

# **For Work, for Rest, for Selfies: Solidarity Portraiture and Capitalist Photography in Post- Automation America**

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## **Abstract**

Labor condition advancements have occurred alongside technological developments, and the two have intersected at multiple moments in American history. This study examines workplace photography - through the lens of the worker and the employer - through four eras: the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, the Great Depression, the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and 70s, and the Tech Boom between 2000 and 2020. By examining the differences in how labor advocates and employers portray workers, it becomes clear that photography is a powerful tool in workplace unionization efforts and that whoever is holding the camera matters a great deal in the narratives that are constructed.

**Keywords:** Workplace photography, self-representation, labor movement, political aesthetics, unionization

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## Introduction



Fig. 1. Twitter posts of essential medical workers (from Jackie Dunham, "It's Exhausting: ICU Nurse Shares before-and-after Photos of Herself to Show Pandemic Toll." Coronavirus. CTV News, November 24, 2020. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/it-s-exhausting-icu-nurse-shares-before-and-after-photos-of-herself-to-show-pandemic-toll-1.5202591>).

The COVID-19 pandemic has made itself unavoidable in current conversations of labor. As stores shut down and working from home surged, essential workers across the nation carried the economy on their backs, in their aprons, and with gloved hands. Especially during the beginning of the pandemic, little was known by the general public about how essential medical workers were handling the increase in patients and limited supplies. Twitter became a platform for essential workers to take and share selfies in a way that demonstrably argued the reality of their conditions. In these images we see bags under eyes, we see bruising, we see stunned expressions [Fig. 1]. Through these

images, we *feel* the exhaustion, we *feel* missing family members, we *feel* the need to respond to their calls and give these essential workers their personal protective equipment. In our current COVID discourse, selfies are being deployed by the workforce to demonstrate the toll, both physically and emotionally, of the pandemic.



Fig. 2. Fruit tree workers strike (from Gosia Wozniacka, "As Hundreds of Farmworkers Test Positive for COVID-19, Many Remain Unprotected." Civil Eats. Civil Eats, May 18, 2020. <https://civileats.com/2020/05/13/as-hundreds-of-farmworkers-test-positive-for-covid-19-many-remain-unprotected/>).

Photographs taken by and of laborers and labor advocates have crystallized in all different ways throughout the pandemic. This photograph for instance, which appears on the food systems non-profit Civil Eats, depicts fruit tree workers in Washington state as they protest unfair pandemic conditions [Fig. 2]. In this image, we see unity and collective action through the community of people. We see a holistic depiction of fruit workers' environment, as their individual and cultural identities are apparent through their languages, clothing,

families, and emotions. Through this holistic documentation of produce worker lives and conditions, Civil Eats's photograph illuminates how the medium shapes the relationships, affiliations, and allegiances between the subject of the gaze and the viewer. These relationships can range from utter objectification to unified advocacy—with Civil Eats signal of solidarity establishing it in the latter camp. Its image is symbolic of the influence in- and out-groups have on the depiction and presentation of photography stories. When laborers and labor advocates are both behind and in front of the camera, a notion of worker solidarity exists outside of the traditional order of the labor union, creating wider opportunities and newer possibilities for labor organizing.

Workplace photography has long served two purposes: solidarity portraiture and capitalist photography. Capitalist photography is highly curated political photography with a strict set of socioeconomic objectives that is distributed by employers with a narrative that they are comfortable with promoting. Capitalist photography seeks to homogenize the workforce and increase their production outputs. This might be, for instance, an image from McDonald's Corporation that shows potato supplier Frank Martinez exuberantly sitting atop a pile of his freshly farmed potatoes [Fig. 3]. The sun ascends, illuminating the potato horizon and shedding light upon Martinez's gleaming smile. He is happy, his potatoes are happy, McDonald's is happy and you, the consumer thinking wistfully of fries, should be happy—a stop at the drive through means you are making farmers like Martinez gleeful and filled with purpose. This image depicts workers on McDonald's terms, and the autonomy seen in previous images is absent.



Fig. 3. McDonald's supplier Frank Martinez (fMcDonald's, "Meet Our Suppliers: Frank Martinez." McDonald's, 2017. <https://www.mcdonalds.com/us/en-us/about-our-food/meet-our-suppliers/potatoes-frank-martinez.html>).

Alternatively, solidarity portraiture is photography by laborers and labor advocates that fashions the portrayal of working people into an argument for labor advancements, including better conditions and higher pay. This understanding of portraiture builds upon the conventions of the medium—focusing on a person or group as the primary subject—but acknowledges how it evolves under the definition of labor. This kind of portrait is of a people, not just a person. It indicates a movement, not a moment. Civil Eats's photograph provides a demonstration of how solidarity portraiture operates as a response to repressive corporate tactics, such as those seen in the McDonald's image. Civil Eats shows the protesting reality of produce workers, while McDonald's curates ideal imagery of its staff to service stockholder's expectations and comfort customer's ethics.

Not quite photojournalism, solidarity portraiture is a powerful counteractor to employers' use of photography due to its biased authorship. The photographer of solidarity portraiture does not position herself as an objective observer and visual reporter of events, rather is defiantly subjective and intentional in the contradiction of employers' use of capitalist photography. Solidarity portraiture does

something different than any other medium: it provides an alluring snapshot of the movement's perspective that holds that representation of laborers by themselves and their proxies is a form of advocacy. Solidarity portraiture involves laborers and labor advocates controlling the camera and securing autonomy through expression. When practiced effectively, this has the distinct ability to catalyze labor movements in the post-automation era.

Workplace photography has been structured by an internal dialogue between capitalist photography and solidarity portraiture that encompasses both subject matter and aesthetic style. When it engenders this dialogue, solidarity portraiture comprises an activist posture where it counters, challenges, and talks back to the oppressive tactics of capitalist photography. Employers, hell-bent on increasing productivity, have evolved in how they attempt to homogenize employees, frequently through the photography used to pacify the workforce and discipline workers. Managerial science turned into identification propaganda which turned into surveillance apparatuses, and all of which seek to pacify employees and homogenize the workforce. Yet solidarity portraiture has routinely been deployed as a counter-discourse to this capitalist photography, with the intention to combat employee repression.

