

A FREE BOOK FROM THE THE GLOCAL WORKSHOP

FAUSTO GIUDICE

Joe Hill

in memoriam



Don't waste time mourning. Organize



"erga omnes" Series Nr.1



Fausto Giudice

Joe Hill, *in memoriam*

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Joe Hill: “*I never died*”, folk art, 20th century

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The “*erga omnes*” series takes its name from the motto of the rebellious slaves in ancient Rome, guided by Spartacus, which means “for all” in Latin

On 19 November 1915, Joe Hill was shot by a firing squad in Salt Lake City. Like Malcolm X, Patrice Lumumba, Che Guevara or Thomas Sankara, he died, murdered by the class enemy, while less than 40, exactly at 36 years. This epic, tragic and bloody page in the history of the working class of the Americas deserves to be told. It is that of men and women who had fled old Europe in search of paradise on earth and fell into the hell of the deadliest capitalism in history, alongside their black and native brothers and sisters.

A child of the iron

Joel Emmanuel Hägglund was born on 7 October 1879 in Gävle, in central Sweden, a region called Gästrikland, land of iron and lime, which have been mined since the 14th century. His father Olof, the son of a peasant, was a locomotive driver on the Gävle-Falun line. The family was religious and belonged to the *Waldenströmian* sect. This is a Swedish Missionary Church, a breakaway group of the official Lutheran Church created by an excommunicated pastor, Waldenström, who was very active in working-class circles, attracted attention with his emphasis on individual freedom - and musical abilities. Joel learned very early to play the violin, the banjo, the guitar, the piano, the harmonica and on the organ built by his father; he began to compose songs, inspired by the psalms sung by the teenage girls of the Salvation Army, in whose skirts his hands always strayed.

The situation of the family changed dramatically with the death of the father in 1887, at the age of 41, during an operation following an accident at work during a false manoeuvre . Trapped under a locomotive , Olof suffered from internal bleeding for a year before

being operated. Finally, he did not wake up from the anaesthesia. The mother, whose railway widow's pension was very meagre -225 crowns per year, or a quarter of a worker's income at the time -, and the six living children (out of the nine she had) have to roll up their sleeves and the weaving machine manufactured by Olof was running at full speed. Some evenings, there was nothing to eat and the children went to bed in the freezing cold of the winter on an empty stomach and wearing mittens in their hands, for lack of heating.



Widow Hägglund and her six children around 1890

Olof's death drove Joel's mother crazy. Nicknamed "Hille-Kajsa", she began to travel the 5 km separating her village from the city, standing on a street corner to read the Bible aloud and denounce the miseries of the world. The children threw stones at her. Then she retaliated

with quotations from the Holy Book. In the end, she was interned in the village hospice for the poor, from where she continued to escape to go ahead with her preaching activity.



Joel left school at 12 with the best grades in written expression, drawing and behaviour and the worst in biblical history. He would never be a clam frog. He preferred going to the premises of the Workers' Association or the Sailors' Church to take drawing, music and English lessons rather than accompany his mother to the Church of Bethlehem. At the beginning of the 1890s, the labour movement was undergoing a transformation: the Social Democratic Labour Party was created in 1889, but the trade union centre was not born until 1898. The party mainly advocated for the universal right to vote – women would only get it in 1921 – and the 8-hour workday “8 hours of work, 8 hours of leisure, 8 hours of rest” – which would only be established in 1919 with the introduction of the 48-hour week.

Gradually, the old workers' associations, which were more of a paternalistic impulse of enlightened bourgeois to educate the workers and, above all, to divert them from vice (alcohol, tobacco, pub and brothel), disappeared or were transformed into grassroots organizations of the party. Joel, who at that time was still a teenager, undoubtedly attended the debates agitating the working-class environment, which contributed to his training.

He worked as a grocery boy, then in a rope shop, and after that as a steam engine driver on a construction site. At the age of 20, he had cutaneous tuberculosis – which, after disappearing in Europe, has reappeared in recent years and remains endemic in the Maghreb – requiring X-ray treatment in a hospital in Stockholm, where he spent two years, and of which he would keep traces in the form of scars on his face and on his neck. This did not prevent him from continuing to sing, at workers' meetings and in local cafes. In 1901, Joel was discharged from military service for health reasons.



