

# Skinny and Exhausted: Photographs of Underaged Labour Force in Interwar Yugoslavia

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# Skinny and Exhausted: Photographs of Underaged Labour Force in Interwar Yugoslavia

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## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between photography and class was established in the 19th century thanks to the work of photographers such as Jacob A. Riis. This resulted in the emergence of the worker-photography movement. This type of photography developed significantly in the interwar period, when Dorothea Lange and Edith Tudor-Hart photographed the harsh living conditions and social divisions of the Great Depression. By professionally photographing social life or ‘the life lived by the other half’,<sup>1</sup> as Riis stated in the title of his book, they became social documentarians. Riis was referring to the well-known saying that ‘one half of the world does not know how the other half lives’. It was precisely owing to the ‘other half’ that the focus shifted to a whole range of marginal social groups, from workers, homeless people and immigrants, to all those removed from the centre of political power. Some of these photographs, such as *Migrant Mother* (1936) by Dorothea Lange, became iconic images of an era.

Although there is no single definition of this type of pictures, documentary photography is an umbrella term that encompasses the diversity of the photo-taking process, and many theoreticians, such as Michelle Bogre, agree that it is a type of photograph characterised by sharp focus, depicting a real moment in order to convey a meaningful message about what is happening in the world.<sup>2</sup> Others, such as Christopher Carter, see photographs as “rhetorical devices, which through their depiction of social class and spaces, can expose contradictions in the capitalist system”.<sup>3</sup> In other words, according to Riis, documentary photography is an attempt to create class consciousness by shaping human perception, i.e., by making people aware of ‘the other half’. It can be said that photographic representations of living conditions, work in factories, free time and political struggles, turned pho-

1 Reference to the Jacob A. Riis book named *How the Other Half Lives. Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, first published in 1957.

2 Bogre, *Documentary Photography Reconsidered*.

3 Hodson, “The Politics of Documentary Photography”.

tography into an “instrument of social changes”<sup>4</sup> Lauren Jensen claims that, by showing the slums of New York in the 1870s in his photographs, Riis managed to make the middle and upper classes aware of the existence of the poorest parts of the city, which led to a better understanding of living conditions of migrants, workers and other people from the margins of society. In this way, photography became a kind of mediator between the classes, making them aware of the mutual differences.

This phenomenon became increasingly evident in the interwar Weimar Republic when photographers began to focus on the working class. The most popular magazine dealing with working class topics during this period was *Der Arbeiter*, whose covers depicted female workers operating machinery, peasants working in the fields, and the working class spending their leisure time. The magazine published pictures belonging to the concept known as worker-photography. Referring to Christian Joschke, Polish historian Maciej Duklewski believes that this concept implies primarily a historical phenomenon of “an attempt to create class consciousness by shaping [people’s] perception and seizing the means of visual production”.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, it is worth highlighting a significant series of photographs of American mines from the second half of the 20th century, titled *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures 1949–1968*. The series depicts miners, their homes, and working conditions, all of which point to the social position of the working class. Theoretician Bernard Edelman referred to the photographers who created such images as “proletarians of creation”.<sup>6</sup> *The Russian Association of Proletarian Photo Reporters (ROPE)*<sup>7</sup> should also be mentioned here, an organisation, along with the *Arbeiter—Illustrierte Zeitung (AIZ)*, that was essential for the development of worker-photography. An interesting fact is that employers, however rarely, also used photography to depict the lives of their workers. Among them was the Pullman Company, an American automobile company, which regularly photographed its workers in the period between 1880 and 1890.<sup>8</sup>

As can be seen, there is a long tradition of collaboration between photography and representation of marginal social groups, from immigrants in New York to American miners in the second half of the 20th century. Susan Sontag stressed this kind of synergy by saying that people are made

4 Jensen, “The Photographs of Jacob Riis”.

5 Duklewski, “Worker’s Photography Movement of the 1920’s and 1930’s”.

6 Frank, “A View of the World”.

7 The most famous project of this organisation is the publication *24 Hours in the Life of Moscow Worker Family* (1931).

8 Photographs show workers during their work at the factory, the activities performed in their free time, and the strike that took place in 1984. The majority of these photos were taken in factories, using a 45-degree angle, to show both the architecture and the machines. More can be found in: Peterson, “Producing Visual Traditions among Workers”.

real by photographs.<sup>9</sup> In other words, photographers who portrayed the working class tried to bring it closer to the public, make people aware of class differences, and show that the working class is part of our reality.