Solidarity portraiture provides freedom in self-depiction that can allow laborers to, among other things, move beyond cultural stereotypes, depictions, and expectations set forth by capitalist photography. Today, in a world where corporations have their own Twitter accounts and, according to the *Citizens United v. FEC*, their own rights, self-representation among laborers can be enormously helpful in their ability to combat dystopian surveillance and consumptive capitalism. The ability to present oneself can bring about progressive changes within labor movements, and photography that allows laborers to display their movements through their own eyes can help their causes enormously.

This article tracks solidarity portraiture as a response to capitalist photography's homogenization efforts, so that we might document how self-representation of workers can lead to gains in labor

movements. This critical rebuttal of corporate control can capture the distinct power photography has in encouraging social support for a movement. The relevant events and issues that shaped the production and distribution of workplace photography are unique to the particular times in which they occur. Solidarity portraiture has progressed from the Brownie to the iPhone—and its effects have enhanced as well. The unique powers and limitations of solidarity portraiture as a counter-discourse to capitalist photography can be seen throughout American history. This study explores four major labor contexts that produced this dynamic: the Gilded Age into the Progressive Era, before and during the Great Depression, during the Civil Rights era, and in the early 2000s. In each context, capitalist photography is countered by solidarity portraiture. By comparing photography from these touchstone moments in the American labor consciousness, we can see how solidarity portraiture is a direct, argumentative response to capitalist photography and understand how the portraits that laborers and their advocates develop can provide the foundation for progressive advances in labor movements. We can understand the trajectory of labor movements based on not only what they show, but how they show it.

### **Literature Review**

Scholarship relevant to the study of solidarity portraiture generally falls into three avenues. First, scholars have explored how photography is used by employers, largely in terms of improving efficiency, surveillance, and other modes of social control meant to further profits. Second, scholars have asserted the role of photojournalism and photography in social movements. Third, scholars have examined how self-representation provides autonomy to workers.

On the first point, scholars have dissected the methods by which employers use photography to increase productivity and homogenize the workplace through a surveillance apparatus. Historian Larry Peterson, for example, argues that the first uses of photography

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in the workplace were images produced by and for the employers; these were critical in establishing the medium as politically significant.<sup>1</sup> By discussing the covert advantages of photography and photographic distribution for employers, Peterson illustrates the key role that both can play in the maintenance (or destruction) of workplace pacification. Angela Kathleen Dietz builds upon Peterson, asserting that “welfare work” photography—propaganda that employers use to argue the quality of life for their employees is better than it is—is more than a method of pacification.<sup>2</sup> This is a type of capitalist photography that rallies affection around “working class heroes” who exemplify submission to corporate authority.<sup>3</sup> This, she suggests, depicts workers as benefiting from a corporation’s largesse and high production outputs. Dietz distinguishes “corporate welfare” photography as more than a depiction of workers; instead, it is overt instances of corporations using photography to surveil and homogenize their workers. Capitalist photography, then, is used to homogenize diverse laborers into a single, employer-driven cultural identity, thereby preventing workplace dissent and improving the corporation’s bottom line.

In addition to exploring how photography has served employers, scholars have examined how photojournalism, or the documentation of historic events by news organizations, has played a significant role in American social movements and, importantly, their ability to attain their goals. Similar to but not the same as solidarity portraiture, photojournalism comes from purportedly objective journalistic sources while solidarity portraiture is developed by advocates and laborers on behalf of the workers. Journalism reports, while portraiture asserts. Robin Lindley asserts that news photography

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<sup>1</sup>Larry Peterson, “Producing Visual Traditions among Workers: The Uses of Photography at Pullman.” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 42 (1992): 40-69. Accessed February 22, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27672021>.

<sup>2</sup> Angela Kathleen Dietz, “Spectacles of Labor: Visualizing a Nation at Work, 1850-1920.” PhD diss. Saint Louis University (2008), pg. 331

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pg. 366

has allowed labor unions to garner public sympathy.<sup>4</sup> Claiming that the snapshot itself causes change, Lindley demonstrably argues that the frame, focus, and finite details of a photo are what strike sympathy in its audience, and insists that sympathy is crucial for the movement's advancement. This claim—that images of movements can affect their outcomes—solidifies photography as a powerful tool, one useful on behalf of both labor protest and corporate hegemony. Lindley's work distinguishes the particular effect that photography uniquely brings to unionization efforts. Solidarity portraiture—which aims to evoke sympathy—is entirely built upon the nuances and advantages of photography. Carol Quirke expands on this, finding that when photojournalism is made accessible to the public it becomes particularly advantageous to movements.<sup>5</sup> Quirke proposes that, from the perspective of labor movements, the success of any collaboration between the working class and photojournalists hinges on the distribution of photos to the public. For Quirke, the snapshot itself is less important than the cultural perception of it, as the latter depends upon the former. This is complicated in conversations about photojournalism and civil rights.

While race-based civil rights movements are not always directed toward labor, many of their most famous actions, such as the Memphis sanitation strike, dovetailed with labor movements. Furthermore, the lessons scholars have taken from photography and the Black civil rights movement of the 20th century have some applicability to examinations of labor movement photography. In his foundational text on the use of photography in the civil rights movement, Martin A. Berger tracks the international distribution of protest images in the 1950s and 1960s and in doing so, finds that

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<sup>4</sup> Robin Lindley, "Unions and Strikes Through the Camera Lens." History News Network. Accessed February 22, 2021.

<https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/149436>.