Joel, seated, and his brothers Paul and Efraim, wearing bushy moustaches, shortly before their departure to the Americas. Photo Länsmuseet Gävleborg



Margareta Catarina, his mother, died in 1902, aged 57. Like her husband, she had refused to see a doctor until the end. Joel was 23 years old. The six siblings sold the family home and shared the inheritance. Once the debts were paid off, they each ended up with a thousand crowns, the equivalent of a year's decent salary for a worker, corresponding to €6,000 today. Paul who was two years older than Joel was unhappy in his marriage and had just lost his daughter at the age of three months. He decided to leave, abandoning his wife and son. Joel would accompany him. They embarked in Gothenburg on the *Wilson* steamer that took them to Hull on the east coast of England. From there, they reached Liverpool by train, where they boarded the Cunard Line's *Saxonia* for America, in the third class. After ten days of crossing, during which they gave a piano and violin concert, the two brothers reached Ellis Island on 28 October 1902.



KFUM's house in Gävle (photo of 1956)

They knew English, acquired from the Young Men's Christian Union (YMCA in English, KFUM in Swedish), an organization founded by George Williams, a Yankee veteran turned Baptist priest, with the aim of working for the harmonious development of the "body, mind and soul" of young people (hence the famous red triangle which is its logo). George Williams was at the origin of the international movement to denounce Belgian colonialism in Congo which then became so to say the personal property of King Leopold II. It was YMCA animators who invented basketball and volleyball, being in search of non-violent forms of sport to be practiced by young people. The local chapter of KFUM had been founded in Gävle in 1890. The poor young people who saw no other solution to the prevailing misery than to emigrate to the Americas were very assiduous in English classes.

Svenskamerika

One and a half million Swedes emigrated between 1850 and 1930, including 1.2 million who went to the United States. These so-called “Svenskamerikaner” have left a strong footprint in Minnesota (with Minneapolis as its capital), where their descendants now make up 10% of the population, and just about everywhere they have settled, from Massachusetts to California. The emigrants of the pioneer period, from the 17th century onwards, were generally “religious refugees”, fleeing the repression exercised by the Lutheran State Church against all forms of dissent, in particular the prohibition of conventicles, that is to say prayer meetings held at home without the presence of a priest, which were punished by prison sentences until 1856. This prohibition targeted a whole series of free churches, which challenged certain dogmas propagated by the official Church.

And until this same period, the Church exercised a police and fiscal function. The priests had to keep the census books, in which all data on each family, including their religious knowledge, were entered, verified each year during a "catechism interrogation" conducted at home at the beginning of each winter. Poorly rated Christians just had to behave. Yes, today's Sweden, so rich, so cool and politically correct, comes from afar. But there is no plaque commemorating the Hay Square (Hötorget) in central Stockholm – the site of the Concert Hall where the Nobel Prize award ceremony takes place– the execution of sisters Britta and Anna Sippel and Anna Månsdotter burned, not alive but once beheaded, on 24 April 1676, for witchcraft...



Geskel Saloman: *Emigration* (1872). Emigrants en route to Gothenburg, where they will embarke for the USA.
Image from the Art museum in Gothenburg

Economic reasons for emigrating followed religious reasons from the second half of the 19th century, while the appearance of steamboats allowed a much faster journey of much larger masses of people than sailing boats (which took two months to cross from Gothenburg to New York). After the end of the Civil War in the United States (1865), the Washington authorities launched a campaign to recruit immigrants by offering free plots of land in depopulated areas (and for good reason, the native population, the “Indians”, had been exterminated). From 1840 to 1914, 50 million Europeans emigrated to the USA. In Sweden, the agricultural crises of the 1880s accelerated the movement. The Swedish peasants became American proletarians. From 1900, the workers took precedence over the peasants. Every failure of the labour movement provoked a great wave of emigration, and this was especially the case after the last two general strikes in Swedish history, that of 1902 and that of 1909. After the strike in

1909, half the strikers were fired, and half of them headed for America. These jobless workers from Sweden formed the basis of the revolutionary social movements that would agitate the United States before, during and after the First World War.



Cleaning spittoons at the Washington Capitol, 1914

From New York to California

During the winter season in New York in 1902, Joel began by becoming a cleaner of public spittoons in the slum districts where immigrants piled up. This cleaning mission was a typical first job for immigrants who had just landed, such as that of horse droppings picker, who was also threatened with the disappearance by "progress", because the automobile took the place of the horse-drawn vehicle for the greater benefit of the Rockefellers and other Texas oil tycoons. Spittoons in public places, made of copper, iron, glass or porcelain, were then at the peak of their diffusion, considered as a factor of public hygiene. At that time, Scout organizations and the Anti-Tuberculosis League organized campaigns based on the slogan "Don't

Spit on the Sidewalk”. It would be necessary to wait for the influenza epidemic of 1918 - which caused between 50 and 100 million deaths worldwide, including more than half a million in the United States, particularly affecting the poor and Native Americans – for the medical profession to question the prophylactic function of these spittoons.

