

World Press Photo 2026 in Amsterdam: Striking images of crisis-ridden capitalism

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On April 24, the World Press Photo (WPP) Foundation opened its 2026 annual exhibition at De Nieuwe Kerk in the heart of Amsterdam.

Out of tens of thousands of photographs submitted by photographers from more than 100 countries, an international jury selected 42 winning efforts, including the Photo of the Year and two runner-ups. The exhibition at De Nieuwe Kerk (a 15th-century church located on Dam Square) will remain on view until September 27, 2026.

The exhibition will tour dozens of cities worldwide, including Berlin, Rome, Jakarta, Rio de Janeiro and Sydney, bringing before millions of viewers powerful images of war, displacement, poverty, state repression and the broader social decay produced by world capitalism.

The exhibition takes place amid escalating global turmoil, including the Gaza genocide and US-Israeli aggression against Iran, as well as the European powers' plans for war against Russia and attacks on immigrants and refugees everywhere.

These developments have generated mounting opposition within the international working class, a response vividly captured in a number of the photographs on display. World Press Photo, however, in its self-appointed role as a "neutral witness" to contemporary events, largely eschews any serious examination of the social forces and class interests underlying these tragedies, often omitting reference to them altogether.

The 2026 World Press Photo of the Year, "Separated by ICE," was shot by Carol Guzy for the *Miami Herald*. Taken on August 26, 2025, inside New York City's Jacob K. Javits Federal Building, the photograph captures the moment Luis, an Ecuadorian immigrant, was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents immediately following an immigration hearing.

The strength of Guzy's photograph lies in its immediacy and physical intensity. No courtroom, no official document is visible within the tightly cropped frame. Instead, the viewer is confronted with profound helplessness—the anguish of family members watching their loved one being taken away, powerless to intervene. Luis stands close to the camera, his face only partially visible, blurred in the midst of the sheer force of physical struggle. The focus falls instead on the frantic hands and distressed faces of his family members as they cling to his T-shirt with all their strength. The stretched fabric becomes a powerful visual metaphor for a family fighting—both literally and figuratively—against being torn apart by the police apparatus of the fascist Trump administration.

Furthermore, at the centre of the photograph, the anguished face of one of the children dominates the composition. Her expression conveys terror, grief and anger. The image transcends the fate of a single family. Made with a short focal length and from close range, the photograph possesses a claustrophobic intensity. Bodies press against one another in a confined space, hands grasp desperately and faces emerge in varying states of panic and distress. The viewer experiences the scene almost at arm's length, as though trapped within the struggle itself.

Thus, the image becomes an indictment of an entire system of mass detention and deportation, an experience shared by countless immigrant

working class families confronted with detention, deportation and separation by the ICE Gestapo. By selecting this photograph, the WPP jury observed: "What Guzy records here is not an isolated moment of grief; rather, it is evidence and documentation of a government policy being applied systematically to people who followed the rules they were given."

The first finalist, *Aid Emergency in Gaza*, was photographed by Palestinian photojournalist Saber Nuraldin for the European Pressphoto Agency. Taken July 27, 2025, the image shows Palestinians swarming an aid truck entering Gaza through the Zikim Crossing—one of the northern access points used for humanitarian aid entering Gaza from Israel—as they struggle to secure bags of flour during what the Israeli military described as a "tactical suspension" of military operations.

The photograph condenses an immense social and human catastrophe into a single frame. Bodies are compressed into a dense mass surrounding and climbing over the truck, itself barely visible beneath the crowd. The people in the image appear exhausted and emaciated, struggling for food after months of deprivation, while the devastated landscape visible in the distance on either side of the frame bears witness to the relentless destruction wrought by US-backed Israeli bombardment.

There is no central figure in focus. The subject is an entire people driven to the brink of survival. The elevated perspective reveals the scale of the crisis, transforming individual acts of hunger into a collective struggle for existence. The harsh daylight and muted palette underscore the brutal conditions confronting Gaza's population.

After decades of oppression and following years of bombardment, displacement and siege, Gaza's population has been reduced to a struggle for the most basic necessities of life. Tens of thousands have been killed. Those who survive are subjected to conditions of famine, disease and deprivation. Thousands more have been killed or wounded while attempting to obtain food and humanitarian aid. The photograph exposes the criminal character of a war long obscured by official propaganda and media distortion. It stands as visual testimony to what many observers and legal scholars describe as war crimes.

Furthermore, the photograph was made by a Palestinian journalist, which is itself significant. Since October 2023, Gaza has become one of the deadliest places in the world for media workers. Hundreds of journalists and media personnel have been killed by the Zionist military while documenting events on the ground. This systematic destruction of life has been accompanied by efforts to suppress and intimidate those seeking to expose the truth.

That photographs such as this continue to emerge testifies to the extraordinary courage and persistence of Palestinian journalists. Working under conditions of bombardment, hunger and constant danger, they have consistently produced an irreplaceable visual record of the ongoing genocide in Gaza—one of the defining tragedies of the 21st century.

Explaining its selection, the jury observed that "starvation and famine, affecting more than half a million Palestinians, was the result of an Israeli

blockade of the Gaza Strip and was a defining humanitarian issue of 2025.” While this acknowledges the mechanisms of mass deprivation, the starvation imposed on Gaza was not solely the product of Zionist policy by the Netanyahu regime. It was first and foremost endorsed and facilitated by all the major imperialist powers, which continue to provide Israel with diplomatic, military and financial support.