<sup>5</sup> Carol Quirke, *Eyes on Labor: News Photography and America's Working Class* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), pg. 181

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attention to a movement matters a great deal in the public support of it.<sup>6</sup> In a divergence from Lindley and Quirke, Berger argues that it is not the photographic form or the breadth of its distribution that make social movements successful. Instead, he purports, the critical difference is the attention viewers pay to the photographs. The transmission of photographs—from protests to people—matters a great deal in a movement’s ability to define itself directly. While Lindley and Quirke depict photojournalists as equal players in social movements because of their production and distribution of photos, Berger feels they play a secondary role to the public and its perceptions.

Berger, Lindley, and Quirke all discuss the effects of journalistic photography in social movements; other scholars examine the nexus of documentary photography and advocacy. For example, Emily Kathryn Morgan documents how the public’s visceral response to dramatic photographs of the meat-packing industry led to labor advocates’ success in gaining progressive regulations.<sup>7</sup> Critical to Morgan’s theory is the gravitas of the content. This, in turn, provokes uncomfortable discussion spurred by the intensity of the imagery. While it might begin with images, it is public discussion, she contends, that is key to social change. Morgan argues that it was not simply the images but their ability to evoke uncomfortable discussion that encouraged change in the meatpacking industry.

None of these scholars, however, focus on self-representation, even as the representation of self is becoming an increasingly key part of social movements. By turning toward solidarity portraiture, the article provides new contours to all of these discussions by seeking to determine how solidarity portraiture has been used by laborers and their advocates themselves; as simultaneous photographers and subjects, workers have made photography an organizing strategy as they seek to further progressive contracts and make policy gains.

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<sup>6</sup> Martin A. Berger. 2011. *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press), pg. 33

<sup>7</sup> Emily Kathryn Morgan, “Striking Images.” *The Annals of Iowa* 77, no. 2 (2018): 151–89. <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12500>.

### **From the Gilded Age to the Progressive Era**

The end to the rapid economic growth of the Gilded Age was fueled by anti-trust legislation and pro-worker sentiments. While monopolies had shaped civilian aristocracies—a small minority of the population who had a large share of wealth—this opulence was challenged by progressive interventions, such as the famous publication of Upton Sinclair’s muckraking *The Jungle* in 1906, a signal event that enraged the public with its depictions of the appalling labor conditions in Chicago’s stockyards and led to the passage the Pure Food and Drug Act later that year<sup>8</sup>. In this fraught context, the Gilded Age and Progressive Era saw the initial rise of workplace photography as a tool of both management and worker advocates.

Frank Bunker Gilbreth’s photography, used for his “Motion Study,” sought to increase worker productivity through correcting and policing their bodily movements. This emphasis on productivity and control over workers’ bodies led to Progressive Era concerns regarding labor conditions in factories and the way photography was being used by employers to oppress workers. Among advocates for improved conditions were photographers like Lewis Hine, a staffer of the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), who specifically utilized child labor imagery. For the decade following 1908, Hine’s photographs of child laborers served to critique the objectives of hyper-productive imagery that was instilled by figures like Gilbreth. Hine’s photographs intentionally spoke back to Gilbreth by employing a similar visual vocabulary, and simultaneously undermined his emphasis on increasing worker productivity by replacing it with an empathic approach to employment.

First published in 1915, Gilbreth’s “Motion Study” used triggered camera photography in order to compare the movements of fast and slow workers. Photographing each hand movement, Gilbreth

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<sup>8</sup>Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle: With the Author's 1946 Introduction*. Cambridge, MA: R. Bentley, 1979.

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distinguished the types of workers and movements that were most efficient. This allowed supervisors to mandate certain movements and styles of production, while eliminating unnecessary and thus unproductive ones or terminating inefficient workers altogether. Gilbreth employed light capture photography to track the minute hand movements of assembly line workers and perfect production.<sup>9</sup> While conflicts between labor movements and corporate control rose in the early-20th century, Gilbreth authored many texts that transformed how employers viewed workplace efficiency and the humanity of the humans on the assembly line. These ultimately contributed to the prioritization of productivity over the problems that workers faced.

Photographs for “Motion Study” were taken in Gilbreth’s studio between 1913 and 1917, during the rise of American capitalism in the post-Civil War, increasingly industrial north. This studio was motivated by factory owner interests during the Taylorist, Fordist-era of factory production, where scientific management and mass production were being widely deployed in factories across the nation. In his study, Gilbreth attached flashing lights to worker’s hands to calculate the time it took for movements to be completed. For Gilbreth—a wealthy, white inventor that was born an American citizen, unlike the largely immigrant working class—laborers were objects of study. Intended for those in managerial positions, Gilbreth’s work had a single intention: maximum efficiency. Scientific management of the workforce was a blossoming field, and Gilbreth’s photo collection became foundational to factories across the nation. Irrelevant was the comfort of the worker; productivity was the primary purpose during this era of photography.

In one series of “Motion Study,” we see a woman engage with a stamp [Fig. 4]. She opens a book, picks up the stamp, dips it in ink, stamps the page, and scribbles with a pen before finally glancing at Gilbreth behind the camera. The graphed backdrop indicates a pseudo-scientific environment—where lines are used but don’t really

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<sup>9</sup>Frank B. Gilbreth, *Primer of Scientific Management*. New York, NY: Nabu Press, 2010.

measure anything. The slightly heightened position of the camera and closeness of the frame on the subject contribute to its voyeuristic effect; the tilts of her head, curl of her fingers, and deflation of her chest during exhales are all captured when the photograph is taken this way. It is here that we see the distinct opportunities photography provides to employers: Gilbreth's treatment of workers perceived them as vehicles of productivity and capable of adhering to whatever was needed to increase photography. Motion study did not automate the workplace; it rendered the workers as automated as their industrial surroundings.