Soon, Joel and Paul separated to try their hand at adventure. Joel “goes west”, towards El Dorado, California. Here he worked in agriculture, as a mason, docker, and lumberjack. A postcard to his family in 1905 is mailed from Cleveland, Ohio.



Joel was in San Francisco when the city was hit by the earthquake of 18 April 1906, of force 8.3 on the Richter scale, whose catastrophic effects were the fires started by gas line chain explosions, which started at Hayes Street when a mother making breakfast started the first fire, making the disaster go down in history as the “Ham and Eggs Fire”. However, two other factors contributed to the burning of 28,000 buildings, or 80% of the city: the uncontrolled use of dynamite by firefighters to blow up buildings hit by the earthquake, which only spread the fires, and the fact that homeowners played with their

matches to qualify for insurance, which did not compensate for earthquake damage but did for fire damage. In short, the toll: 3,000 dead. On 16 May 1906, under the title "*The disaster in San Francisco-A resident of Gävle tells*", the daily newspaper "Gefle Dagblad" published a letter sent by Joel to a friend, who transmitted it to the editors, where he tells the effects of the disaster on the city.



"(...) according to the editor-in-chief of the Swedish-American newspaper on the West Coast, Mr. Alex Olson, of the 10,000 Swedes in San Francisco, about 6,000 are homeless and, what's even worse, additionally short of work and therefore need to find a roof over their heads in the best possible manner. Most of them are reduced to looking for a night home under the stars in parks and streets. There are hundreds of widows and orphans among these unfortunate people and many are sick and totally destitute..."

Wobbly!

In 1907, our Joel found himself a **dock worker** in Portland, Oregon. IWW activists came one day to call on the dockers to stand in solidarity with the sawmill strikers who were demanding better wages and shorter working hours. Joel **took** off his gloves and **adhered** to Section 92 of the syndicate. The Industrial Workers of the World **was** one of the most exciting experiences of the workers' organization. Its militants were called the "wobblies", without it being known where this word even comes from. Literally, the term means "the staggers" and would come from the pejorative language used to refer to them by the bosses who hated them like the plague and translated "IWW" as "I Want Whisky", but this is just one of many hypotheses.



The movement was created in 1905 in Chicago by 200 socialist, anarchist and radical activists wanting to break with the reformism of the official AFL-CIO union, representing the interests of the labour aristocracy, the skilled, male and white workers who at the time organized only 5% of the country's employees. The IWW **would** soon become the union of the "other labour movement", that of the unskilled, women, black people, new immigrants, nomadic workers, in short, the stevedores of the capitalist system.

The IWW developed a form of horizontal organization, opposed to the AFL-CIO's trade structure, which the IWW saw as an obstacle to the real unity of workers (the wobblies called the American Federation of Labor "American Separation of Labor").

Its objective was clear: "abolition of wage labour". **His Its** slogan too: "An injury to one is an injury to all". The way was "One Big Union", one for all, resorting to direct action and working to prepare the insurrectionary general strike to abolish capitalism. The IWW **would** certainly have leaders, men and women, black and white, but never bureaucrats.

It is probably the only workers' union in history that has tried to be as mobile as the class it wanted to organize. As unskilled workers moving from one construction site to another, from a plantation to a port, from a factory to a mine, the wobblies would turn into itinerant organizers.

During the month of October 1907, the great banking panic broke out, following a fraudulent manoeuvre by stock market speculators on the shares of the United Cooper, which led to massive withdrawals of funds and cascading bankruptcies. This situation resulted in rising unemployment. The US Federal Reserve was created in 1913 to prevent the return of such crises (indeed, we could see its effectiveness in 1929...).



Rebel Girl

Joel jumped onto a freight car on a passing train and found himself in the spring of 1908 in Spokane, Washington, a major railway junction under construction. And this is where Joe Hill was born, during the epic "Free Speech Fight", the Battle for the Right to Speak, led by the IWW from November 1908 to March 1909.

Northern Pacific used the services of a multitude of private employment agencies to recruit workers coming from all over the

world. The turnover was hellish, with workers being replaced all the time by new recruits. Agencies took money from workers for positions that turned out to be non-existent. The IWW was leading an intense agitation in the streets of the city to get workers to organize. On the pressure of the bosses and the slavers, the city council enacted a general ban on speeches, distribution of leaflets and meetings from which the Salvation Army was exempted.

