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# AMERICA: THE (WORKERS') FILM & PHOTO LEAGUE

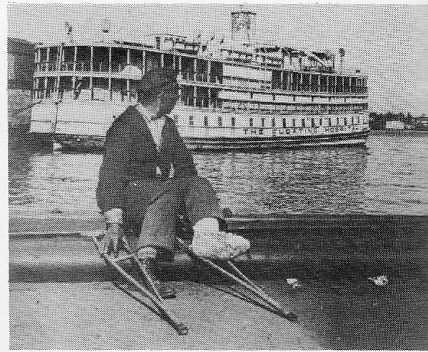
Russell Campbell

The Workers' Film and Photo League (WFPL) in the United States, known as the Film and Photo League (FPL) after 1933, was part of the cultural movement sponsored by the Communist International and its affiliated national parties in the inter-war period. Specifically, it was a section of the Workers' International Relief (WIR), American chapter of the Comintern-linked *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe* (IAH) which had been founded at Lenin's instigation in Berlin in 1921.

The WIR's main function was providing food, clothing and shelter for strikers and their families, but like its parent body it engaged also in cultural work. Among leftwing artistic groups supported by the WIR in the early thirties, chiefly in New York, were the Workers' Laboratory Theatre, the Red Dancers, symphony and mandolin orchestras, bands, choirs, art workshops, etc. Film and photography formed part of this cultural spectrum, but because of their potential in reaching mass audiences they were accorded special attention by Communist propaganda theorists such as Willi Münzenberg, head of the IAH.

Münzenberg's commitment to an alternative, working class cinema was expressed in his 1925 pamphlet *Erobert den Film!* (Capture the Film!) and concretely in the extensive activity in film production, distribution and exhibition undertaken by IAH organizations in Germany and the Soviet Union during the twenties and early thirties. Priority was also accorded to the sponsorship of worker photographer groups, principally for the purpose of providing visual coverage of the class struggle for the leftwing press; Münzenberg claimed that there were 102 local branches of the *Vereinigung der Arbeiterfotografen* operating in Germany alone in 1931.<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, a New York group known variously as the Workers' Camera League, the Japanese Workers' Camera League, the Workers' Camera Club and the Nippon Camera Club had established ties with the WIR at some point in the late twenties. A report in the *New Masses* of February 1930 described the League as having "about 52 members", holding meetings once a week and exhibitions twice a year. The story continued:



"Floating Hospital", East River Dock, New York City, 1932. Photo: Leo Seltzer.



Unemployed women demonstrate at City Hall, New York City, 1932. Photo: Leo Seltzer

"Only one of the members is a professional photographer. All the other photographers earn their living as food workers, in restaurants, and housework. They have all learned the art of photography in this country."



Rent strike, Upper East side, New York City, 1933. Photo: Leo Seltzer.

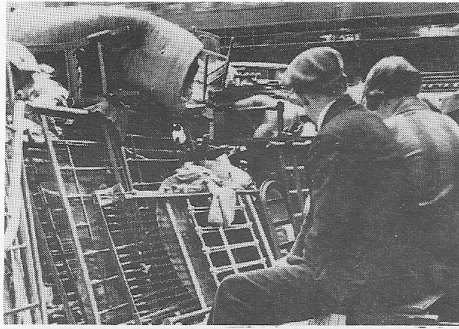
Their spacious headquarters is fully equipped with a dark room, filming room and enlarging room, and all the materials used in the different processes of photography. The club also owns a moving picture projector and screen.

The club was started five years ago by a group of eight people who were interested in photography as an art medium and decided to work together to develop it. When later they found they also had a mutual interest in the revolutionary labour movement, their activities were reorganized to include class struggle propaganda, through the work they were engaged in."

The Workers' Camera League was said to be "particularly interested in photographs of industrial and farm life, natural scenes, workers' homes, labour sports, machines, engines, and pictures of individual workers at their tasks". At its 4th Annual Photo Exhibition, held from December 1929 to January 1930, it displayed photographs "mainly concerned with proletarian life and the class struggle", including "scenes of May Day, demonstrations of food workers, labourers at construction work, a factory, fishermen, etc." It was observed that "class

consciousness is the theme of pictures bearing the titles: *Sabotage, Movement, Workers, Speed-Up, Exploitation, Red Day, Mobilization to Work, etc*".<sup>3</sup>