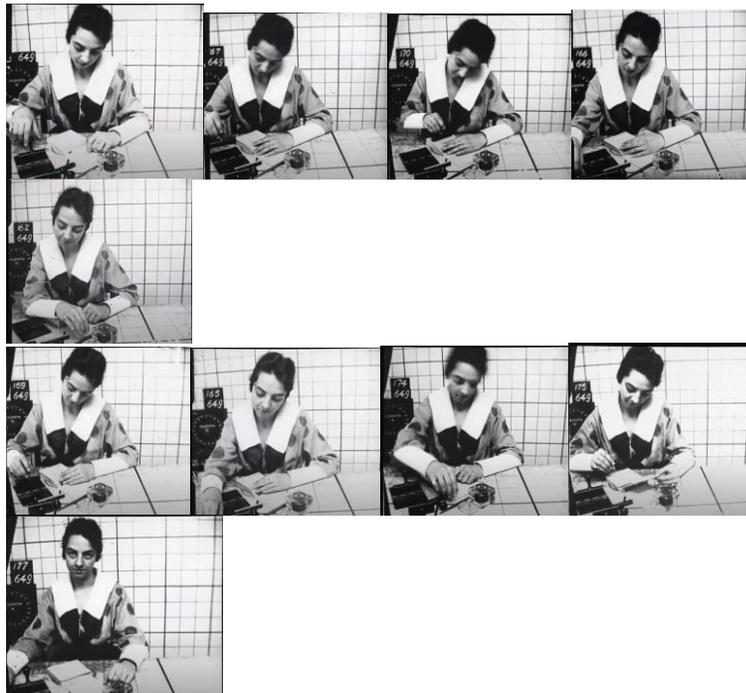


Fig. 4. "Motion Study" excerpt (Frank B. Gilbreth, "Frank B. Gilbreth Motion Study Photographs." Guide to the Frank B. Gilbreth Motion Study Photographs. Cornell University. Accessed May 10, 2021. [/https://rmc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/KCL06126p.html](https://rmc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/KCL06126p.html)).

While operatives like Gilbreth were busy using photography to enhance productivity, workers' rights advocates opposed the increasingly ominous notion that workers were essentially robots. Children, characterized by some as ideal laborers due to their small hands, nimble bodies, and submission to authority, were subjects of debate during the labor advancements of the Progressive Era. To disrupt this narrative, the NCLC hired photographer Lewis Hine to create a visual catalogue of—and argument against—child labor. Purposed with communicating to the public the plight of child laborers, Hine employed solidarity portraiture to counter the oppressive use of photography by figures like Gilbreth.

Taken across the nation beginning in 1908, this photographic collection was developed during the eruption of labor protections and worker's rights movements. The Progressive Era saw laborers and their advocates step behind the camera, yet into the limelight. Unlike Gilbreth's intended audience of management personnel, Hine wanted the whole nation to see the nuances of his photography. These images were distributed in newspapers and, eventually, academic texts.

By capturing images of children on the factory floor, in fields, and fearfully unrecognizable from coal dust, Hine's work depicted their exploitation in what many viewed as an irrefutable way: realistic documentary photography with an essence of realism. Though there was staging and scene-setting done by Hine, his photographs seemed to be a brutally honest form that did not allow for rhetorical language or selective illustration to obstruct or alter the meaning of the laboring subjects. Instead, Hine's purpose of exposing the cruelty of child labor conditions was clear with every detail. Here, photography wasn't used to increase the speed of child workers; instead argued that the focus on their speed was robbing them of any true life.

Whereas Gilbreth used motion photography to depict laborers as simply makers of movements, Hine's sympathetic imagery and strategic distribution of his child labor photography debunked this inhumane belief. This is most apparent in his 1917 "Stamping Labels".

"Stamping Labels" depicts a young girl, on her feet and in an uniform smock stripped of any personalized identity, stamping

shipping labels in a work room lit only by a single bulb. Her careful balance and steady eyeline indicates familiarity with the job and curvature to its requirements. She is, like Gilbreth's subject, stamping paperwork for a wage. This photo is taken from a measurable distance, making it seem like the photographer is unbeknownst to the subject, as he peers into her world. Despite the standardization of her movement, her identity spills out through a ribbon fantastically tied atop her head. It's just a small piece of identity, but it indicates the slippage of humanity to productivity. This photo, posed and captured by Hine, advocates on behalf of a child who has been mechanized by labor. This image shares a visual vocabulary with Gilbreth, where objects like stamps, smocks, and assembly lines serve as motifs between the eras, as do disciplined concentration of workers and the management of their actions.

The image below speaks back to Gilded Age depictions, arguing that productivity-driven photography neglects to consider the condition to which workers were subjected and thereby replaces an ethos of efficiency with one of empathy. Hine is arguing that Gilbreth's focus on productivity is an incomplete study, as it deprioritized the workers: the subjects. Since Gilbreth uses a studio to take his photos, the seating, clothing, and environment of the subjects are removed, and the contexts of labor conditions are hidden. In contrast, Hine considers the contexts that shape life for child laborers, and he depicts this by displaying a child in her workplace and not in a studio. When the subject of the photo is surrounded by seemingly insurmountable piles of paper, for example, this inclusion suggests the overwork, long days, emphasis on productivity that structured the exploitation of child laborers. Gilbreth's rosy review of productivity is rounded out in Hine's portrait of a worker in plight.



Fig. 5. “Stamping Labels” (Lewis Hine, “Stamping Labels. Boston Index Card Co., 113 Purchase Street. Boston, Massachusetts.” The Library of Congress. National Child Labor Committee, January 31, 1917. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/nclc.05617/>).

By photographing child workers in their work environments, Hine exposes the incomplete nature of Gilbreth’s study. His photo, which shows a child laborer partaking in the same task as Gilbreth’s, tells a widely different narrative than Gilbreth’s: the inclusion of a grim context is Hine’s method of deprioritizing productivity as a “science” and demanding examination of productivity and exploitation. When Hine doesn’t remove child laborers from their conditions or fictionalize their climates, it is an expression of solidarity with them. Photography moves from being a weapon of the oppressor to a tool

for organizing to change the conditions of childhood labor. A portrait of a girl becomes a portrait of change needed.

