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

Carol Quirke

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With his tousled hair, straight-toothed smile, and sweat-streaked face, steelworker Andy Lopata appeared to readers of *LIFE* magazine in March 1937 as proof of the labor movement's achievements. The headline beneath Lopata's grinning portrait seemingly identified the reason for his good spirits – "The Common Steel Worker Gets His Pay Raised to \$5 a Day." The accompanying picture story claimed to depict a typical week in the life of the average worker. Lopata's wife and children watched him leave for work in the morning. His wife readied dinner in the kitchen. The couple attended church services on Sunday. He stretched in the grass, resting. Just one image showed Lopata toiling in the steel mill. The message: Here's a hard-working, upstanding family man living the good life thanks to a little help from his union, the Committee of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and quite a lot of assistance from the generosity and foresight of the managers of America's industrialized political economy. Lopata, though, never enjoyed the payday touted in the headline. His employer fired him for joining the union and fighting for a raise.

In *Eyes on Labor*, Carol Quirke explores how news photography – and the editing decisions made about print photographs – shaped Americans' understanding of the labor movement and working-class life in the mid-twentieth century. She analyzes more than one hundred photographs (with more than eighty figures reproduced in the book), seeking to make sense of Americans' muddled reaction to the rise of union power. She studies photographs in

context, examining the headlines, captions, stories, and advertisements that appeared beside images as closely as she does the photos themselves. Quirke organizes her thematic chapters into an overlapping chronology, steadily revealing how different newspapers and magazines visually represented unionists and their activities, as well as how corporations and unions used supposedly "truthful" photographs to promote their political agendas. She situates her research within a growing body of scholarship that sees the "contradictory impulses and consequences" of the "populist aesthetic that suffused America's visual culture" (5) in the 1930s and 1940s. She complicates conclusions by Elizabeth Cohen and Michael Denning about the ability of mass culture to unite and empower industrial workers. Quirke finds that heroic imagery celebrating "the people" often implicitly promoted consumption, conformity, and corporatism. Images that appeared to salute workers often contained contradictory meanings that negated workers' activism, as her critical reading of Andy Lopata's picture story shows, and forestalled their imagining of what was possible for them and their movement. Too often, Quirke argues, news photography "narrowed labor's political and economic strategies, ultimately constricting workers' place within the American Dream" (283).

The New Deal legislation that propelled union activism coincided with photojournalism advances that fostered the development of a visual mass media. Photographers carried lighter cameras more capable of capturing action, and printers reproduced photographs more cheaply and more quickly. Publisher Henry Luce capitalized on these technological changes by publishing *LIFE*, America's most popular news pictorial magazine. Labor news appeared frequently in early issues. Quirke credits the magazine's photographers and editors with producing images that "recast working Americans into the national mainstream" (52). While most news publishers still denounced unionists, Luce welcomed stories about ordinary workers,

hoping to win new readers who would buy the goods advertised beside the magazine's stories. He accepted the presence of unions in American society. Luce's embrace, though, was qualified. *LIFE* minimized workers' struggles, ignored their complaints, downplayed their activism, and inflated the benevolence and intelligence of factory bosses. Editors typically blamed violence on strikers, not owners. When sit-in strikes rippled across the nation, the magazine's editors characterized the movement as a fad rather than an innovative tactic of protest. Quirke concludes that their "lighthearted approach muted class hostility and portrayed management as sympathetic to labor's needs" (74).

Public relations strategies evolved in tandem with new photojournalism practices, and business interests often manipulated the presentation of images to their advantage. Despite poor pay and overbearing managerial oversight, workers who struck against Hershey Chocolate in 1937 failed to mobilize public support for their movement. Their complaints were seldom heard. Hershey's corporate publications established a pro-company narrative that journalists often replicated in their news stories and photographs. Milton Hershey, the company's founder, benefitted from an oft-told origins story that celebrated his rags-to-riches biography, philanthropic endeavors, and construction of an idealized, cooperative community that strove to eliminate class hostility (but actually exacerbated conflict). He indirectly enjoyed consumers' residual goodwill thanks to the comforting branding of his chocolate products. The National Association of Manufacturers, an unflinching opponent of unions, reiterated Hershey's whitewashed corporate history to rally national opposition against the CIO and striking workers. Journalists followed suit. In story after story, reporters repeated bromides about Hershey's personal story and his supposedly idyllic town. Photographs "vivified the message of a corporate paradise torn by CIO activism" (142) when editors repeatedly contrasted bucolic images of

Hershey's town with strike violence. No wonder, then, public polls found that few Americans sympathized with the exploited workers.

Union bosses also advanced their own interests through the careful selection of images. In perhaps her most original insights, Quirke illustrates how the United Steelworkers of America reinforced the authority of its leaders through the use of photographs in *Steel Labor*, the organization's in-house publication. Started in 1936, the newspaper allowed members to become "part of an imaged community bound by the conventions of a staid, gender-divided, associational life, with modest demands for inclusion in the promise of American life" (189). Editors mostly published portrait-style photographs of the union's leaders, despite the affordability of image reproduction and the enhanced ability to capture human motion on film. Images of rank-and-file members tended to show them standing and staring straight ahead – a nameless generic mass of humanity awaiting direction. "By presenting the predominantly male membership in a formulaic, humdrum form," Quirke argues, "*Steel Labor* proposed that they were necessary but subsidiary contributors to the movement" (199). Such images mostly excluded women and African Americans. Quirke strengthens her conclusion by contrasting *Steel Labor* with *New Voices*, a newspaper published in New York by Local 65 of the Distributive and Processing and Office Workers of America. The paper's volunteer photo staff consisted of ordinary union members who, "enticed workers into struggle, educated them about collective action, and modeled activities for campaign success" (227). Photographers searched for angles that enlivened routine meeting coverage and planned ahead to match images with the main points explained in news articles. Their photographs captured rank-and-file members walking picket lines, recovering from assaults, and voting on contracts. Other images emphasized the union's diverse membership, frequently showing men and women, blacks and whites, working and relaxing in

integrated settings. *New Voices'* photos illustrate the unifying – and subversive – possibilities that photography could nurture, but their exceptionality also reaffirm Quirke's central argument that even seemingly supportive photographs often contradicted or undermined workers' aims.

Eyes on Labor risks becoming a blur, with its close reading of so many photographs and the too frequent burying of penetrating insights. Quirke, though, rewards diligent readers with a smart, nuanced analysis of photojournalism's impact on workers' lives and struggles in the decades before television emerged as the nation's most viewed visual medium. Labor historians and media studies scholars will find her book valuable for helping to explain how Americans came to accept the presence of unions without worrying much about the economic inequities that motivated workers' protests.

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