In the spring of 1930 the Workers' Camera League combined forces with the International Labour Defence, the Communist legal-aid organization parallel to the Workers' International Relief, to form the Labor Defender Photo Group. The purpose of this new association was "to get pictures of the class struggle for use in working-class papers and magazines", particularly the ILLD's *Labor Defender*. The secretary announced in July: "Our members are ready with their cameras on the picket line, demonstrations, street meetings, in factories, unemployment lines, and in the homes of workers". A spokesperson for the ILLD projected "a network of worker-photo groups throughout the country" with which "we will be able to create a powerful pictorial expression of our struggles which can be used very effectively in building our organization". The group reportedly possessed two motion-picture cameras and was very likely responsible for a small number of workers' newsreels which appeared during 1930.<sup>4</sup>



Eviction, Midtown, East Side, New York City, 1933. Photo: Leo Seltzer.

Both the Defender group and its progenitor were still active late in the autumn. The Workers' Camera League announced an International Photo Exhibition and Dance for November 15, and the issue of *New Masses* for that month reported that the Labor Defender Photo Group had twenty active members, enjoyed the facilities of a studio and darkroom, and conducted a regular photo exchange abroad. The address given for the Defender group was 7, E. 14th Street, New York, where the premises (described above) of the Workers' Camera League were formerly located.

In December 1930 the Workers' Camera League was reorganized under the auspices of the WIR and renamed the Workers' Film and Photo League. Apparently the Labor Defender Photo Group was also absorbed into the new body, since nothing more was heard of it. The consolidation resulted in an organisation which, as the economic crisis deepened, could sustain political filmmaking and photography on a permanent, ongoing basis.

League membership, which fluctuated between 75 and 100, consisted of a small core of enthusiasts who spent much of their time (unpaid) at headquarters, and a larger number who appeared at regular meetings and participated on a spare-time basis. According to WFPL organizer Sam Brody, the members were "mainly working-class with a sprinkling of middle-class intellectuals and technicians sympathetic to our progressive goals".<sup>5</sup> Funds came from a variety of sources including membership dues, contributions from the WIR (which usually paid for motion-picture raw stock and processing), donations from sympathizers, benefits (such as costume balls), public film screenings (chiefly of European and Soviet classics), and the sale of stills. New York remained the main centre of activity, but as the decade progressed local League chapters sprang up in most major cities (and some small towns) of the US.

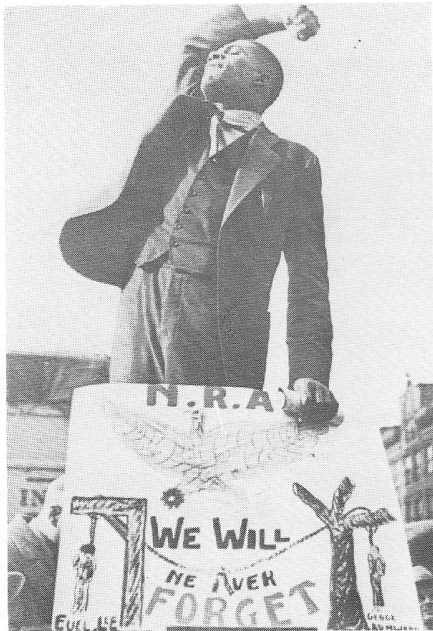
Though film and photo sections of the League usually met separately, their activities were comple-



Unemployed, East River Dock, New York City, 1932. Photo: Leo Seltzer.

entary, and there was some overlap of personnel. The (W)FPL's chief work in film was the production of newsreels and documentaries of the class struggle; these were then exhibited by members to workers on picket lines, at Communist functions, in union halls, or at meetings of fraternal societies or nationality groups. In addition, the League conducted militant campaigns against fascist and reactionary films and against bourgeois censorship, stimulated and sponsored the writing of radical film criticism, held series screenings of movies significant from a political or aesthetic point of view and offered classes in film history, criticism, and technique.<sup>6</sup>

The goals of the photo section were to provide militant workers (and the unemployed) with the skills to create photographic records of the class struggle, to assure a flow of illustrations for radical publications, to orient established professional photographers more to the left, and to help publicize the work of the WIR, the ILD, and other Communist-led organizations. To achieve these objectives, the section provided darkroom facilities, sponsored lectures, ran training courses, held exhibitions, and created channels for the supply of photographs to publishers. In carrying out this programme, the (W) FPL gave a powerful impetus to the growth of both photo-journalism and documentary photography, neither of which was at the time greatly developed.



