

Uprising of the 20,000: Debate,  
Diplomacy, and its Consequences in the  
New York Shirtwaist Strike of 1909

Netaly Phanouvong and Hallie Rackley

Senior Division Group Website

1200 Student Composed Words on Website

498 Words in Process Paper

1:54 Minutes Media Time

This year's theme is Debate and Diplomacy, and we wanted a topic that not only encapsulated the theme, but was meaningful to us. During our research, we looked at everything: treaties, wars, and more. However, strikes caught our eye as the epitome of debate. As young women, we wanted to find a strike that talked about the struggles women faced in the early labor movement, and we came across the New York Shirtwaist Strike of 1909. The women of this strike had to debate what labor rights they should be afforded, and had to face the consequence of a fire when they weren't deemed worthy of all they asked for.

Once we had our topic picked out, we started scouring our school's databases for information. We divided our project based on successes, failures, and consequences, researching the three independently and then exploring how they connected. After looking on databases for relevant information, we were able to narrow our search and look online using key words. We confirmed our websites were reliable sources and used them to start writing. We also looked at the Library of Congress for images. All the while, we were adding our sources to our bibliography, sorting them, and annotating them.

Both of us had done National History Day in middle school, and we were most comfortable creating a website. However, NHDWebCentral was new to us, so it was a bit of a learning curve to make everything as navigable and aesthetically pleasing as possible. We divided our website into successes, failures, and consequences, but then realized we needed an overview page of everything that happened during the strike. We wrote about each category, trying to fill our project with information and primary sources. After writing, we had to pare down our information, make our project under the word count, and refine the aesthetics of our website.

Through our website, we wanted to convey how resilient and inspirational the women of the strike were. Debate, diplomacy, and negotiation always come with a power imbalance. As immigrant Jewish women, the strikers were at a severe disadvantage in their negotiations. The story of the women who died in the Triangle fire is told more often than the women who stood up for their labor rights. In a situation with such a severe power imbalance, it's important to give a voice to those who were disadvantaged. The strike is a story of determination, of laborers standing up for themselves when their government at the time didn't.

The New York Shirtwaist Strike brought change to shirtwaist companies throughout New York. Although the Triangle fire was a tragic consequence, the damage could have multiplied without the settlements the strikers came to at other factories. Additionally, the leaders of the strike such as Clara Lemlich, Rose Schneiderman, and Pauline Newman went on to help lead unions and fight to gain women's suffrage. Though tragic, the Triangle fire brought new labor organizations and laws, emboldening labor unions to continue fighting for change.