17.

This review points out that, while the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire is generally viewed as the catalyst for labor unrest and change, Dash's account reveals that progress on the part of labor was the result of much effective work long before the fire took place.

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996