Deepwater Horizon – source: U.S. Coast Guard. Fire boat response crews battle the blazing remnants of the offshore oil rig Deepwater Horizon. A Coast Guard MH-65C dolphin rescue helicopter and crew document the fire while searching for survivors. Multiple Coast Guard helicopters, planes and cutters responded to rescue the Deepwater Horizon’s 126 person crew.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in NYC which occurred 100 years ago on March 25, 1911

1911 TO 2011
IN MEMORY OF
all of the workers who have lost their lives on the job since The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in NYC
Letter from our Executive Director

One hundred years ago, our country experienced one of the worst industrial disasters in its history—the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire that caused the deaths of 146 workers, mostly young women and girls. It was not just the number of dead or the youth of the victims, but the manner of their deaths that so shocked the American public. The scene of young women jumping to certain death from ledges ten stories above the street became indelibly etched in the minds of contemporary observers and fueled the outrage that resulted in significant safety reforms.

It is undeniable that we have made great progress in protecting workers’ health and safety since the Triangle fire. But a closer look at the social and political context of the fire provides a cautionary tale for today. In response to reforms proposed by an investigating commission following the fire, industry voices argued vehemently against any restrictions on the businessman’s pursuit of profit. Laurence M. D. McGuire, president of the Real Estate Board of New York City, led the charge against the reforms, saying:

“To my mind this is all wrong…The experience of the past proves conclusively that the best government is the least possible government, that the unfettered initiative of the individual is the force that makes a country great and that this initiative should never be bound…”

It is an argument that is all too familiar today. 100 years after the Triangle Fire, it remains an article of faith among those opposed to stronger worker safety protections. And while the social context today is undoubtedly different from that of the early 20th century, the factors historians cite in contributing to the fire sound strikingly contemporary: intense economic competition, extreme pressure to produce at low cost, and workers pushed to the limit to maximize production while minimizing waste.

For today, in response to reforms proposed by an investigating commission following the fire, industry voices argue against any restrictions on their pursuit of profit, a strategy that had tragic results for so many young workers (as it did again at a chicken processing plant in Hamlet NC, eighty years later.)

This report, issued on the 100th anniversary of the tragic Triangle Fire, is intended to commemorate the tens of thousands of working people who have lost their lives on the job in the past hundred years and to remind us that much remains to be done to ensure that every worker goes home safe and sound at the end of the day. This report is divided into three sections:

• A proposal for much-needed reforms of our system for protecting the health and safety of America’s workers
• A review of the worst industrial disasters in the U.S. over the past 100 years; and
• A reminder that the headline-grabbing disasters are only one part of the story of workplace casualties

We also would like to thank the Cry Wolf Project, a research network that identifies and exposes misleading rhetoric about the economy and government, whose help made this project possible.

Please join us in continuing to advocate for stronger health and safety protections for our nation’s hard working people.

Tom O’Connor
Executive Director
National Council for Occupational Safety and Health

SILENT WORKPLACE KILLERS
Reports on the toll of workplace deaths tend to focus on the obvious—death by traumatic injury. But while some 5,000 workers per year die from these causes, perhaps ten times as many die from “silent killers”—diseases that result from exposure to carcinogenic or otherwise toxic substances in the workplace. We highlight a few of the major offenders to the right.

SILICOSIS
According to one authoritative study, over 16,000 people died of silicosis, an occupational lung disease, between 1968 and 2002 alone. Silicosis is caused by inhaling dust containing crystalline silica; no effective treatment for the disease is available. Crystalline silica exposure and silicosis have been associated with work in mining, quarrying, tunneling, sandblasting, masonry, and foundry work, among other industries. Silicosis deaths have declined significantly in recent years as the result of adoption of exposure standards by the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and OSHA. Nonetheless, overexposure to silica remains widespread and silicosis deaths and new cases continue to occur today, even in young workers.

HEPATITIS B
Prior to enactment of OSHA’s Bloodborne Pathogens Standard, health care workers suffered an epidemic of occupational illness and death. In the 1980s, 17,000 healthcare workers each year contracted Hepatitis B and 300 died every year as a result. During this era, Hepatitis B was known as “healthcare workers disease.” A vaccine was developed but most healthcare employers refused to buy it because of its cost (about $130.) Not until OSHA issued its Bloodborne Pathogens Standard in 1991, requiring employers to provide the vaccine free of charge, did cases of Hepatitis B begin to plummet. A 1995 study found that the number of cases went from 17,000 a year to around 400, directly as a result of the OSHA standard. This rule stands today as a remarkable public health success story.

ASBESTOS-RELATED DISEASE
Former Assistant Surgeon General Dr. Richard Lemen told a Senate committee in 2007 that between 189,000 and 231,000 workers died from asbestos-related diseases from 1980 to 2007. He estimated that another 270,000 to 330,000 deaths were expected to occur over the next 30 years. Though most Americans may assume that asbestos is banned for use in the U.S., it is not. While at least 55 other countries have banned the deadly fiber, it is still imported into the U.S., despite the well-known dangers it poses. The World Health Organization, the U.N.’s International Labor Organization, the American Public Health Association, and many other major national and international organizations have called for a comprehensive ban on asbestos. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency tried to ban asbestos in 1989 but was stopped by an industry lawsuit. Legislation to impose a ban has continually failed to pass since Sen. Patty Murray first introduced it in 2002.