Research of worker-photography enables a different perspective that includes not only art history, but also visual sociology and historiography. These disciplines approach photography as a visual fact, as well as a historical source. Accordingly, in the theoretical framework of documentary and worker-photography, the goal of this paper is to explain the connection between photography and social aspects as a result of the relationship between labour and capital. The research includes the analysis of the photographs published in magazine *Organizovani radnik*, which was published in Zagreb between 1924 and 1929. The primary goal of these documentary photographs was to expose social injustice through meticulously planned narrative structure and picture composition. Also, these photos will be compared to the works of Danish-American photographer Jacob Riis, considered “a pioneer in the use of photography as an agent of social reform”.<sup>10</sup> It is important to emphasise that Riis was the author of the series of exposés about conditions in the slums on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, which led him to regard photography as an appeal for slum reform. The latter was, to a certain extent, the goal of the photographs published in the Yugoslav labour press as well.

#### PHOTOGRAPHY AS TOOL OF TESTIMONY AND MEMORY

In the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, documentary photography began to develop after the First World War. A significant figure was Franjo Fuis, a photographer who shot pictures representing social issues, such as street vendors and shoe shiners in the streets of Zagreb, for the newspaper *Novosti (News)*.

While German and British working-class press was illustrated with a large number of photographs, this was not the case with Yugoslav press associated with the labour movement. Still, just as in other European labour movements, most of the press was related to the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY).<sup>11</sup> The magazine *Organizovani radnik* had the longest-running tradition and often published pictures of workers. Since most newspapers were not equipped with pictures and were limited to textual content, the photographs published in *Organizovani radnik* are valuable sources in the analysis of the position of the working class in Yugoslavia

9 Sontag, *On Photography*, 126.

10 “Jacob Riis. Biography”.

11 In late 1921, the CPY was banned, thus in the interwar period it was active under various names, in order to be able to act legally, at least temporarily.

in the interwar period. According to the features of these photographs, we can assume that the authors were nonprofessional photographers. It should also be noted that in most European labour movements, such as the German one, the core of worker-photography was taken by amateurs such as Eugen Heiling or Erich Rinka. However, as Guy Lane points out, it is very difficult to determine exactly to what extent the workers photographs published in the interwar period are truly amateur or professional. In this context, a similar conclusion emerges in the case of photographs published in Yugoslav workers' newspapers.

Most of the characters in the Croatian interwar worker-photographs have a restrained expression and lack any props. They are placed within a simple composition and in front of a black background. In this context, these photos coincide with the words of Marxist theoretician Edwin Hoernle: "We will have no veils, no retouching, no aestheticism; we must present things as they are, in a hard, merciless light."<sup>12</sup> This kind of realism helps to keep the observer's attention exclusively on the subject, whose role is to evoke empathy, similar to the postulates of documentary photography. It is also in line with the beliefs of Eamonn Carrabine, who stated that "human misery should not be reduced to a set of aesthetic concerns but is fundamentally bound up with politics of testimony and memory".<sup>13</sup>

This type of photographs shows young workers and apprentices, mainly males, highlighting their physical exhaustion. The pictures are mostly portraits, and most of the subjects are looking directly into the camera. In the newspapers, the photographs were regularly accompanied by articles, so they form a segment of a broader portrayal of the social position of the working class. For this purpose, the photos were taken from an angle that allows emphasis on their faces and bodies. One photo shows the extremely thin body of a young male worker with visible wounds on his legs. These images illustrate Carrebine's "testimony policy"; they bear witness to the social position of the working class, but also to their exploitation and physical and psychological abuse.