Speaker at demonstration in Harlem, New York City, 1933. Photo: Leo Seltzer

The League photographers discovered a demand for pictures of the class struggle not only from leftist publications, but also from a range of liberal and mainstream journals. Several months after the formation, in September 1934, of a National Photo Exchange as a central clearing house for FPL photographs, it was reported:

“During the past year the New York League has had an unprecedented call for photos from the workers’ press, from magazines and book publishers, and from picture services. We were able to supply only an average of about sixty photos per month. The demand is so great that we feel that we could easily place three times as many pictures. This we were not able to do in the past due to the local nature of our photos. Publications soon become glutted with local material. Our photos have appeared in the *Daily Worker*, *Freiheit*, *Der Arbeiter*, *Labor Unity*, *Labor Defender*, *Better Times Magazine*, *Fortune Magazine*, *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, *Survey Graphic*, and other publications too numerous to mention.”<sup>7</sup>

The supply of stills to the commercial press in fact provided a much-needed source of income for League members. One of the more active photographers, Leo Seltzer, recalls:



May Day Demonstration, 1934. Photo: Leo Seltzer.

“Motion-picture film couldn’t be sold, no one would want to buy it, the newsreels had their own crews going out. But we could sell photographs, because very often we could get things the commercial news photographers couldn’t get. So I took quite a lot of photographs as well as movies, and these could be sold to the newspapers to get a few bucks. A lot of times we’d know about a picket line or something that was going to happen, we could scoop the press, and that’s what made our photos valuable.”<sup>8</sup>

In July 1931 the Workers’ Film and Photo League announced a class in photography, to be conducted by Howard D. Lester, “a member of the executive board and one of the leading American photographers”. This was to be the first of a number of such courses held throughout the League’s existence. Advertised as being given “to enable workers to use their knowledge of photography to further the interests of the working-class” or “to meet the pressing need for photo correspondents (for the labour press)”, they covered topics such as “camera construction, developing, printing, enlarging, copying, portraiture, press work, etc.” At the time instruction in photography was scarcely available at all through other channels.<sup>9</sup>

(W)FPL members were in the forefront of a struggle over what constituted the most vital subject matter of photography. They rejected, of course, the romantic scenes of the Pictorialists and the glamorized products and fashion models of the commercial photographers; they also had little time for the details of nature pictured by “straight” photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, and Edward Weston. In 1931 a “Proletarian Photo” exhibition was planned (as an American contribution to a conference to be held in conjunction with the tenth IAH congress in Germany), and it was pointed out:

“It is to be understood that worker photographers intending to exhibit... are to concentrate on the photo of class struggle and



Salvation Army street scene, East Side, New York City, 1932. Photo: Leo Seltzer.

proletarian life. No bourgeois portraiture, nudes, landscapes, still lifes, will be exhibited.”<sup>10</sup>

In 1933, the scope of (W)FPL work expanded to include pictorial commentary, from a leftist perspective, on Roosevelt’s New Deal policies. For a major exhibition in the autumn, the League assembled a collection of photographs intended to portray *“America Today* and all the social and economic transformations it has undergone during the last four years.” Subjects which would be covered included unemployment, housing conditions, militarism, and child misery; and a later appeal for entries was even more explicit, calling for “pictures from North, South, and West, pictures of industry, of farming, of unemployment, misery, stagnation, reforestation camps, child labour, political speakers, the ‘New Deal’, pictures of struggle, strikes, picket lines, demonstrations, etc.” Sam Brody, at the opening of the exhibition in November, exulted: “[it] breathes with the fire of workers’ struggles and makes the pink-ribbon photographic salon displays look like the last stage of pernicious anemia.”<sup>11</sup>

The extent to which such subjects remained of priority importance to the League is indicated by several published calls for photographs and reports of

work from around the country in 1935. In January of that year, the National Photo Exchange stipulated the nature of the material it wished members to submit:

“One — General Photos of Social and Economic Implication. For example: unemployed workers, child misery, bread lines, prostitution, housing conditions, destruction of crops, manpower replacing machinery.

Two — Labour actions. For example: strikes, demonstrations, protest meetings.

