

Excerpt: *Rose Perr-Working Conditions in a Shirtwaist Factory*

Rose Perr, a 15 year-old Russian Jewish worker, testified before a commission investigating the conditions inside garment factories in New York City in the early 20th century. She was employed in one of the many shirtwaist factories, producing the tailored shirts that were the fashion among women of all classes at the time. Perr's testimony, along with that of others, helped raise awareness of the horrific conditions inside the thousands of factories in which immigrant women earned their livings.

Mounting the stairs of the waist factory, one is aware of the heavy vibrations. The roar and whir of the machines increase as the door opens, and one sees in a long loft... Rows and rows of girls with heads bent and eyes intent upon the flashing needles. They are all intensely absorbed; for if they are paid by the piece, they hurry from ambition (*motivation*), and if they be paid by the week, they are "speeded up" by the foreman to a pace set by the fastest workers....The hours were long - from eight till half past twelve, a half hour for lunch, and then from one till half past six. Sometimes the girls worked until half past eight, until nine. There were only two elevators in the building, which contained other factories. There were two thousand working people to be accommodated by these elevators, all of whom began work at eight o'clock in the morning; so that if Natalya (Rose's fictitious name) reached the floor of the shaft at half past seven, it was sometimes half past eight before she reached the factory on the twelfth floor. She was docked for this tardiness so often that frequently she had only five dollars a week instead of six.

"In the shop it is always night. The windows are only on the narrow ends of the room, so even the few girls who sit near them sew by gaslight most of the time, for the panes are so dirty the weak daylight hardly goes through them. The shop is swept only once a week; the air is so close that sometimes you can hardly breathe."

Eventually, Perr earned enough experience to earn nine dollars a week but she never took home the entire nine dollars.

"There are always 'charges' against me. If I laugh, or cry, or speak to a girl during work hours, I am fined ten cents for each 'crime'. Five cents is taken from my pay every week to pay for cleaning fluid which is used to clean waists that have been soiled in the making; and even if I haven't soiled a waist in a year, I must pay the five cents just the same. If I lose a little piece of lining, that possibly is worth two cents, I am charged ten cents for the goods and five cents for losing it...."