The subjects of these photographs are not anonymous workers or 'production factors', as was the case with the majority of photos published in the newspapers. Their names are listed in the published data, and employment data reveal that most of them moved to Zagreb from smaller towns and villages, in search of work. They were most often employed as apprentices, which implied various forms of abuse and underpayment, as the pictures clearly show. Revealing their identities strengthened the achievement of one of the goals—to arouse empathy and contribute to the change of the social and political paradigm.

12 Seward, "Camera as Weapon".

13 Ray, "Social Theory, Photography and the Visual Aesthetic of Cultural Modernity", 9.

In accordance with the aforementioned, the published photographs were intended to serve as proof of subjugation and marginalisation of the working class, especially young and underaged workers, as its most vulnerable segment. That is why some of the workers are shown in their underwear, revealing the endured exploitation, which served as additional support for the ideas proclaimed by the working-class leaders. Their working conditions were inhumane, and they were obliged to work overtime. Furthermore, laws on the social protection of workers, such as the eight-hour shift recommendation, were often ignored. Most of the workers were cruelly exploited and experienced verbal and physical forms of abuse. Various mistreatments sometimes resulted in illness, as in the case of a cook, employed by D. Mikić in Otočac, who contracted typhoid fever, due to unfavourable working conditions, and was forced to walk 11 km to the nearest doctor.<sup>14</sup> Such stories were actually the basis of the Yugoslav labour movement narrative, which, with the help of trade unions, attempted to draw attention to the difficult position of workers.

Looking up to their comrades who started the publication *Der Arbeiter*, the leaders of the national labour movement were very attentive of the importance of photography in creating the desired policies. However, due to a number of technical and material limitations, the use of photography as a visual component of political struggle could not serve as a significant political instrument. We should not forget the fact that the CPY operated illegally throughout the entire interwar period, which had a negative impact on the practice of using photographs as a propaganda tool. Nevertheless, some photographs published in the magazine *Organizovani radnik* suggest that the workers were well aware of its potential to raise awareness of their social position.

#### REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE FROM BELOW

In accordance with Maciej Duklewski claim that communist parties played a very important role in organising what is known as the "proletarian photography movement",<sup>15</sup> Yugoslav communists used photographs with the aim of creating class-conscious workers and mobilising them. Therefore, it is not surprising that the CPY was close to the magazine *Organizovani radnik*, a newspaper that, as already highlighted, was one of the few newspapers that used photography as a political tool, especially in the mid-1920s. Bearing in mind the role of communist parties and organisations in the creation of the "proletarian photography movement", primarily in Germany, Great Britain and France, communists in Yugoslavia had to be

14 Šoljan, *Žene Hrvatske u radničkom pokretu*, 327.

15 As an example, he mentions the German Communist Party, which started using visual arts as an instrument to convey messages and create mass agitation in the region. Duklewski, "Worker's Photography Movement of the 1920's and 1930's".

influenced by them, which resulted in the recognition of the potential of photography within the class conflict. Accordingly, Larry Ray noted that photography gained “the power of informing and mobilizing social justice campaigns”,<sup>16</sup> due to Riis, Lewis W. Hine<sup>17</sup> and others who portrayed the slums of New York and the horrors of war.

Most of the published photographs depict injured and exhausted workers, with the aim of drawing attention to the exploitation and brutality of their employers. Therefore, emphasis was placed on the poor physical health of the workers, resulting in their thin, sick and exhausted bodies being shown in the photos. In order to portray their malnutrition, i.e. employers’ lack of interest in the workers’ nutrition, the camera is positioned vertically, showing the whole body. In this way, the photographers put in the foreground the legs of the workers, which appear almost deformed due to constant standing and non-compliance with the law stating the right to rest during the working day. This is also evident in an article published in the magazine *Organizovani radnik* in 1928, in which a picture of the workers is accompanied by a note stating that this reveals ‘the crimes committed by employers’.<sup>18</sup> Undoubtedly, by publishing such pictures these photographers helped redefine the social position of the working class, further supporting Riis’ theory of photography as an instrument of social change.