Though Hine's divergent framing of labor—while using a visual vocabulary that was shared with Gilbreth—he speaks back to Gilbreth and challenges corporate photography's normalization of workplaces abuses in the name of science and, importantly, how management uses this science to homogenize the movement of the workforce. If Gilbreth is asking how fast laborers can stamp paper, Hine answers that speed itself is what's wrong with the early-20th century workforce, and that the dehumanization of employees should instead be the subject of study.

### **Before and During the Great Depression**

In the era preceding the Great Depression, corporate activity became saturated in pseudo-managerial sciences. Taylorism, a theory of scientific management that analyzes and increases productivity with the main objective of efficiency, sought to create a more efficient workplace alongside Fordism, which was focused on mass production on assembly lines.<sup>10</sup> Due to this, laborers had concerns regarding the concentration of wealth, opposition to unionization, and overall exploitation by their employers. In response to the “labor problem,” or fear of job loss due to increased mechanization, unionization efforts grew. These efforts sought job security, livable wages, safe conditions, and a general sense of humanity for workers. This era was also characterized by conversations regarding race, gender, cultural heritage, and class in the workplace as a reaction to the anonymity and replaceability of laborers in the Gilded Age.

Corporations, the wealthy, and anti-unionists had to quickly control their employees' conversations to maintain corporate interests

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<sup>10</sup> PBS. “American Photography.” Public Broadcasting Service. Accessed February 22, 2021.  
<https://www.pbs.org/ktca/americanphotography/filmandmore/programdesc.html>

and tranquilize any impending labor movements. This phenomenon is prevalent in how corporations used photography, such as that included in Ford Motor Company's *Factory Facts with Ford*, to develop internally-used propaganda that pacified, homogenized, and galvanized American laborers under "American" ideals as the wealth gap insidiously grew. Simultaneously, organizations like the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) pictorially preserved the dignity of their members and made an argument about their conditions. The comparison of corporate propaganda photos and solidarity portraiture of sharecroppers illuminates how the latter contests the formers' use of photography to homogenize workers into passivity.

Ford Motor Company exemplified the power of photography as a weapon to oppress workers by seeking to define their lifestyles. *Factory Facts with Ford* was a campaign that the Ford Sociological department distributed to employees via publications beginning in 1915. Pamphlets contained photographs that celebrated the assimilation of immigrant laborers and depicted a version of the American dream that the wealthy corporation promoted in order to police employee behavior outside of the workplace and therefore heighten productivity inside the workplace. This lifestyle-controlling use of photography cemented the camera as a powerful tool in maintaining—or breaking—the economic status quo. Controlling the lens led corporations to be just as powerful—if not more—than the people who had exposed and changed the conditions in their factory.



Fig. 6. The First Ford English Class (“Museum, Greenfield Village and Rouge Factory.” The Henry Ford Museum. Accessed February 22, 2021. <https://www.thehenryford.org/>).

In particular, the 1915 image “First Ford English Class” demonstrates how Ford used photography to homogenize employees [Fig. 6]. This photograph appeared in a 1915 installment of *Factory Facts* with Ford, and now resides in the Henry Ford Museum, where the publication is informatively described as follows: “This pamphlet covers topics about Ford Motor Company and highlights the Ford Sociological Department. The Department was created to ensure that employees, many of whom were non-English speaking immigrants, did not squander their \$5 per day wages. Investigators monitored the personal and work lives of employees. In addition, the Department provided hygiene instruction, financial and legal advice, and an English

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school.”<sup>11</sup> This publication debuted during a time of heightened progressive agendas like workers’ rights and labor condition reforms. Notably, Henry Ford paid his assembly line workers the uncommonly high wage of \$5 a day in an attempt to prevent the increasing threat of unionization as well as increase production.<sup>12</sup>

In this image we see a crowd of (European) immigrants, dressed in similar suits and sitting in school desks. A few raise their hands as the instructor, who we might be able to assume is a Ford employee, appears to engage with the workers. Inquisitive and intent stares abound. The trappings of America are omnipresent; from the traditional classroom set up, to the English penmanship on the board, to the map of the nation hanging above the workers’ heads. This source’s visual vocabulary served the goal of homogenizing workers under an “American identity.”

In contrast to images like this, the Great Depression saw continued efforts of solidarity portraiture as a response to corporate photography. Sharecroppers, predominantly Black tenant farmers, worked in exploitative conditions in the post-Reconstruction South. To many wealthy southerners and detached northerners, the fact that that slavery had been abolished meant that the lifestyle conditions of the enslaved had also been ended. However, southern tenant and sharecropper farmer advocates debunked this narrative by visually demonstrating the similarities between sharecropping and slavery. In the 1930s, the STFU produced, published, and circulated a series of photographs that provided a jolting look at working conditions for sharecroppers for northerners.<sup>13</sup> These commissioned photographs depict that the dignity of sharecroppers was defiled to the point that

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<sup>11</sup> “Museum, Greenfield Village and Rouge Factory.” The Henry Ford Museum. Accessed February 22, 2021. <https://www.thehenryford.org/>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> “Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union.” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. Accessed March 19, 2021. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/southern-tenant-farmers-union-35/>.

they appeared in conditions similar to enslaved people. The reality of these photographs worked to trump the words of denial.



Fig. 7. A 1937 meeting of Southern Tenant Farmers Union (Encyclopedia of Arkansas. "Southern Tenant Farmers' Union." Encyclopedia of Arkansas. Encyclopedia of Arkansas, March 19, 2021. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/southern-tenant-farmers-union-35/>).

However, solidarity portraiture went further than exposing conditions; it usurped the homogenizing efforts of corporate agendas. In particular, one STFU image illustrates how the visual vocabularies used to define collective power were a reaction to homogenizing forces in corporate America [Fig. 7]. In this image, the STFU documents the happenings of southern unionization efforts. We see a crowd in this image filled with Black and white faces focused on the similarly multiracial group of speakers upon the truck. There is plurality in position, clothing, and where the faces are pointing. This was not a

utopic depiction, but one that endeavors to depict the burgeoning southern unionization efforts amid racial division.

