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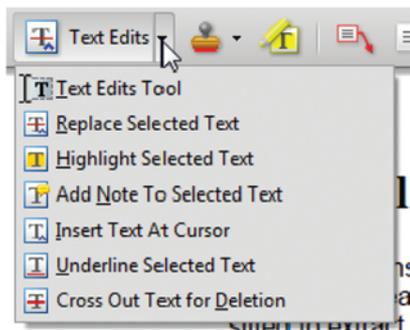
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Review

Eyes on labor

by Carol Quirke

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 376 pages

5 ISBN: 0-199-76823-4 Price: US\$26.96

Reviewed by Paolo Cardullo, Goldsmiths, University of London

In her detailed analysis of the US visual imagery of labour, produced mainly by press photography in the first half of the twentieth century, Carol Quirke's book, *Eyes on Labor*, considers the symbolic struggle over labour as central to historical understanding. It is hard to imagine how producers and consumers of images would have experienced the major technological shift precipitated by the growth of press photography in the 1930s. In this study, Quirke undertakes a remarkable task, reconstituting the excitement and effects brought by this revolution in mass culture. Through photography's increasing popularity, images of labour constructed public opinions and influenced labour relations themselves, to the extent that the 'new national media became an arena for competing messages about organised labour' (10).

Eyes on Labor is organised into six chapters, reflecting almost as many case studies, apart from Chapter 1, which sets the scene for the rising importance of photography in journalist practice at the turn of the century. The case studies are diverse and entertaining, from small-town Pennsylvania to the publishing industry in Manhattan, from congressional hearings in Washington DC to union halls in Chicago. They follow of a mixed method of content analysis, tracking 'patterns of meanings' across large bodies of archival photographs, and historical reconstruction of archival sources, through interviews, life stories and news content. This strategy results from the scarcity of direct references to any explicit politics of imagery in unions and corporate archives.

Eyes on Labor is a radical contextualisation of photographic meaning, which encompasses not just consideration of images and texts, but also institutional and political frameworks. It carefully considers the available technology and the intertextuality of meaning construction in photography. By weaving together interviews, images and documents with scholarly

analysis, Quirke shows how the politics of making the news through the eye of the camera shaped US labour, its perception, and ultimately its organisation. In other words, she unveils the symbolic battle over labour's shifting status. 45

Chapter 2 takes us behind the scenes of *Life* magazine, the rising star of photojournalism which, three years after its début in 1936, had already achieved regular circulation figures of 2 million. *Life's* coverage of labour is mostly from the Committee of Industrial Organisations' point of view. Quirke considers photography's inherent ambiguity alongside an exploration of the confusion that this new and powerful tool of representation could bring to the public. She argues that both unions and corporations produced representations of union membership as a 'fable of abundance', promoting a sober and individualistic ideal of labourers, devoted to the American dream of consumerism (15). This is evident especially in the representations seen on the pages of *Life* magazine. Against these dominant models, Quirke observes, crucially, that 'images of solidarity, community, or collective, public security rarely appeared in photographic prints as something worth fighting for' (15). 50 55 60 65

In Chapter 4, rising tensions over the representation of organised labour reached a crisis point around the photographic news reportage of the handling of the Memorial Day Massacre in May 1937, when Chicago police charged a mass picket, killing 10 workers. These reports first suggested that demonstrators were to blame for the incidents. By the end of the 1930s, however, with the unions' increasing mastery of photographic imagery, blame was turned towards the police and their union-busting techniques. Growing awareness of the political use of powerful forms of visual representation meant that unions sought to take greater control of their own photographic production, and began to use the camera, as Quirke puts it, 'as a political weapon' (234). 70 75 80

This issue is of particular significance in the final chapter of the book, where Quirke's abilities in reconstructing history really shine. Reading between the lines of the text, one has the sense of the huge archival task the researcher faced in examining US 85

90 photographic representations of labour in the first half
of the twentieth century, but also of the huge amount
of material which was not available, for reasons
including corporate restrictions and editorial
censorship. Chapter 6 is dedicated to the union paper
95 *New Voices* at Local 65 in NYC. This was, according to
Quirke, 'never just a union, but ... a cooperative
movement and a social service centre' (231), which
'melded shop floor, community, and cultural activism'
(226). The 'Photo Union', staffed with 50
100 photographers in 1942 alongside a wealth of
collaborators, had the most modern darkroom of any
trade union in NYC, apparently 'so popular that club
leaders had to arrange a waiting list' (227). While
'camera club members shot nostalgic landscapes, risqué
105 photos of their wives and men tossing babies', *New
Voices* photo staff had no patience for the club's
aesthetic concerns with 'endless critiques of the 450th
time you have seen a print' (228). As Bourdieu would
have it, photography is a classed technique of
110 apprehending the world. The Photo Union showed the
realistic, practical, fuss-free tastes of the working
classes, but there was an unresolved tension between
the leftist goal of representing unionised labour and
members' own aesthetic expectations. Ultimately, the
camera club served members' creative needs, while the
115 photo staff explicitly had an 'organising eye',
documenting union life in an era of rising
McCarthyism or, better, 'Hooverism' (Schrecker 1998).

Quirke works with these 'visual silences' and
complexities, revealing that the published photos were 120
only a tiny part of the thousands of negatives she studied
in order to find 'patterns of meanings'. She rightly
maintains that it is the photograph's institutional
context – 'who commissioned and who disseminated a
photo' (11) – which gives us crucial clues about the 125
ideological work that photographs produce. 'Workers'
home lives were often ignored. Workers existed in the
vacuum of their institutional or work lives', Quirke
admits (16). Among these silences and strategic
130 positionings, Quirke does a remarkable job of digging
through the fragments left behind in archives. She
examines the historical novelty of press photography in
the early years of the twentieth century with the
academic rigour of the scholar and the passion of the
135 activist. *Eyes on Labor* is a truly enjoyable journey
through 50 years of US unions, corporations and press
archives, exploring the spaces between organised
workers' struggles, their public representation and their
conscious fight to counter-represent themselves.

REFERENCE 140

Schrecker, Ellen. 1998. *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in
America*. Boston: Little, Brown.

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