The Price of Clothes

How wages, orders, and safety shaped two workplace crises

AWH.P.2.2.B "Analyze complex and interacting factors that influence multiple perspectives during different historical eras and contemporary events."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline details about workers' needs, circle details about business pressures, and number the groups whose choices affected safety. Use your marks to trace how these factors shaped different perspectives.

Two Disasters in the Clothing Industry

1 On March 25, 1911, a fire swept through the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City. Many garment workers were young immigrant women who depended on their wages. Some exit doors were locked, and the building's fire escape failed; 146 people died. Workers and their families faced immediate questions about safety and survival. Factory owners sought to keep production moving in a competitive clothing market, while labor organizers pushed for safer workplaces. After the fire, reformers argued that inspections and stronger laws could prevent similar deaths. The disaster made the costs of cheap, fast production impossible for many New Yorkers to ignore.

2 More than a century later, workers at Rana Plaza in Bangladesh faced another deadly workplace crisis. Cracks appeared in the building before it collapsed on April 24, 2013, killing more than 1,100 people. Shops and a bank in the building closed after the cracks were found, but garment production continued. Many workers needed their wages, and reports say some were pressured to return. Factory managers faced pressure to meet orders, while clothing buyers abroad sought low prices and quick delivery. For workers, a missed shift could threaten income; for managers, a delayed order could threaten business. Neither concern made the building safe.

3 The two disasters occurred in different clothing industries. Triangle's workers made clothes in a US city where local organizers could press state lawmakers for change. Rana Plaza's factories supplied an international market, where decisions by buyers far away could affect deadlines and prices. In both cases, workers' need for wages interacted with employers' drive to fill orders, making it harder to refuse dangerous work. Yet responsibility was debated across more borders after Rana Plaza: factory managers, government inspectors, and foreign brands all faced demands for change. Seeing these pressures together explains why people could agree that safety mattered but disagree about who should pay for it.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did workers' need for wages and employers' need to fill orders interact in both crises?

2. Why might a worker and a factory manager at Rana Plaza have viewed the decision to keep producing differently?

3. How did the location of clothing buyers change which groups faced demands for safety improvements after Rana Plaza compared with Triangle?

4. Why would blaming workers for entering either building overlook other pressures described in the passage?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine your school district must choose between two uniform suppliers: one charges less but does not share factory inspection reports, while the other charges more and publishes them. In 5 to 6 sentences, analyze how two groups might view the choice, explain how cost and worker safety interact, and compare the dilemma with one event in the passage.

ANSWER KEY

The Price of Clothes

HIGH SCHOOL · AWH.P.2.2.B

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline details about workers' needs, circle details about business pressures, and number the groups whose choices affected safety. Use your marks to trace how these factors shaped different perspectives. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did workers' need for wages and employers' need to fill orders interact in both crises?	**Workers risked losing needed income if they stopped working, while employers wanted production to continue. Together, these pressures made it harder for workers to refuse dangerous work.**
2	Why might a worker and a factory manager at Rana Plaza have viewed the decision to keep producing differently?	**A worker needed wages but faced danger in the cracked building. A manager faced pressure to meet orders and could see a shutdown as a threat to the business.**
3	How did the location of clothing buyers change which groups faced demands for safety improvements after Rana Plaza compared with Triangle?	**Triangle's local organizers could press state lawmakers for change. Rana Plaza supplied buyers abroad, so demands for change also reached foreign brands, alongside factory managers and government inspectors.**
4	Why would blaming workers for entering either building overlook other pressures described in the passage?	**Workers depended on wages, and some Rana Plaza workers were reportedly pressured to return. Employers' drive to fill orders also shaped the conditions workers faced.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Families with tight budgets might prefer the cheaper uniforms because higher prices would strain their finances. Students concerned about factory workers might favor the supplier that publishes inspection reports. The school board could weigh both groups' concerns while deciding how to spend limited funds. Missing reports do not prove that the cheaper supplier's factory is unsafe, but they make its conditions harder to check. Like buyers after Rana Plaza, the district can influence a distant workplace through its purchasing choices. The higher price raises a question: who should pay for better information about worker safety?

Accept other supported perspectives that connect at least two interacting factors. For Part 3, students should not treat missing inspection reports as proof of unsafe conditions.