Three — Demonstrations Against War and Fascism.”<sup>12</sup>

In the same month the New York FPL announced some forthcoming photo exhibitions. “The City Child” — “undoubtedly the most important photographic document the New York League has made” — was designed to show the “home, school and recreational background of the New York City child” and would be accompanied by statistical charts. “City Streets” was scheduled for April and was envisaged as “a comparative photo exhibit on this subject” in which five photographic organizations of the Metropolitan area would be invited to participate.<sup>13</sup>

The Chicago FPL undertook a photographic survey of living conditions on the South Side, while the Detroit group held a photo display on the subject of the "Forgotten Man". At the same time, the San Francisco League published an intriguing "proposed plan of work" which outlined a scheme to expand from scenes of proletarian life to embrace a complete pictorial class analysis of American society:

"We want to seek subjects that are powerful and representative factors in the present struggle of social forces. We want bankers, workers, farmers (rich and poor), white-collar workers, policemen, politicians, soldiers, strikers, scabs, wandering youth, stockbrokers, and so on and so on. We want to see them in relation to those things they do, where they live, how they work, how they play, what they read, and what they think. In other words we want to see them as they are in their most significant aspects. This means seeing them in relation to each other. We want this most of all because in this period of economic crisis the whole population is shifting into groups with equally uniform demands. In this shaking down of people into more and

more clearly defined classes lies the prospect of vast social change."

Subjects which were specifically suggested included: "1. Waterfront, San Francisco; 2. S.E.R.A. Work Relief; 3. White Collars; 4. The New Legislature; 5. Cold; 6. Disarmament or the Next War; 7. Section 7A (of the National Industrial Recovery Act)." How successful the project was is not known.<sup>14</sup>

By 1936 the Film and Photo League had been weakened by several splits and the slow demise of the Workers' International Relief. In June of that year the film section of the League moved to its own headquarters, and thereafter little more was heard of it. The photo section, however, seems to have benefitted from the break, and, after reorganization, it emerged in strength as the Photo League in 1937. Under the guidance of figures such as Sid Grossman, Aaron Siskind, Sol Libsohn, and Walter Rosenblum, the Photo League sustained the FPL's commitment to documentary photography and left wing politics for many years to come. Placed on the Attorney General's Subversive List in 1947, it did not finally succumb to witch-hunting pressure until 1951.<sup>15</sup>

#### NOTES

1. This article is based on sections of the author's PhD dissertation, *Radical Cinema in the United States, 1930-1942: The Work of the Film and Photo League, Avkino and Frontier Films*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms. Thanks are due to *Jump Cut* for permission to reproduce material which previously appeared in the author's articles "Film and Photo League: Radical Cinema in the 30s" and "A Total and Realistic Experience": Interview with Leo Seltzer", *Jump Cut* No. 14, 1977.
2. Willi Münzenberg, *Solidarität: Zehn Jahre Internationale Arbeiterhilfe, 1921-1931*, Berlin: Neuer Deutscher Verlag, 1931, p.87.
3. *New Masses* V, No.8, January 1930, p.20; and *New Masses* V, No.9, February 1930, p.20.
4. *New Masses* VI, No.2, July 1930, p.22; *Labor Defender*, April 1930, p.76.
5. Samuel Brody, in: Tony Safford, "The Camera as a Weapon in the Class Struggle: Interview with Samuel Brody", *Jump Cut* No.14, 1977, p.28.
6. For further information on the film activities of the League cf. the author's dissertation and articles cited above.

7. "Send Photos to the National Exchange!", in: *Filmfront* 1, No.2, January 7, 1935, p.12.
8. Leo Seltzer, in: Russell Campbell, "A Total and Realistic Experience' Interview with Leo Seltzer", op.cit., p.26.
9. *New Masses* VII, No.2, July 1931, p.21; *Daily Worker*, October 12, 1934, p.5, and April 4, 1935, p.5.
10. *New Masses* VII, No.1, June 1931, p.22.
11. *Daily Worker*, August 15, 1933, p.5; October 21, 1933, p.7; and November 13, 1933, p.5.
12. "Send Photos to the National Exchange!", op.cit.
13. "New York Photo Activities", in: *Filmfront* 1, No.3, January 28, 1935, p.14.
14. *Filmfront* i, No.2, January 7, 1935, p.13; and i, No.5, March 15, 1935, p.9.
15. On the Photo League see its publication *Photo Notes* (reprinted in one volume by the Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, N.Y.); Anne Tucker, "Photographic Crossroads: The Photo League", in: *Journal of the National Gallery of Canada* No.25, April 6, 1978; and Anne Tucker's forthcoming book, *Photographic Crossroads: The Photo League* (Knopf).