

## AFD Ep 334 Links and Notes - The Execution of the Singer Joe Hill by the Murderous Capitalist Class

- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe\\_Hill](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Hill)
- <https://aflcio.org/about/history/labor-history-people/joe-hill>
  - Joe Hill (born Joel Hägglund) aka Joseph Hillström
  - Born in Sweden in 1879. Father was a railroad conductor who died at 41.
  - Contracted tuberculosis fairly early in life
  - Moved to the US at age 22 with his brother in 1902. Became an “itinerant laborer” crossing the country
  - Joined the Industrial Workers of the World circa 1910 as a California dockworker, although later in the year he was in Oregon as a dockworker. He used the name “Joe Hill” to submit letters, cartoons, songs, and other writing to the IWW newspaper “The Industrial Worker.” He became a legend within just the few remaining years of his life.
  - Famous songs, mostly mocking or subversive parodies of well known popular songs and religious songs from Christian revival groups proselytizing among the homeless encampments, migrant farm camps, and lumber camps, and mining camps, where the IWW was trying to recruit too:
    - “There Is Power in a Union”, “The Rebel Girl”, “The Tramp,” and “Casey Jones—the Union Scab” (which was in support of the 1911 Illinois Central shopmen’s strike and national solidarity strike, both of which were undermined significantly by rail employees in rival unions filling in for striking workers, thereby scabbing against union men)
    - Satirical hymn “The Preacher and the Slave” which was the origin of the phrase “**pie in the sky**” -- the first two verses (and **chorus**) are as follows: *Long-haired preachers come out every night / Try to tell you what’s wrong and what’s right / But when asked how ‘bout something to eat / They will answer in voices so sweet / **You will eat, bye and bye / In that glorious land above the sky / Work and pray, live on hay / You’ll get pie in the sky when you die / And the Starvation Army, they play / And they sing and they clap and they pray / Till they get all your coin on the drum / Then they tell you when you’re on the bum***
  - Joe Hill was a rail-hopping migrant worker...
    - This made him a key asset to the IWW’s hobo rail networks for soapbox protests, where they would quickly mobilize their rhetorical propagandists to show up in key cities to respond to events. Hill’s song “the rebel girl” was about Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the IWW soapbox legend who had started as a teen and was 25 when the song was released and who would eventually serve as a leader of the Communist Party of the United States. The hobo rail networks had great respect for the IWW’s signature red membership card and rail hobos tended to be one target audience for Joe Hill’s body of work.
    - Listeners might recall from [our very long episode in 2019 on the history of the IWW](#) – and here we’re citing Patrick Renshaw’s 1967 history “The Wobblies: The Story of Syndicalism in the United States”– that the IWW had launched a 1913 campaign to organize seasonal farm laborers across the Midwest who spent much of the year struggling to find work between harvests and then lived in horrid conditions during the harvest season
    - Another key step by the IWW was a 1914 convention decision to begin organizing the unemployed members of the working class, not only to

help them find jobs, but also to make it easier for them to avoid serving as surplus labor force scab workers during strikes.