This image is also contextualized by the rising southern Communist movement. Attracted to financial stability and promises of equality, sharecroppers joined Leftist organizations, such as unions, that promised collective power.<sup>14</sup> The rise of the second Ku Klux Klan, however, made unionization during this era a controversial and highly visible political issue: it was seen as a dangerous and disapproved behavior for many, especially given the interracial efforts in the South. While other photographs by the union attempted to depict sharecroppers as disadvantaged by this systemic racism, this image built upon those *and* defined the power of non-homogenized working-class forces. This image's purpose was therefore twofold. In one sense, it was intended to provide documentation of unionization events in the South. This was largely for internal use: mobilization and organizing. Yet by examining the visual details of the piece—including its non-uniformity and presumed spontaneity—it becomes clear that this image also had a second purpose. It was also intended for public alert and attention. By capturing the group work of unionization efforts, organizations like STFU could obtain validation and support from the northern public.

Ford insisted on the subscription of its workers to American financial, hygienic and educational standards, but through the promotion of interracial workers' groups, STFU interrupted this notion of one kind of American. This argument is apparent through the curation of crowds, as the topic of racial subjugation is present in both these pieces. Ford's photo portrayed the English school as an opportunity for immigrants to improve their lives through adherence to a certain set of rules. Taking English classes Americanized people through more than the language; it conditioned workers to adhere to a dominant culture and abandon portions of their identity in order to make a living wage (you needed to be Ford-educated to work at a Ford factory). They were not only learning rules of English, but rules of the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

dominant culture. Imagery aided in Ford's assimilative, pro-management tactics. It served the STFU, however, in an opposing way. In the STFU image, there is lessened threat of racial subjugation in the crowd. While unquestionably racism flourished legally and extrajudicially in the South, there is not "one" American ethnicity over another in the STFU photo. That said, it is important to note that there are proportionally more white people poised on the platform as speakers. The racial and ethnic division seen in Ford-era photos, however is not to be seen. Instead the STFU displayed the crowd as capable of overcoming cultural differences in order to organize for better conditions; the frame of this photograph optioned revolution as an accessible means of change. A crowd of Blacks and whites, listening to another crowd of Blacks and whites, contradicts the message Ford was trying to send. Instead of instruction, it shows collaboration. Instead of passivity, it shows protest. Instead of one America, it shows solidarity among multiracial workers. The camera eye confronted and critiqued corporate efforts to homogenize the workforce.

### **The Civil Rights Era**

The era after the second World War and before the tech rise of the late 20th-century endured more turmoil and advanced more agendas than is perhaps calculable. These included civil rights struggles, strife, and successes—including Title VII of the Civil Rights Act that enabled improvements (albeit incomplete) in workplace equality legislation. The concurrent rise of the Cold War also saw problematic evolutions in workplace security, both in terms of required documents and dress. In this period, corporations used photography—specifically workplace identification badges (ID)—to enforce gendered expectations of female employees, even as (and perhaps because) they defied them by working outside the home. This regulation of the female body and identity was challenged in the decades following the Civil Rights movement and into the era of Women's Liberation, when photojournalists used solidarity portraiture as a method to cement

pants, and by extension resistance, as part of working women's wardrobes.



Fig. 8. The ID badge of an employee at Pittsburgh Steel Company from the Collection of Frank Maresca (Siobhán Bohnacker, "The Art of the I.D. Badge." *The New Yorker*. June 19, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/the-art-of-the-i-d-badge>).

The ID badge rose to prominence in the late 1940s, as a result of increased national security concerns.<sup>15</sup> One example is the badge of an unnamed factory worker created between the 1940s and 1950s by the Pittsburgh Steel Company [Fig. 8]. Its intended audience was small: operatives within the corporation for clearance and security purposes. It is not just the ID badge, but her style itself as captured in the image that tells us she is a working woman in the mid-1900s: from her neat dress to the finger waves of her hair, she is the appearance of professionalism, but also femininity. The black and white photograph itself has been modified through colorization. The lips, cheeks, and blouse of the subject have been colored a soft red. This practice was

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<sup>15</sup> Lyle Rexer, "Vintage American Worker's ID Badge as Art and a Sign of the Times." *Time*. February 3, 2014. <https://time.com/3806765/the-american-workers-id-badge-as-art-and-a-sign-of-the-times/>.

common at the time in order to add liveliness to human photography subjects and specifically, femininity to females. As a result, its inclusion in workplace photography—that was supposedly meant just for security—reveals gendered corporate agendas regarding female employees.

This image's coloring and clothing critically indicates a badge like this one served a purpose beyond identification. It instilled visual standards on working women. ID badges were a way for corporations to promote femininity, moderate the aesthetics of their female workers, and promote gender conformity. There is no identity to these working women: Women are simply a series of fine hats and painted makeup. They are what their workplace deemed "woman." These ID badges were carried for clearance, but also carried with them the expectation that women were trimmed, tamed, and polished. The omnipresence of security meant the omnipresence of femininity, even as—and perhaps especially because—white women in the workplace were a challenge to traditional gender roles. Evident through the coloring and clothing is how ID badges were an oppressive use of photography by corporations, which endeavor to homogenize women workers to non-threatening corporatized norms. What ID badges like this indicate, but don't show entirely, is the bottom of the outfit. These women were wearing suit skirts, dresses, and pinafores, but not pants until the later part of the Civil Rights era.

During the 1970s, solidarity portraiture was once again used to counter corporate photography. Journalists, employing the same exposé and investigative tactics of the Gilded Age muckrakers, documented workers' movements. Photojournalists, in particular, had the distinct ability to become advocates for said laborers when they captured laborers' accomplishments and distributed them widely. One such image first appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on June 10, 1970 [Fig 9]. When the *Times*, a mainstream paper, distributed this imagery, it validated it. Its intention was to inform the (Los Angeles) public of the nurses' new right to wear pants. The snapshot shows seven nurses,

each extending a leg. Some wear heels, others sneakers. Most have caps, one does not. Some appear white, some appear Black. Some wear button-up coats, others are in scrubs. Short, long, and medium sleeves, updos, bobs, and bracelets—despite wearing a “uniform,” all these women are different except for one major thing: their pants.