According to contemporary research based on the methodology known as *Eigen-Sinn* (self-will), as Wolfgang Hesse points out, the subjects shown in the photographs represent a conscious self-presentation, and it is evident that the person is aware of being photographed.<sup>19</sup> These photographs have some other features in common, such as an attempt to evoke empathy in the viewer, with a more distant goal of redefining the social position of the working class, creating social welfare, etc. It should be noted that all workers were photographed outside their workplace, in front of the simple flat canvas background. This is in line with what August Sander stated: “I hate nothing more than sugary photographs with tricks, poses and effects. So allow me to be honest and tell the truth about our age and its people.”<sup>20</sup>

These photographs are very powerful, as they create a multilayered narrative, shaped through articles that give insight into the social circumstances and working conditions of the portrayed subjects. The workers were photographed in different poses, depending on the desired emphasis. For example, the 13-year-old baker’s apprentice Mirko Vrebac is shown in

16 Ray, “Sociology and Visual Aesthetics”.

17 His photographs of children labour force led to the reinforcement of some social measures the goal of which was to protect children in the United States.

18 “Još jedna žrtva noćnog rada i zvjerskog postupka”.

19 Duklewski, “Worker’s Photography Movement of the 1920’s and 1930’s”.

20 “August Sander on Photography (1927)”.

two ways: with his face and his back facing the camera. In this way, it was possible to show his hunched back, as well as his deformed, swollen and lumpy feet, which were the result of carrying heavy sacks of flour.

The thesis that the worker-photography was intended to point out the difficult working conditions and arouse empathy is supported by the issue dated 2 August 1928, which featured a photograph of two carpenter apprentices. These two apprentices, Anton Karabić and Vjekoslav Marinec, worked in the Zagreb workshop of carpenter Vjekoslav Pavunac (Fig. 1) Unlike most photographs where the frame is vertical, in this example the frame is horizontal, which achieves the focus on their broken arms (both apprentices have their hands in plaster), which clearly shows that the photograph was meant to highlight the exploitation of the working class and the injustice of the political system of the time. In other words, the photo was not used for visual effect, but was “used by socialists as a weapon in order to transform the reality”.<sup>21</sup> The picture is accompanied by an article stating that the employer “picked up Karabić, an apprentice, and threw him over his shoulder, causing a bone in his left arm to be broken”.<sup>22</sup> The aim of the photograph, which depicts two exploited apprentices, was to arouse a sense of solidarity, overcoming class divisions in Yugoslav society, to discourage similar treatment of assistants by other employers, and to introduce a system of punishment for those who treat their apprentices in a similar way. Such pictures of workers were meant to redefine certain social patterns, primarily the relationship between workers and employers, and served the purpose of creating a narrative about capitalist exploitation and the brutality of employers.

A month earlier the same newspaper featured a photo portraying the already mentioned 13-year-old Mirko Vrebac, whose working day lasted 12 hours (Fig. 2). The only food he received from his employer was bread and white coffee. In addition to working at the bakery, Vrebac also had to perform cleaning tasks, sweep the floor, fetch water, etc. Also, he was not allowed to sleep, and if his employer caught him sleeping, he would immediately wake him up. With such practice, he had hardly slept in three days. In the article, Vrebac said that one day his employer caught him sleeping and “punched him in the face, breaking his left jaw and causing blood to flow from his nose”.<sup>23</sup> The photo of young Mirko and his testimony supported the thesis about the gross exploitation of workers and showed that labour and capital are in opposition to each other. This is supported by the article accompanying the picture, which states that the young workers were exposed to “terrible treatment and that their employers killed them emotionally and physically”.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, Mirko Vrebac is defined as a

21 Kouwenhoven, “Worker’s Photography Movement of the 1920’s and 1930’s”.

22 “Slika divljaštva jednog poslodavca”.

