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Eyes on Labor: News Photography and America's Working Class

Carol Quirke. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xii, 358 pp. Cloth, \$99.00. Paper, \$29.95.)

Vincent DiGirolamo

Baruch College, New York, New York

The first photograph to win a Pulitzer Prize—awarded in 1942 to Milton Brooks of the *Detroit News*—shows nine members of the United Automobile Workers union pummeling a scab outside Ford Motor Company's River Rouge plant. Titled “Ford Strikers Riot,” the picture is emblematic of the heightened and highly partisan role that photography played in the struggle between capital and labor in modern America. More than a social revolution, the 1930s labor upsurge set off a visual revolution, argues Carol Quirke in *Eyes on Labor*, a perceptive, richly illustrated examination of photojournalism as practiced by news corporations, employers, and unions—all of whom drew on the seeming objectivity of photography to advance their interests.

Eyes on Labor opens by tracing the origins of photojournalism in stereographs, postcards, and the pictorial press's coverage of conflicts stretching from the national railroad strike of 1877 to the strike wave of 1934, and in reformers' pictures of slums and sweatshops. Yet photography's impact on class relations remained limited until the “photo-driven 1930s,” says Quirke, when fast film, wirephotos, and picture magazines produced a national visual culture with the capacity to influence public opinion and the political fortunes of labor (p. 45).

Quirke supports her thesis through five intersecting case studies. The first dissects *Life* magazine's glib coverage of the sit-down strike “fad” (p. 74). Seeking a mass readership, the publisher Henry Luce dished up gossipy details about life inside the occupied plants rather than interrogating the issues behind the protests. His photographers and caption writers paid more attention to the women's “gorgeous gams” than to their grievances (p. 75). *Life* nevertheless recognized unions as legitimate participants in the bid for a shared prosperity.

Quirke next focuses on the largely forgotten 1937 sit-down strike at the Hershey Chocolate Company in Pennsylvania, where a paternalistic industrialist, backed by the National Association of Manufacturers, unleashed a public relations blitz of pamphlets and doctored photos to cast strikers as aliens and ingrates. Fueled by this propaganda, a parade of loyalists, legionnaires, and dairymen stormed the factory and crushed the strike, showing corporate America that public relations experts could be as effective as Pinkerton Agency detectives.

Labor violence peaked in the 1937 Memorial Day massacre in Chicago, where clashes at a steelworkers' rally documented by newsreel cameras left ten people dead and ninety wounded. Quirke's discovery of several versions of the newsreel enables her to demonstrate how visual evidence, elucidated by investigative reporting and congressional hearings, shifted blame for the riot away from strikers and onto police. "Cameras Don't Lie," asserted a headline, but the truth, we see, only prevailed through struggle (p. 150).

Quirke is hardest on *Steel Labor*, the house organ of the United Steelworkers, which adopted a conservative, top-down approach to win social acceptance rather than to effect social change. The paper pictorially transformed its blue-collar founders into pinstriped labor statesmen and militant locals into obedient "team players" (p. 199). Quirke's focus on the much-neglected labor press is praiseworthy, yet her indictment discounts editors' classic rebuttal: that bosses also read the paper and could easily construe the cacophony of rank-and-file democracy as disunity.

The opposite of *Steel Labor* was *New Voices*, the newspaper of New York Distributive Workers Local 65, with a left-wing leadership that saw member participation as integral to the union's strength. Urged to document the full life of the union, the local's camera club photographed dances, blood drives, and picket lines, thus making *New Voices* an effective organizing tool and "an avenue for self-expression" until it was red-baited in the 1950s (p. 229).

Based on astute readings of individual photographs and a deep understanding of the context in which they operated, *Eyes on Labor* persuasively evokes how images shaped reality in working-class America.

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