The IWW retaliated by calling for mass civil disobedience. Imagine the scene: in a square, a wobbly, with his red scarf around the neck, climbs onto a crate of soap and shouts, "Comrades and friends!". A policeman arrives and takes him out of the box. A few seconds later, a second wobbly arrives. The same scene repeats itself, and so on, until the available police forces are exhausted. When the umpteenth wobbly climbs on the crate and launches his address, he is quite surprised not to be disturbed and has a moment of hesitation before realizing that he can continue. As a result, over the winter, more than 400 IWW activists were imprisoned, first in Spokane and then in the surrounding area when there was no room at the local prison, which triggered an incredible **bother**, not only because the imprisoned wobblies practiced what they called "building a warship" – making as much noise as possible, all together, by all available means - but also because taxpayers' organizations began to protest against the cost of imprisoning hundreds of people who had to be fed well.

Among the prisoners was Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a girl from the Bronx (New York) who was just 17 years old and had just finished her high school. She delayed her arrest by chaining herself to a streetlamp. As soon as she got out of prison, she accused the police of turning the local women's prison into a brothel, which triggered a hunt for the *Industrial Worker* newspaper containing the denunciation, of which the police tried to destroy as many copies as possible. Elizabeth, dubbed by the reactionary press "the anarchist bitch" inspired Joe Hill's song *Rebel Girl* in 1911. From the exchanges he was to have with her, he would adopt resolutely feminist positions, constantly insisting to his

companions on the need to recruit more women in the organization and to give them their full place.

However, the song did not begin its historic public journey until November 1915, when it was sung at the funeral ceremony in honour of the author, in Chicago. I offer you a moving version of the song by the young Alyeah Hansen in Salt Lake City, a century later:

https://youtu.be/e_tz3wPgLUw

During their battle of Spokane, the wobblies found themselves not only facing the cops and Pinkertons, private detectives used by the class enemy to hunt for spoilsports but in the ranks of the Salvation Army, whose band arrived and played as loud as possible every time the IWW had a meeting, thus drowning out the voices of the speakers, who, in the best case, had only acoustic loudspeakers, the electric megaphone being still a rarity and the loudspeaker invented by Ernst Werner von Siemens in 1877 was not yet commercially available.

What could be done to counter the Salvation Army's flare-ups? Joe and his comrades found the answer: they too would sing and make music! Joe had known the Salvation Army repertoire well since his Swedish childhood, and he had a well-turned pen and humour. He got to work. The goal of what **would** become the IWW's "Little Red Book of Songs" was determined during the meetings. This goal can be summarized as follows: "Songs that sow anger and revolt, pushing workers to act, wrapped in a dose of humour, to mitigate the sadness of the message". Or, to use Joe's words: "A well-crafted text, sung in a joking tone and to a well-known melody". And it paid off.

Quickly, the IWW agitators took over the repertoire produced by Joe, which became an organizing tool. Imagine the scene: it takes place in a grape pickers' camp in California, in the evening, after the exhausting day of work. People sit in a circle around the fire, the only source of light. The wobbly arrives, sits down and pulls out his guitar or banjo. From the first song, whose melody comes from a psalm that is in everyone's ears, people begin to laugh and resume the chorus.

After a few songs, the wobbly launches his call to join the IWW, distributes the cards to the new members, exchanges practical information with them to stay in touch and disappears into the night, before the Pinkertons, alerted by the service snitch, can descend on him, and climb into the first freight car that passes to disembark elsewhere the next day.

The songs of Joe, who, in the meantime, had become Joseph Hillstrom - no doubt to throw the cops off his track- were published in the *Industrial Worker*, where, along with the text, the accompanying melody was indicated. This allowed for dissemination throughout the U.S. and much of Canada. “A pamphlet or leaflet, no matter how well written, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and sung after the fact”.

Joe spent the years 1909 to 1913 mainly in California, San Pedro, San Diego and Fresno, participating in a long series of workers’ struggles, especially dockers, and other campaigns for freedom of speech in public. In January 1911, he joined the hundreds of American and European comrades who joined the Mexican revolutionary forces in Baja California, where they tried to establish a workers’ free republic, but an attack by federal forces of the dying Porfirio Diaz regime forced them to retreat to the United States.