23 “Još jedna žrtva noćnog rada i zvjerskog postupka”.

24 Ibid.

victim of “inhuman brutality”, which is further emphasised by the depiction of a “pale boy” and his clothes, as pointed out in the text.<sup>25</sup>

Two very similar photographs were published in 1927 and 1928. The first features Vinko Kranja, a 16-year-old apprentice in a bakery (Fig. 3), and the second features Ivan Stajić, a carpenter (Fig. 4). Both are shown facing the camera. They are wearing underwear, and the upper part of their body is bare. The pictures show exhausted boys with, as the newspaper wrote, “bent feet”,<sup>26</sup> while their arms are crossed. Their gaze, turned towards the camera, seems ‘dark’, and their emotional state revealed by the photographs is best described by the author of the article by stating that their “consciousness is humiliated”.<sup>27</sup>

These were the results of a 20-hour workday, which included cleaning the stables and washing clothes, while their only meals were rotten tomatoes and bread.<sup>28</sup> Both of them were sleep-deprived, just like Vrebac. They were only allowed to sleep if there was no work. Due to such working conditions, Stajić looks thin, pale, sick and “stunted”. These were also the consequences of physical abuse.<sup>29</sup> The workers were beaten, thrown into laundry tubs, deprived of sleep, forced to work long hours (which was illegal), etc. Because of all this, as already pointed out, their faces were “dark” and their consciousness “subdued”, while they became “physically disabled” and contracted tuberculosis.

The photographs of Vinko Kranja, Mirko Vrebac or Ivan Stajić gave a realistic depiction of society, devoid of aesthetic manipulations. Depicting individuals and emphasizing personal tragedies, the photographs were a mediator between the subjects and the recipients—newspaper readers. According to Susan Sontag, photographs have a moral mission.<sup>30</sup>

#### PHOTOGRAPHY AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN LABOUR AND CAPITAL

The pictures published in magazine *Organizovani radnik* are in line with the goals of worker-photography, which showed two opposing social positions—worker and employer, i.e. the oppressed and the oppressor. This type of social relations can be interpreted following the ideas of German sociologist Georg Simmel, which include subordination, supremacy, etc.<sup>31</sup>

25 Ibid.

26 “Još jedna od mnogobrojnih žrtava ubitačnog noćnog rada u pekarnama”.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Sontag, *On Photography*, 89.

31 Korllos, “Uncovering Simmels Forms and Social Types in Social Settings”, 18.

In this context, we can observe the photographs of underage workers from Zagreb, whose narrative is based on the struggle between labour and capital. In the accompanying articles, it was stated that employers slowly kill children without letting them see a doctor when necessary, and that “they carry out their criminal activity all over the country, having only one goal—to amass wealth, while the younger generation perishes, healthy children turn into idiots and physically disabled”.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, the photographs published in the magazine *Organizovani radnik* depict, to employ Simmel’s term, the social relationship between the inferior and the superior. Therefore, it can be argued that photographs can be taken as historical sources that can help us reach historical truth, by showing two opposing sides, they reveal the negative consequences of social inequality—starving and sick workers, their deformities, etc. The picture becomes a mediator between the subject (workers) and the rest of the world (readers, employers), and at the same time has the power to inform and mobilise “the campaign for social justice”.<sup>33</sup> Sociologist Larry Ray points out that the image does not speak to us in a magical way, but is always presented in context and through multiple ‘lenses’ of social differences.<sup>34</sup>

As the aim of a photograph is to convey a message and show reality, the level of aestheticization is kept to a minimum, the subjects are photographed in front of a simple background, letting the environment speak as much as the representation of the workers themselves. On the one hand, the simplicity of the environment coincides with their way of life, and, at the same time, it allows focus on the deformations caused by years of hard work. Because of this, the observer can experience compassion, identification and, possibly, an aspiration to redefine the social position of the working class, which is what photographers and newspaper editors hoped for. We can agree with James T. Siegel who, writing about the work of George Simmel, asserted that aesthetics can have a humanising effect.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the appeals accompanying the picture implies “the emancipation of mankind”.

