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Review of *Eyes on Labor: News Photography and
America's Working Class* by Carol Quirke

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

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Carol Quirke, *Eyes on Labor: News Photography and America's Working Class* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2012, \$29.95). Pp. 358. isbn 978 0 1997 6823 3 .

In an era of digital imaging, where photographic images are created, combined, altered and removed, it seems comforting to consider a time when photographs were used as evidence of an external objective "reality." In *Eyes on Labor: News Photography and America's Working Class*, Carol Quirke focuses on the influence of news photographs in shaping public opinion about organized labor during the first half of the twentieth century. In addition to evaluating how photographs were used as factual evidence, Quirke maintains that news images also represent an ideologically constructed vision of the world. In *Eyes on Labor*, news organizations, employers and labor unions all utilized a belief in the objectivity of visual evidence to create views of labor, unions and relations between workers and management.

Quirke draws on traditional archival material, memoirs, news articles, Congressional investigations and oral histories to create a series of case studies focusing on labor-related events during the years between 1919 and

1950. The first chapter provides important contextual material for the rest of the book, situating the rise of photojournalism in labor struggles with Progressive Era reformers who incorporated visual evidence in their depictions of labor. The case studies consider the construction of unionism in *Life* magazine, address press coverage of the Hershey Chocolate Sit-Down Strike and Chicago's Memorial Day massacre, and evaluate the use of photographs in two union publications, *Steel Labor* and *New Voices*.

In each chapter, traditional historical sources are augmented with probing analyses of news photographs, many of which are reprinted in the book. These textual analyses explore the rhetoric, visual vocabulary and style of the photographs in addition to considering the social, institutional and cultural context for the images. The result is a masterful text that is extremely well researched and is based on a conceptually thoughtful analysis and nuanced interpretation.

The case study of the Chicago Memorial Day massacre provides a trenchant example of how ideological visions of labor conflicts are considered in *Eyes on Labor*. While police brute force and violence shown in a newsreel and news photographs of the massacre have come to symbolize labor's struggles for unionism, initial news coverage supported police, politicians and business in blaming the strikers for the violence. Although images showed peaceful strikers being attacked by police, resulting in the death of ten strikers and the unprovoked injury of ninety others, news organizations initially framed their coverage as a clash of equal powers, with the police defending management against an unruly mob of rioters. News photographs and a Paramount newsreel were later used as evidence in a Congressional investigation into corporate violence against unions. While the La Follette Committee determined that the police killed innocent strikers, a refashioned newsreel story of the massacre was later censored in Chicago and St. Louis because the graphic images were seen as inappropriate for women and children viewers.

Eyes on Labor provides a nuanced and complex understanding of business and labor struggles. Two chapters focus on how unions used news photographs to support differing ideological perspectives on labor. A case study of photographs in the United Steel Workers' newspaper *Steel Labor* illustrates changes from a visual tradition in support of class struggle to an emphasis on authoritative leadership. Images of union workers or labor struggles were rarely shown in the paper; instead, headshots of union leaders were used to promote the stability and power of the union. *Steel Labor* emphasized leadership-driven unionism and did not focus on race, class or gender issues, nor did it address workers' needs or strike violence. Its emphasis reinforced a distinct vision of union rights and labor struggles.

In contrast, the study of *New Voices*, the picture newspaper of Local 65 of the distributive workers, documented worker struggles, collective action and union life. *New Voices* was envisioned as a worker's forum, educating workers about unionization and integrating them into union activities. The photographs in the newspaper helped to create a union culture where laborers worked and played together, organized, studied and lived union-focused lives. Aligned with the policies of Local 65, *New Voices* stressed gender, race and ethnic diversity, providing members with a labor-focused publication.

Overall, the excellent contextual material, combined with a strong conceptual perspective, and a nuanced analysis of news images, makes *Eyes on Labor* a must-read for researchers interested in visual communication and/or labor history.