Do Your Fire Exits Look Like This?

Imagine that you were a worker inside this building counting on getting through that exit to flee a fire. That padlock is sealing not just your escape exit but your fate.

The Moral: Fire exits must be secured *from the inside* and in such a way that it doesn't prevent workers from using them in an emergency.

WHAT'S AT STAKE: The Humanity—The Triangle Shirt Factory Fire

Take another hard look at the photo. Now close your eyes as we take you back more than 100 years to New York City.

It's March 25, 1911. You work at the Triangle Waist Company shirt factory. It's the very definition of a sweatshop. You and your co-workers, mostly young women immigrants who barely speak English, earn pennies a day. Hundreds of you are crowded together on floors 8 through 10 in hot, dirty and appalling conditions

At about 4:30 in the afternoon, a fire breaks out on the eighth floor. The work space is crammed with flammable cloth and the fire quickly spreads to the ninth and tenth floors. The building has no fire protection and the only exit doors on each floor are locked from the outside—just like the fire exit in the photo above. You're trapped. 114 workers are killed.

The building owners are tried but under the laws of the day, they can't be convicted. The so-called Triangle Shirt Fire and its aftermath provoke outrage. It gives a huge boost to the labor movement and led to major reforms, including the enactment of fire and building codes and the first workplace safety laws.

We've come a long way since then. But apparently we still have a ways to go before fire exits locked from the outside become a relic of history.

WHAT'S AT STAKE: The Legality–Liability for Sealed Fire Exits

In addition to creating a death trap, sealing emergency exits from the outside is the kind of safety violation likely to get you into big big trouble with regulatory agencies and inspectors. Here's an example from the U.S.

A Hawaii food warehouse owner learned this lesson the hard way. OSHA inspectors found some fire exits were locked from the outside and sealed shut and others blocked by storage racks.

Result: It cited the owner for a willful violation, i.e., one committed with intentional, knowing or voluntary disregard for the law, or plain indifference to worker safety, and fined it $56,000. The owner was fined another $195,000 for other violations, 2 of them willful.

The press release announcing the fine leaves no doubt that OSHA hasn't forgotten Triangle:

"Employers must follow safety and health rules to prevent horrific tragedies, such as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York in 1911 when 146 workers died, unable to escape due to blocked exits. We hope to never see such a tragedy again, in Hawaii, or anywhere."

*Unicold Corp.,*No. 13-1602-SAN (SF-124), Reg. 9, August 12, 2013

8 EMERGENCY EXIT DO's & DON'Ts

1. **DO** make sure you know the emergency exit(s) in your building
2. **DON'T** keep large objects like boxes or equipment in emergency exits
3. **DO** remove any large objects that are blocking emergency exits–or ask your supervisor to do
4. **DON'T** keep explosives or flammable objects in emergency exits
5. **DO** make sure emergency exits are well lit–if they're not tell your supervisor
6. **DO** make sure emergency exits are kept unlocked from the inside so people can use them to escape the building in an emergency–no padlocks!

7. **DO** tell your supervisor if an emergency exit is padlocked or otherwise not readily available to use in an emergency
8. **DON’T** panic or stampede if an emergency does occur—evacuate calmly and help those who need assistance evacuating