While these photographs showed empathy with the workers, at the same time they dehumanised their employers. This is further emphasised by the accompanying texts, in which their attitude towards the workers is described as “savage” and “barbaric”, etc. In this way, these pictures created class symbols of the capitalist system—the exploited worker and the brutal tyrant (employer)—thus becoming instruments of class struggle.

32 “Još jedna od mnogobrojnih žrtava ubitačnog noćnog rada u pekarnama”.

33 Ray, “Sociology and Visual Aesthetics”.

34 Ibid.

35 Siegel, “Georg Simmel Reappears”, 112.

## CONCLUSION

In worker-photography, aesthetics and the pursuit of social justice come together, and their interrelationship is the subject of a series of analyses and opposing views. According to Larry Ray, a picture has the right to represent an object, and in this sense “has a right to truthfulness”,<sup>36</sup> while Georg Simmel asserted that society is a work of art.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, with regard to the relationship to reality, photography was often accused of insufficient authenticity, of voyeurism and commodification, and of the aesthetic representation of suffering.<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, a dynamic relationship develops between photography and what is shown, especially in terms of its aspiration to show the ‘complete truth’, which is especially expressed in worker-photography. However, this aspiration is not one-dimensional and is subject to different interpretations.

Susan Sontag is the author of one of the most famous discussions on this topic. In her collection of essays *On Photography*, she stresses that photography connects two ideals—one that is an “assault on reality” and one that is a “submission to reality”.<sup>39</sup> Referring to the pictures of young workers mentioned in this paper, we can say that these pictures are “submission to reality”, and according to Robert Frank, the photographer is a “friendly observer”. In this sense, the artistic component of these photographs is not an imperative, they are documents in which the representation of reality has an undisguised social message and the role of raising social awareness.

Sontag pointed out that the camera has a dual purpose in capitalism. On the one hand, it is intended to produce spectacles (for the masses), while, on the other hand, serving as an ‘tool of surveillance and control (for state governments)’.<sup>40</sup> Based on the analysis of the photographs presented in this paper, a third purpose might be added—the role in raising awareness of the position of marginal social groups (in this case, the working class). Therefore, this kind of photographs may be interpreted within the framework of historiography and visual sociology, which open up a relatively unexplored area of historiography, at least in the Croatian context.