Moreover, in early 2024, major imperialist powers suspended funding to UNRWA, the principal humanitarian agency supporting Palestinian refugees. Among them was the Dutch caretaker Rutte government, which froze its contribution of €19.4 million while the Port of Rotterdam continued to function as a critical node in international supply chains linked to the Israeli military. Funding was restored only in March 2026, after two years of “investigations,” when The Hague reinstated its annual contribution.

That the World Press Photo Foundation, operating from the Dutch capital since its establishment in 1955, remains silent on the role of the Dutch government and its institutions in facilitating and politically and financially aiding Israel’s genocide on Gaza is revealing.

As the WSWS noted in its 2022 review of the exhibition, the then-executive director of the World Press Photo Foundation had previously led the Prince Claus Fund, a cultural foundation established by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Both institutions are based in Amsterdam and are closely linked through Dutch state-supported cultural funding structures, where foreign policy, diplomacy, and so-called independent arts organisations often overlap.

Tamer Hassan al-Shafei and his family break their Ramadan fast in the remains of their home in Beit Lahia, Gaza, part of the series *Witnessing Gaza* by Palestinian photographer Saher Alghorra for the *New York Times*. It shows the family sitting down to eat inside the shattered remains of their home.

What remains of the building is less a home than the skeletal frame of one: a handful of standing walls, part of a floor, a table, a cupboard with a school rucksack hanging from it and a clothesline stretched across the room. These details matter. They are the remnants not merely of a shelter, but of what was once a home—traces of ordinary domestic life violently shattered.

Against this backdrop, the family’s meal unfolds among the ruins, offering a defiant assertion of everyday existence amid devastation. Their gathering is not simply an act of survival, but an insistence on preserving the rhythms of home and daily life in a place where almost everything that once defined it has been reduced to shambles.

The executive director of WPP this year, Joumana El Zein Khoury, explained on the official website,

I have regular conversations with photo editors from news organisations across continents. At one point this past year, I asked them: in a world as polarised and complicated as ours, how do you balance stories and narratives? How do you continue to show that you are not there to take sides, but to tell stories as they are? How do you navigate the daily turbulence that comes with being a vehicle for storytelling? Their answer was both simple and profound: we do the best we can.

Here she raises questions that cut to the heart of the matter: do the photographs on display—documenting ICE raids and family separations, the aid emergency in Gaza, and other harrowing scenes of social misery—embody “balance” and “neutrality,” free from taking sides? Clearly not! The claim collapses under its own weight.

To claim “photographic neutrality” in conditions of mass suffering, state repression, war and genocide is to obscure the very historical foundations

and ongoing significance of documentary photography. The great documentary photographers did not achieve distinction through indifference to the fate of their subjects. On the contrary, they turned their cameras toward poverty, exploitation, injustice, war and inequality because they believed the exposure of these conditions demanded public attention; and sought to stir, move and make people reflect.

Robert Capa once famously remarked, “If your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough.” The statement referred not merely to physical proximity, but to a deeper engagement with the human reality being documented. From Lewis Hine’s exposure of child labour and Jacob Riis’s documentation of urban poverty to W. Eugene Smith’s photo essays on war and industrial poisoning, documentary photography has historically been animated by a profound concern for objective truth and a commitment to revealing conditions that the ruling elite often prefer to keep hidden from the public.

As the WSWS has previously noted, the WPP Foundation is hardly a politically “neutral” institution. While presenting itself as an impartial arbiter of visual journalism, it operates within a broader network of media, cultural and political institutions aligned with the foreign-policy interests of the major imperialist powers.

In the past years, WPP partnered with Bellingcat, the Amsterdam-based organisation that has received generous funding from the US government-backed National Endowment for Democracy (often referred to as the “second CIA”), the European Council and other “non-profit” organisations. This year, World Press Photo once again honoured Ukrainian photographer Evgeniy Maloletka, a Ukrainian nationalist, who has collaborated with the neo-Nazi Azov battalion.

In the context of this review, it is not possible to examine every photograph and project presented in the exhibition in detail. Nevertheless, a broader assessment can be made. Taken as a whole, the WPP exhibition 2026 offers a striking visual record of a world marked by war, displacement, poverty, state and political repression, environmental disasters and widening social inequality.

Many of the photographers demonstrate considerable courage and sensitivity in documenting human suffering and resilience under extraordinarily difficult conditions, continuing the best tradition of documentary photography.

Yet the exhibition also reveals a persistent contradiction that has accompanied documentary photography throughout its history. While many of the images capture the devastating consequences of contemporary social and political crises with striking immediacy, they rarely shed light on the deeper historical, economic and political forces that produce those crises.

This tension has long been present and recurs throughout the exhibition year after year. On the one hand, the photographs testify to the immense skill and commitment of documentary photographers, whose work bears witness to reality under conditions of considerable risk and difficulty. On the other hand, the curatorial framework of WPP often presents these crises as isolated tragedies rather than as interconnected manifestations of a global crisis.

Photography, like every other art form in contemporary society, has a profoundly contradictory character. Our age has produced an immense number of images documenting social decay, circulated instantly and widely across social media—an image culture that itself carries explosive social significance. The problem is not that too many photographs depict too much misery. The problem is that misery is too often presented stripped of its social, political, class and historical context.

Photography, in its most serious form, must mean more than the mere witnessing of suffering. It must do more, in other words, to place that suffering within a broader historical and social framework. People must be assisted in seeing the *truth* of the suffering.



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