- Joe Hill's arrest and demise in 1914 & 1915 came at a critical point in this migrant labor effort by the IWW. By 1916, the final year before the US entry to World War One, the Agriculture Workers Organization for seasonal migrant farm workers was a massive force within the IWW and was raking in the dues money and winning fight after fight with farm owners who could not afford to let their crops spoil during a strike. The IWW's strongest branch thus became a highly decentralized union of seasonal and mostly unemployed farm workers.
- 1914-1915
  - In January 1914, Joe Hill was working in a mine in Park City, Utah. He was the 13th person arrested as a possible suspect after a former police officer and his son were shot and killed in the Salt Lake City grocery store they owned. The two gunmen had worn red bandanas, which were presumably fairly common. Hill had himself been shot through the shot the same night – although a number of other equally unconnected people had too – and sought medical attention in Salt Lake City. The doctor claimed Hill had been armed when he arrived. It was clear that Hill's wound had been sustained while he had his hands up. He said he had been shot in a dispute over a woman. He did have a red bandana at his boarding room.
  - Prosecutors found a dozen eyewitnesses to testify that Hill had shot the grocer and his son and they coerced the victim's 13-year-old surviving son to recant his insistence that Hill looked nothing like the actual shooter. Hill did not know the grocer and the store was not robbed, which was one reason it was originally presumed to be a hit. The media repeatedly emphasized Hill's prominent reputation within the IWW. Hill refused to testify (or even explain to police about the nature of his injuries). It seems likely the former fiancé of a woman he was involved with shot him. The likeliest actual suspect for the grocery store murders was a Norwegian criminal Magnus Olson aka Frank Z. Wilson, who went on to be armed muscle and getaway man for Al Capone, and who had been arrested in the earlier sweep. The jury deliberated for only a few hours before finding Joe Hill guilty anyway, which would mean a death penalty.
  - Hill himself wrote of the trial: "Owing to the prominence of Mr. Morrison, there had to be a 'goat' [scapegoat] and the undersigned being, as they thought, a friendless tramp, a Swede, and worst of all, an IWW, had no right to live anyway, and was therefore duly selected to be 'the goat'."
  - The case of course drew the usual national defenders including IWW leaders and other prominent IWW members like Helen Keller, but it was so appalling that President Woodrow Wilson even objected to the outcome. The Swedish government and the Swedish public sought to intervene in the case too. Nothing came of this.
  - Joe Hill's appeals lawyer, though unsuccessful this time, was the famous IWW defense attorney Orrin N. Hilton, whom we have previously talked about with the Frank Steunenberg murder trial and the Sacco & Vanzetti trials. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orrin\\_N.\\_Hilton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orrin_N._Hilton) Hilton contended that Hill had carefully avoided emphasizing his own connections to the IWW, despite the media and prosecutors fixating on it, and that this was a factor in his refusal to take the stand in his own defense. It remains unclear

whether Hill was deliberately allowing himself to be martyred or simply did not see any point in trying to defend himself against an obvious frame-up.

- Joe Hill was executed by firing squad, nearly two years after his arrest, on November 19 1915 – 105 years ago this past week – but he had one final legendary phrase to offer to popular culture. Hill sent a telegram to Big Bill Haywood, another popular subject of our show, with the following lines: “Goodbye Bill. I die like a true blue rebel. Don't waste any time in mourning. Organize ... Could you arrange to have my body hauled to the state line to be buried? I don't want to be found dead in Utah.” In 1967, Hunter S. Thompson reformulated a fragment of this into the pithier line “Don't mourn, organize!” which has been re-popularized in the Democratic Party in recent years by a number of figures who came up in the 1960s political scene including Senator Ed Markey, with the even catchier formulation “Don't agonize, organize!” Joe Hill also released a rhyming poem as his Last Will and Testament requesting cremation. This was carried out in Chicago.
- 1916: [https://twitter.com/Dennis\\_Rodkin/status/1329586938387591177](https://twitter.com/Dennis_Rodkin/status/1329586938387591177) [thread] -
  - Hill's body was shipped to Chicago and cremated Nov. 29, 2015. On the one year anniversary of his death, 150/600 packets of his ashes were distributed at the IWW meeting at the West Side Auditorium in Chicago. The ashes were also mailed to every state but Utah (“I wouldn't be found dead there”) and even internationally. The USPS confiscated some packets as “subversive materials” but some ended up as far away as NZ.
- His ashes continued to be spread around the world by leftists and unionists for 75 years after his execution. In 1988, a vial of ashes that was in the National Archives since 1944 was returned to the IWW, but the National Archives kept the original envelope (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-11-20-mn-590-story.html>). Some parts are also honored in relevant locations including Sweden.
- <https://local.sltrib.com/charts/joehill/ashes.html> Singer Billy Bragg, dared by Abbie Hoffman, ate some of Hill's ashes, washed down with some union-brewed beer in 1989.
- Fun fact: Stephen King named his son Joseph Hillstrom King. He goes by the pen name Joe Hill.