May 1911: Wobbly fighters of the Revolutionary Forces of the “liberal”(actually anarchist) Ricardo Flores Magón, Baja California

In summer of 1913, he was released from the prison of San Pedro where he had spent 30 days because of “vagrancy”. In reality, a too loud musical support for a strike of Italian dockers (“I was a little too active in the eyes of the boss of the place”), was offered by our hero from the cold lands in one of the worst regions of the Wild West, Utah, to the Mormon sect and mining companies. Joe moved to Park City where he had Swedish friends among the miners at the silver mine. And he took the road to the mine.

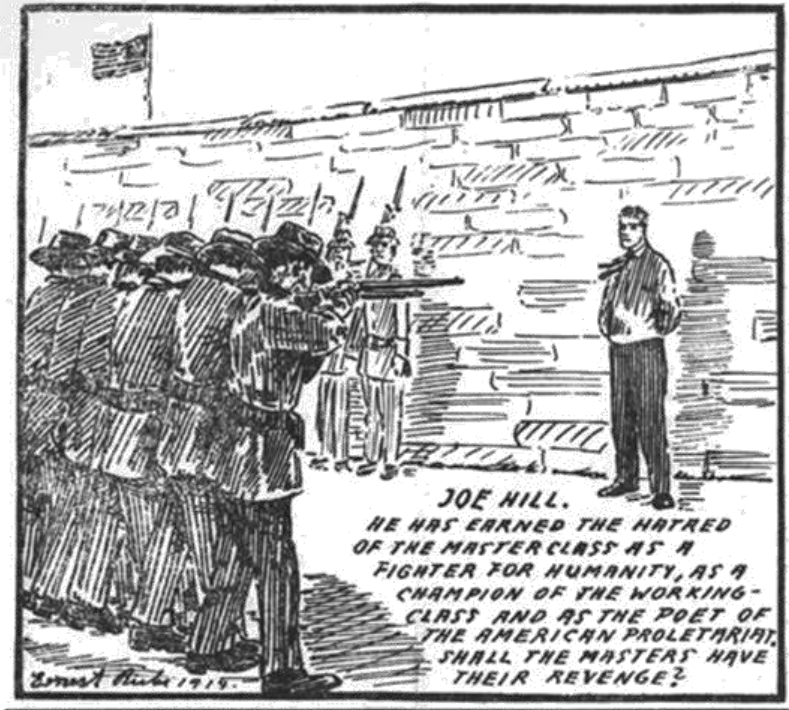


A Yankee lawsuit

On 10 January 1914, at 11:30 p.m., Joe went to a Salt Lake City doctor with a gunshot wound, inflicted, he said, by a jealous husband whose wife he had allegedly offended. A little earlier, in another area of the city, a grocer and his son had been killed by burglars, one of whom had been injured. It didn't take much more for the police to accuse Joe of the double murder and arrest him spectacularly, by catching him in bed and shooting him as he reached for his pants to put on.

He was entitled to a real Yankee trial: no physical evidence, very vague witnesses. And Joe refused to name the jealous husband's wife in court to "preserve her honour" We may be a hell of a red agitator, but we're still gentlemen.

Shall This Take Place?



“SHOULD THIS TAKE PLACE?”

Joe Hill. He has earned the hatred of the masterclass as a fighter for humanity, as a champion of the working class, and as the poet of the American proletariat. Shall the masters have their revenge?”

IWW flyer

The IWW launched a campaign of support two months before the trial opened, bringing personalities to Joe’s defence. Protests took place everywhere, including Stockholm (the author of these lines was featured in the film about Joe Hill shot by Bo Widerberg in 1970, where he had the honour of portraying a Swedish worker demonstrating for Joe in 1915; *The film, Special Jury Prize at Cannes in 1971, was restored and released in France on 18 November 2015. [Find out more](#))*

The IWW of Australia sent a resolution with 30,000 signatures requesting a review of the trial.

The Swedish ambassador in Washington asked President Wilson to delay the execution of the sentence, which gave the convict a few months' respite, but no more.

