Archivist Katie Kirwan discovered this extraordinary photograph among thousands of routine images taken to document the completion of municipal contracts. We now know it was taken by Eugene de Salignac, who shot over twenty thousand photos during his almost thirty years as the only photographer at the municipal Department of Bridges/Plant and Structures.

Unemployment was a part of workers’ lives throughout the twentieth century, although it reached the national consciousness most during depressions. For some occupations, specially day labor, whether it be domestic or outdoor, the possibility of no work is a daily occurrence.

We don’t know what these workers are talking about, but the date and the African-American man sitting to the side evokes the early 1960s efforts of CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) to overcome discrimination in the construction unions.

The garment industry in NY peaked in 1947 with 350,000 workers; by 1993 there were only 88,000. The long decline has been followed by a resurgence of sweatshops, many of them employing undocumented immigrants at extremely low wages.

Brooklyn Bridge with painters posing on suspenders, 1914. New York City Municipal Archives.

Unemployed women waiting to be hired as day workers at what they referred to as the Bronx “slave market.” 1939. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL.

Workers’ lunch break at Warbase Houses, Manhattan, 1963. Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU.

Sau Kuen Wong, single operator (undated). ILGWU Archive, Kheel Center, Cornell University, photograph by Bob Gumpert.