SILENT KILLERS
ONE-BY-ONE KILLERS

ONE-BY-ONE KILLERS

While major disasters from the Triangle Fire in 1911 to the Deepwater Horizon in 2010 garner the headlines and capture the public’s attention, the vast majority of workers who die on the job perish in incidents that warrant no more than passing mention in a local paper—if that. Over 90 percent of workplace deaths are single-fatality incidents: a construction worker falling off a roof to his death, a convenience store clerk shot, or a driver killed in a car accident. While these incidents go little noticed by the public, the overall incidents go little noticed by the public, the overall workers is shocking. Some 7,000 construction workers have died in falls—far more than the number that have died in all the major workplace disasters in that period. While we have made significant progress in reducing the death rate from falls, thanks to a heavy emphasis by OSHA on the construction industry, workers continue to die from falls at an unacceptable rate.

2) CONSTRUCTION FALLS

Over the past 20 years, an average of more than 700 workers per year have died from falls at work. About half of these deaths have occurred in the construction industry, so in this 20-year period alone, some 7,000 construction workers have died in falls—far more than the number that have died in all the major workplace disasters in that period. While we have made significant progress in reducing the death rate from falls, thanks to a heavy emphasis by OSHA on the construction industry, workers continue to die from falls at an unacceptable rate.

3) TRANSPORTATION INCIDENTS

Some 40 percent of all workplace fatalities involve transportation incidents. A large proportion of these involve fatal truck crashes, in which thousands of people die every year and more than 100,000 people are injured. According to the public interest group Public Citizen, truck driver fatigue is a factor in over 30 percent of all fatal truck crashes. Current rules allow truckers to drive and work up to 77 hours in 7 days and 88 hours in eight days, despite research showing that the risk of a truck crash increases dramatically after eight hours of driving. Many truck drivers are forced to work excessive hours because they are misclassified as “independent contractors” and paid by the load, rather than the hour.

In the 100 years since the Triangle Shirtwaist fire took the lives of 146 workers, much has changed with respect to workplace safety, but much remains the same. Indeed, the business leaders of today, led by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other organized special interest groups continue to make the same arguments against workplace safety regulations that the owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory and other businessmen made 100 years ago—that workplace safety regulations are cumbersome, costly and generally bad for business.

But the fact is, it has been 40 years since President Richard Nixon signed the Occupational Safety and Health Act that created OSHA and the agency is badly in need of updating. Today’s OSHA is badly overmatched, trying to police a 21st-century workplace armed with 20th-century tools.

It is long past time to modernize OSHA and its partners in workplace safety regulation, the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), and give these agencies the tools they need to protect the health and well-being of America’s workers. As a result, we call on President Barack Obama and the members of Congress to increase protections for American workers by:

Providing Adequate Funding for OSHA Enforcement

Since its founding, OSHA has been on a starvation diet, with so little funding that it cannot possibly fulfill its goal of ensuring safe workplaces for all Americans. With its current level of resources, Federal OSHA is capable of inspecting each workplace in its jurisdiction an average of once every 137 years.

Fixing the Broken Regulatory System

Most of OSHA’s standards for workplace health and safety date back to its founding in 1971. Attempts to issue updated or new regulations have invariably faced industry opposition and have been plagued by bureaucratic obstacles and delays. As a result, OSHA’s protective standards are, in many cases, hopelessly outdated. The rule-making system requires an overhaul to enable OSHA to modernize its standards protecting workers’ health and safety.

Strengthening Penalties for OSHA Violations

OSHA’s monetary penalties—averaging under $1,000 for a serious violation—are so small that they fail to act as a deterrent. Congress should pass legislation to raise civil penalties and index those penalties to inflation and to establish mandatory minimum penalties for violations involving worker deaths. In addition, criminal penalties are nearly impossible to impose under the current OSHA Act. Reckless behavior by an employer leading to the death of a worker is classified as a misdemeanor. Changes to the OSHA Act are needed to allow felony prosecutions against employers who commit willful violations that result in death or serious bodily injury and to extend such penalties to responsible corporate officers.

Improving Whistleblower Protections

The OSH Act theoretically empowers workers to speak up about unsafe conditions, but in practice, whistleblowers often pay a high price for speaking up. Legislation is needed to codify regulations that give workers the right to refuse to do hazardous work and to make specifically clear the fact that employees cannot be discriminated against for reporting unsafe conditions. These reforms can be made right now, today, with little or no cost to the employers and, without question, they would save lives.