36 Ray, “Sociology and Visual Aesthetics”.

37 Davis, “Georg Simmel and the Aesthetics of Social Reality”, 320.

38 Ray, “Sociology and Visual Aesthetics”.

39 Sontag, *On Photography*, 96.

40 Ibid., 140.

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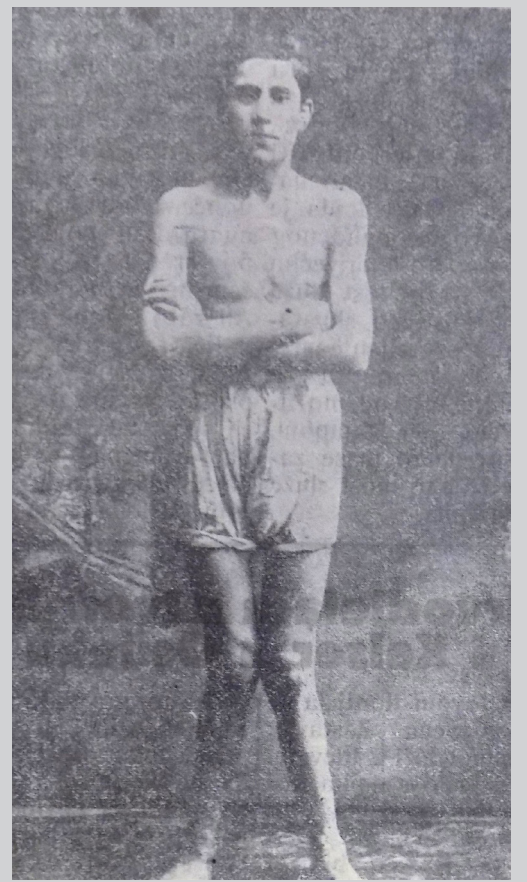
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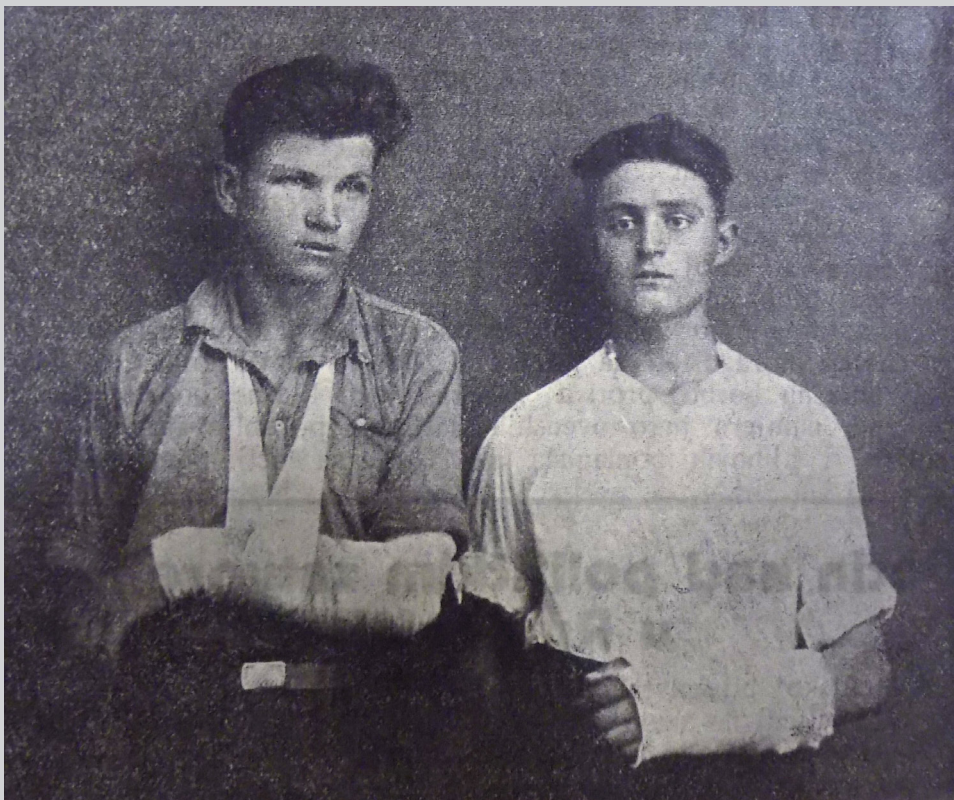


[2]



[3]





[4]

1. Photography of Anton Karabaić and Vjekoslav Martinec who were beaten by their employer (Source: „Slika divljaštva jednog drvodjeljskog poslodavca“, *Organizovani radnik*, Zagreb, August 2, 1928, VIII)
2. Mirko Vrebac under age worker in a bakery shop (Source: „Još jedna žrtva noćnog rada...“, *Organizovani radnik*, Zagreb, June 12, 1928, VIII)
3. 16-old Vinko Kranja after few months of working in a bakery shop in Zagreb (Source: „Vinko Kranja“, *Organizovani radnik*, Zagreb, July 21, 1928, VIII)
4. Ivan Stajic after working in a bakery shop (Source: „Još jedna od mnogobrojnih žrtava“, *Organizovani radnik*, Zagreb, August 2, 1928, VIII)