Statistics and Storytelling: How Crystal Eastman Helped Call Attention to the Human Toll of Workplace Injuries

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“I believe in statistics just as firmly as I believe in revolutions. And what is more, I believe statistics are good stuff to start a revolution with.” — Crystal Eastman, Secretary of the New York Commission on Employers’ Liability and Causes of Industrial Accidents, two weeks after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of March 25, 1911.

March 25th marks the 103rd anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, a tragic industrial accident of such magnitude that it helped spark a groundbreaking movement for new workplace safety regulations and catalyze the creation of the country’s first workers’ compensation systems. While the fire drew public attention to the human carnage occurring in American workplaces, the dedicated documentation of injuries, fatalities, and their outcomes by Crystal Eastman helped prove that the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory disaster was not an isolated incident, but part of a devastating pattern inflicted on workers, families, and entire communities.
Today, a century after the first state workers’ compensation systems were created, is a particularly significant time to look back at the original goals of workers’ (then “workmen’s”)’ comp and evaluate whether today’s systems hold true to those goals. This debate should be as broad as it was a hundred years ago. It must assess the prevention of injuries, illnesses, and fatalities; whether workers are receiving prompt and adequate medical care and replacement wages; and the full medical, financial, mental, emotional, and social impact on workers and their families from being injured on the job.

In 1906, Eastman undertook a research project that documented the need for the workers’ compensation programs that were to be formed over the next decade. Eastman conducted her research in the Pittsburgh Steel District, a region home to 70,000 workers in the steel mills, 50,000 in the railroad industry, and 20,000 in the mines. According to the district’s hospital records, these sectors were in the business of manufacturing not only products, but also injuries: the mills, railroad yards, factories, and mines turned out over 500 workers every year with debilitating injuries including amputations and loss of eyesight. “Ten years would make 5,000,” wrote Eastman, “enough to people a little city of cripples, a number noticeable even among Greater Pittsburgh’s 600,000.”
The death toll was even more stunning: from July 1906 through July 1907, Eastman documented 526 work-related deaths in the district. “It is no wonder that to a stranger,” Eastman wrote, “Pittsburgh’s streets are sad … such is the trail of lasting miseries work-accidents leave behind.” She found, moreover, that the human toll of these injuries and deaths was magnified by society’s failure to support workers and their families. “In over one-half of the deaths and injuries resulting from a year’s work accidents in the Pittsburgh District,” wrote Eastman, “the employers assumed absolutely no share of the inevitable income loss … Not hardship alone, but hardship as an outcome of injustice—that is the situation.”

The power of Eastman’s work lay not only in her detailed documentation of deaths and injuries, but in exposing this “trail of lasting miseries” created in the wake of workplace “accidents.” Eastman revealed not only the abominable health and safety conditions that were leading to such high rates of death and injury, but also the cost shifting that placed the economic burden of these workplace accidents on injured workers, their families, and society at large. Her team visited as many family members of workers killed
on the job as they could find, conducting hundreds of structured interviews and collecting statistics in an attempt to capture the economic and social costs these deaths had on the surviving families.

Thanks in part to Eastman’s seminal work, today we have workers’ compensation systems that are meant to help workers and their families cope with workplace disasters. Yet the testimonies of many who have been through this system show that not only are people still placed at risk of preventable injuries, illnesses, and deaths, but that workers and their families continue to bear an unjust burden from the medical, emotional, and financial costs of these events.

In a 2013 interview, Tammy Miser, founder of United Support and Memorial for Workplace Fatalities, said that she had “seen families left thousands of dollars in debt even after a simple funeral and … [that death benefit] payments in no way provide any real support for families.” The parallels between Miser’s statement and Eastman’s findings over 100 years ago are haunting.

It is clear that the state of workers’ compensation today is not what Crystal Eastman would have hoped for, but there is hope in the opportunity to apply Eastman’s methodology of revolutionary statistics and storytelling to again shape a movement for workers’ compensation systems that demand safe workplaces and a robust system of medical care and replacement wages for injured and ill workers and their loved ones. In 1910, Eastman observed that an increase in health and safety publications had shaped “dissatisfaction which three years ago was all but inarticulate” into activism that “is now assertive and purposeful.” Her words offer valuable advice for today’s activists, who must use the same careful research, documentation, and statistics to influence attitudes and spur a movement.

What will a retrospective of workers’ compensation look like 100 years from now? Will we still be mourning the injustice of a system that does not value workers’ lives, or will we demand transparent, accessible information to both expose problems in the system and show us a path forward?

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