Fig. 9. Nurses at Queen of Angels Hospital are among first in the nation permitted to wear pant suits to work (“Nurses’ Fashion Remedy: Pants.” *Los Angeles Times*. June 8, 2006. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-jun-08-me-a2anniversary8-story.html>).

The pants of these female nurses made a major splash in the feminist and labor worlds, not to mention the movements surrounding them. This photograph appeared when second wave feminism was enjoying increasing attention, and legal and social advancements were being ensured by the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The decision for this photograph to spontaneously depict a moment in these women’s labor wins indicates that it is a portrait not of just women, but of a movement. There is a sense of camaraderie in this depiction;

it is an appeal to the working class as much as *the* working woman. In this photograph, we see how these women protested together, worked together, and dressed together—without sacrificing their individual identities to the homogenizing intentions of their employer. Unlike early ID badges, these photographs did not color employees to conform to the expectations of the employers. Rather, by capturing the nurses this way, the *Times* advocated for their individuality while documenting their triumph, using photography as a method to express solidarity with female workers.

Both of these images are in black and white. Both show working women in pink-collar jobs. They both show women conforming to clothing and style expectations to a certain degree, whether through a fascinator or cap. But the *Times* photography challenges the conformity of the earlier corporate photo: it makes an intervention, it marks the cultural context of fashion, and it implies the sympathetic gaze of who is behind the camera. Whereas the existence of the ID badges indicates corporate requirement of them, and the colorization and clothing featured there expresses gendered expectations of female workers, the *Times* photo overcomes this corporate intervention is evident. These women won the right to wear pants at work despite common workplace standards set forth for their gender in corporate-mandated photography. The *Times* photograph, by also focusing on the context of fashion, is conscious about the gendered expectations that exist for women in the workplace, and more, importantly, it disrupts these expectations by its composition and circulation. When an unnamed administrator told the *Times* that “these young girls are more stylish and have more fashion consciousness,” it indicated how this photograph provided a platform for personal expression and reinterpretation of femininity in the workplace. Photography had been a tool to perpetuate the gendered fashion for women in the context of women’s ID badges; here the photography of fashion undermines workplace expectations for the nurse and argues for change in the gendered standards of labor.

The person—and the ideology—behind the camera mattered a great deal for both of these images. Laborers and labor advocates used photography to undermine corporate narratives of femininity. When corporate control of the camera was removed, advocates had the opportunity to capture and distribute their own narratives that evaded the expectation of femininity set forth in images like the ID badge. Through showing workplace fashion standards that served women’s jobs and well as their genders, the *Times* distinguished “working” as part of their identity, no longer allowing their employers to simply define women by their gender.

### **The Early 2000s**

Between increased automation, stagnant wages, and decreased net pay, the first two decades of the 21st century have been as much a battleground for labor as any other era. Discussion about child labor and mandated overtime have been replaced with discourse regarding paid leave and the age of retirement; labor advancements have evolved the issues that are important to workers. The hyper-productive intentions of corporations, however, have not stopped seeking to homogenize the workforce, even though—and perhaps especially because—the working class is more diverse than ever. Through capitalist photography, companies such as Amazon have used homogenization masquerading as inclusivity to monitor and mold their employees to dystopian levels, promoting conformity while preaching inclusion. In this new era, solidarity portraiture is still used as an organizing tool. When Sinclair’s jungle has been replaced with an Amazon, the visibility of laborers has become the new topic of discussion for worker’s justice movements. The contours of this discussion become clear through comparison of the workplace photography used in diversity initiatives by Amazon and the depiction of undocumented migrant workers.

“The year 1999 was a crucial one for LGBT people,” an Amazon article says on the Diversity and Inclusion page of the company’s website. It launches into LGBTQ+ landmarks for the year, before writing its own, presumably inclusive tale:

“That same year, at Amazon, an employee wanting to connect with other LGBT Amazonians created an email list he called ‘glamazon’—a contraction of Gay & Lesbian Amazon. For the next six years GLAmazon existed as an email list, along with the occasional gathering at the Six Arms pub in Seattle’s Capitol Hill neighborhood. Then, in 2005, GLAmazon became an official employee affinity group (along with the Black Employees Network and Women in Technology groups).”<sup>16</sup>

Boasting about the inclusivity of the workplace (garnered by the workers and not the management, importantly), Amazon depicts itself as a vibrant and progressive corporation that is compassionate about the diversity and humanity of its employees. But the conglomerate did not stop at taking credit for employees’ inclusivity actions. In further attempts to market their inclusivity to their own employees, Amazon deployed oppressive corporate photography.

On a braggadocious webpage about the history of resources that the company provides for queer employees, there is an image from the 2018 San Francisco “Glamazon” Pride parade [Fig. 10]. After the 2015 Supreme Court win for marriage equality, this image is placed in a comfortable time for queer rights in America. Supporting sexual orientation diversity was not the controversy it was when “Glamazon” started in 1999. Many—but certainly not all—corporations host queer pride events and provide queer-specific healthcare for employees. In other words, Amazon hosting a Pride parade is not uncommon or unheard of for corporations in the 2010s.

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<sup>16</sup>Ashley Brown, “Glamazon at Amazon: Eighteen Years of Change.” About Amazon. June 19, 2017.

<https://www.aboutamazon.com/news/workplace/glamazon-at-amazon-eighteen-years-of-change>.