Unfortunately, the longer we wait to enact these solutions, the more American workers will die on the job. Some 5,000 workers die each year—an average of 14 every day—from injuries sustained on the job; and many more perish from occupational diseases. As the descriptions of the incidents in this brochure show, there is a very real human cost for every day we put off strengthening OSHA and MSHA. We cannot afford to wait any longer. American workers should not have to give their lives to earn a living.
The construction of the Union Carbide Gauley Bridge in West Virginia proves to be one of the deadliest projects in American history. A contracting company recruited 1,500 non-union workers (75 percent of whom were African-American) from the Deep South to drill a three-mile tunnel through Gauley Mountain, which was composed of silica-rich sandstone. Workers developed acute silicosis, leading to lung damage, pneumonia, tuberculosis, and death. The actual number of deaths and disabilities remains unknown, but it is estimated that over 1,000 workers died.

In what became known as the Buffalo Creek Disaster, the largest construction accident in United States history, 1,250 were killed, 1,100 injured, and over 4,000 left homeless. In what became known as the Buffalo Creek Disaster, the largest construction accident in United States history, 1,250 were killed, 1,100 injured, and over 4,000 left homeless.

On MARCH 25, 1911, one hundred and forty-six workers at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory—most of them women and teenaged girls—die in an agonizing death when they are trapped in a fast-moving inferno that rapidly engulfs the building, which has no exterior fire escapes. The New York Times reports that “the building had experienced four recent fires and had been reported by the Fire Department to the Building Department as unsafe, on account of the insufficiency of its exits.” In addition, the owners had locked the doors, ostensibly to prevent employee theft. With no escape from the flames, many of the victims jumped to their deaths from the ninth and tenth floors of the building rather than face being burned alive.

Two people die and 150 are injured when a storage tank bursts at Purity Distilling Company and a giant wave of molasses speeds through the streets of Boston’s North End, trapping 53 men inside. None survive. The cause of the fire was determined to be a welding rod damaging a hydraulic hose allowing hydraulic vapors to leak and spread throughout silo, which were then ignited by an open flame source.

An explosion at the Thiokol-Woodbine chemical plant kills 23 people and injures 314. The blast occurs during a routine maintenance check on the Phillips chemical plant’s polyethylene reactor, which is a large quantity of flammable gases ignites.

On OCTOBER 23, 1989, Pasadena, Texas, A series of explosions near the Houston Ship Channel kills 23 people and injures 314. The blast occurs during a routine maintenance check on the Phillips chemical plant’s polyethylene reactor, which is a large quantity of flammable gases ignites.

Eighty-seven miners die in an explosion at Consol’s No. 9 mine when dangerous accumulations of loose coal and coal dust spark an explosion that spreads throughout the entire mine. The disaster helps to propel forward enactment of the Mine Safety and Health Act.

Twenty-one people die and 150 are injured when a spill in U.S. history.

Twelve months later, on MARCH 23, 2005, Texas City, Texas, eleven workers die and 150 are injured in a gas explosion. Workers are clearing gas from the pipelines when the explosion occurs.

In the Titan II underground missile silo at the Little Rock Air Force Base, a rupture in the electrical system causes an explosion, killing 128 workers.

An explosion at the Imperial Sugar refinery kills 13 people and injures more than 30 others. OSHA has no regulations on combustible dust, despite urgent recommendations from the US Chemical Safety Board for OSHA to implement such rules.

In the Buffalo Creek Disaster, the largest construction accident in United States history, 1,250 were killed, 1,100 injured, and over 4,000 left homeless.

A dust explosion at the Imperial Sugar refinery kills 13 people and injures more than 30 others. OSHA has no regulations on combustible dust, despite urgent recommendations from the US Chemical Safety Board for OSHA to implement such rules.

A dust explosion at the Imperial Sugar refinery kills 13 people and injures more than 30 others. OSHA has no regulations on combustible dust, despite urgent recommendations from the US Chemical Safety Board for OSHA to implement such rules.

A dust explosion at the Imperial Sugar refinery kills 13 people and injures more than 30 others. OSHA has no regulations on combustible dust, despite urgent recommendations from the US Chemical Safety Board for OSHA to implement such rules.

A dust explosion at the Imperial Sugar refinery kills 13 people and injures more than 30 others. OSHA has no regulations on combustible dust, despite urgent recommendations from the US Chemical Safety Board for OSHA to implement such rules.

An explosion at the Imperial Sugar refinery kills 13 people and injures more than 30 others. OSHA has no regulations on combustible dust, despite urgent recommendations from the US Chemical Safety Board for OSHA to implement such rules.

An explosion at the Imperial Sugar refinery kills 13 people and injures more than 30 others. OSHA has no regulations on combustible dust, despite urgent recommendations from the US Chemical Safety Board for OSHA to implement such rules.

An explosion at the Imperial Sugar refinery kills 13 people and injures more than 30 others. OSHA has no regulations on combustible dust, despite urgent recommendations from the US Chemical Safety Board for OSHA to implement such rules.

An explosion at the Imperial Sugar refinery kills 13 people and injures more than 30 others. OSHA has no regulations on combustible dust, despite urgent recommendations from the US Chemical Safety Board for OSHA to implement such rules.

An explosion at the Imperial Sugar refinery kills 13 people and injures more than 30 others. OSHA has no regulations on combustible dust, despite urgent recommendations from the US Chemical Safety Board for OSHA to implement such rules.