Fig. 10. GLAmazon Pride 2018 (Amazon, “A Look at Glamazon through the Years.” About Amazon. June 3, 2019. [https:// www.aboutamazon.com/news/workplace/a-look-at-glamazon-through-the-years](https://www.aboutamazon.com/news/workplace/a-look-at-glamazon-through-the-years))

In this image, we see large, colorful balloons tied together to form human-sized letters that spell out “#LOVEWINS.” Employee paraders hoist the letters in an orderly fashion, framing the Amazon banner held firmly across the front of the parade. Although it appears inclusive at first—a corporation throwing its very own Pride parade—this image is anything but. Paraders all wear the same shirt. They are positioned uniformly around the Pride balloons and Amazon banners. They are celebrating on company-decided time. Amazon utilizes the audience’s trust to communicate their corporate narrative. This image is intended not for inclusivity but to constrict and construct identity. This photograph insidiously seeks to unify queer Amazon workers under perceived support by their employer, and it insinuates it would be ludicrous for employees to protest a company that so opulently celebrated their identities. By showcasing employees as identified by both their employer and their sexual orientation, Amazon collapses the two identities into a single, corporate-sanctioned one.

This is quite the opposite for the subjects of “Unseen America,” a project of Bread and Roses, the cultural arm of New York’s Health and Human Service Union. Here, there is divergence from Amazon’s reductive understanding of representation, where undocumented workers use their own visual vocabulary to define their “belongingness” to America. In doing so, they counter the oppressive homogenizing tactics of their employer. They make a bid against repression.



Fig. 11. “Who We Are,” taken by Luis, a member of the Workplace Project (Esther Cohen, *Unseen America: Photos and Stories by Workers* [New York: ReganBooks, 2006], 114).

“Unseen America” photographs depict day laborers and lunch breaks, children’s baths and late-night chats. The image “Who We Are” somehow encapsulates all the joy and impulsiveness of these moments

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[Fig. 11]. This early-2000s image frames an average moment in the modern migrant experience. The image shows two workers dancing. They aren't married or reported to be lovers. She cooks for his household. He is a day laborer. They are in what appears to be a modest kitchen—dishes flank the sink and a crooked frame hangs on the wall. She smiles, with eyes connected to someone or something off camera. He spins her, focused on her movement. Spontaneity and purity is captured in this unplanned portraiture. This celebration is unsanctioned, occurring at the moment of feeling and not the schedule of an employer. This image would only be possible in a photograph. Through the accessibility and intimacy of this medium, migrant workers are visible by their own decision. Their identity—and ability to define it—is autonomous. This image is intended to provide visibility to an increasingly marginalized social and labor group, and it accomplishes this by allowing laborers and labor advocates to define and depict themselves.

Both Amazon and “Unseen America” show celebration on the basis of identity. Yet in an era of omnipresent surveillance, self-representation becomes important. While Amazon seeks to unify sexual orientation and labor, “Unseen America” deflects attempts to subdue workers through surveillance by enabling people to depict their full lives, independent of their status as workers. In doing so, migrants interpret an “American” identity on their own terms and explain it through solidarity-driven, photographic advocacy. Amazon’s power to pacify its employees becomes less powerful when workers can preserve and depict their own visibility as humans who are autonomously able to define themselves and their status as workers. “Unseen America,” by prioritizing self-representation, debunks Amazon’s practice of capitalizing on worker’s cultural identities. Solidarity portraiture solves the problem of the capitalist infiltration of identity. The American economy has become a place where undocumented migrants and members of the largest corporations in America are both surrendered to ununionized workplaces. While the challenges of each are far different and incomparable, the pathways to gains in their labor movements are illuminated by the flash of a camera.

## **Conclusion**

By examining workplace photography from the early-20th century to today, it becomes possible to see how solidarity portraiture has been consistently used by laborers and labor advocates as a counter-discourse to corporate homogenizing efforts in capitalist photography. While employers used photography to control workers through managerial science, laborers and their advocates fought for public affections and to establish their own visibility in attempts to obtain progressive labor reforms.

The production and distribution of workplace photography is shaped by the limitations and possibilities of the era in which it occurs. Gilbreth's "Motion Study" was refuted by Hine's imagery of child labor. STFU opposed the uniformity of Ford by offering visual contrast to it. The *Times* used its distribution to undermine the workplace femininity of the ID badge.

Migrant workers depicted themselves celebrating to establish an identity independent of their employers. Corporations' homogenization efforts have not stopped, but neither has laborers' resistance to it. These touchstones in American history provide a lens for understanding the unique powers of both capitalist photography and solidarity portraiture to prevent and promote American labor movements, respectively. In our modern era—when warehouses, minimum wage fights, gig labor, facial recognition technology, migrant labor, unionization, and, of course, Zoom calls—mold both the economy and every workday, the way in which workers express themselves persists in importance.

One of the hallmarks of the Gilded Age's labor advancements was the 40-hour work week; a more equitable and sustainable lifestyle for the working class. It was tagged as "8 hours for work, 8 hours for rest, 8 hours for what we will."<sup>17</sup> Solidarity portraiture provides

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<sup>17</sup> Ferrari, Chris. "May Day – 'Eight Hours for Work, Eight Hours for Rest, Eight Hours for What We Will.'" *Trades and Union Digest*. Accessed February 22, 2021.

freedom in self-depiction that can allow laborers to do what they will, whether it is to live, to protest, or to oppose capitalist photography efforts. Between social media and social movements, workers used solidarity portraiture to accomplish an array of labor goals and produce progressive policy out of public art. As one last example, take an NPR photo spread of transgender teachers. This promoted inclusivity and authenticity, while resisting homogenization by combining the stories and selfies. By examining how solidarity portraiture has advanced this and other goals, we can see how essential self-presentation—selfies, if you will—is to labor movements.



Fig. 14. Selfies provided for and of transgender teachers (LA Johnson, and Clare Lombardo. “Transgender Teachers: In Their Own Voices.” NPR. March 18, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/03/18/584596293/transgender-teachers-in-their-own-voices>.)

<https://www.paunions.com/may-day-eight-hours-for-work-eight-hours-for-rest-eight-hours-for-what-we-will/>.

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