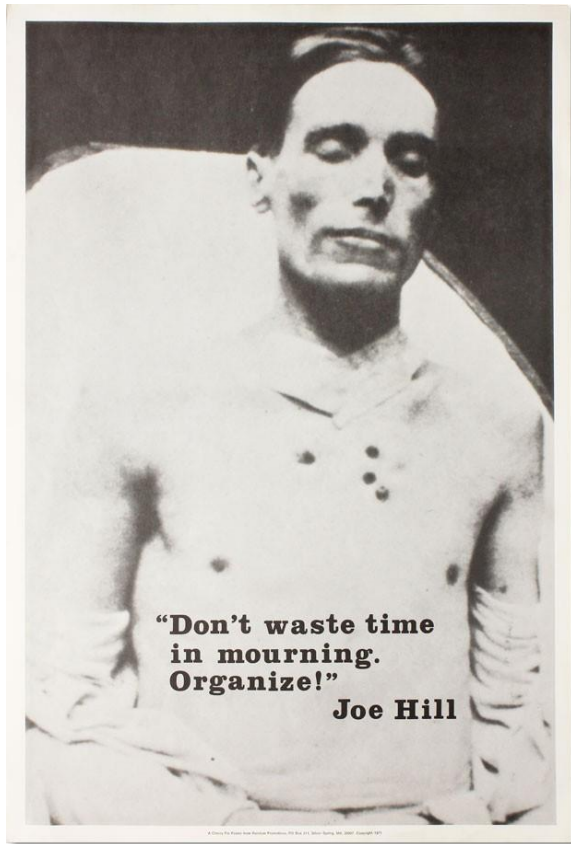
Within 16 months of his conviction, while the sentence was taking its course in the courts, Joe wrote many letters and articles, but refused to write his biography:

“Let’s not waste paper on such nonsense. Only the here and now means something to me. I am a citizen of the world and I was born on a planet called Earth. Where I was born is so unimportant that there are no comments: I don’t have much to say about myself. I only want to say that I have done what little I could to bring the flag of freedom closer to the goal.”

On 19 November 1915, at dawn, Joe Hill was shot in the courtyard of Salt Lake City Prison. He had been given the choice between being hanged and shot. He **chose** the second solution: “I’ve already been shot a few times. I think I can handle it.” He himself gave the order to fire. He left this will:

**My will is easy to decide, for there is
nothing to divide,
My family doesn’t need to complain and quibble
“A rolling stone gathers no moss”
My body? Ah, if I could choose,
I would let it burn to ashes, And the
joyful breezes blow**

**My dust where a few flowers will grow. So maybe
a faded flower
Would come back to life and bloom again.
This is my last and ultimate will, Good luck to all, Joe
Hill.**



His body, transported to Chicago, was cremated after a ceremony attended by more than 30,000 people and his ashes sent in envelopes to all sections of the IWW of the Americas and sister organizations in Europe and elsewhere with instructions to open them on 1 May 1916 and scatter them to the wind. They did so. One of these letters, withheld by the US Post for “non-compliance”, was given to the National Archives of the United States in 1988. It contains a bag of ashes and a photo of Joe with the words: *“Joe Hill murdered by the capitalist class, 19 November 1915”*.

Joe had written to Big Bill Haywood, one of the IWW’s best-known leaders: “I don’t want to be found dead in Utah.” Until the end, he had kept his huge combative humour.

But I am among those who think that Joe is not dead, neither in Utah nor elsewhere. May today's young generation, like all those who preceded them, rediscover the unforgettable author of *The Preacher and the Slave*, *Casey Jones - The Union Scab*, *The Tramp* and so many other songs that have not taken a wrinkle. They were sung by all the progressive US singers who followed him in the 20th century, from Pete Seeger, Joe Glazer and Mats Paulson to Phil Ochs, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. Just look on [Youtube](#) or if Bo Widerberg's movie is near you, don't miss it!

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night

Text Alfred Hayes, Music Earl Robinson, 1938

Sung by Joan Baez at the Joe Hill Centennial Concert on 17 November 2015 in Los Angeles

<https://youtu.be/czVtjfAxSp4>

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night

Alive as you or me

*Says I, But Joe, you're ten years
dead*

I never died, says he

I never died, says he

In Salt Lake, Joe, says I to him

Him standing by my bed

They framed you on a murder charge

Says Joe, But I ain't dead Says Joe, But I ain't dead

The copper bosses killed you, Joe They shot you, Joe, says

I tTakes more than guns to kill a man

Says Joe, I didn't die Says Joe, I didn't die

And standing there as big as life And smiling with his eyes

*Says Joe, What they forgot to kill Went on to organize
Went on to organize
Joe Hill ain't dead, he says to me Joe Hill ain't never died
Where working men are out on strike
Joe Hill is at their side Joe Hill is at their side From
San Diego up to
Maine In every mine and mill Where workers strike and
organize
Says he, is there you find Joe Hill Says he, is there you find Joe
Hill
I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night Alive as you or me
Says I, But Joe, you're ten years dead
I never died, says he I never died, says he*



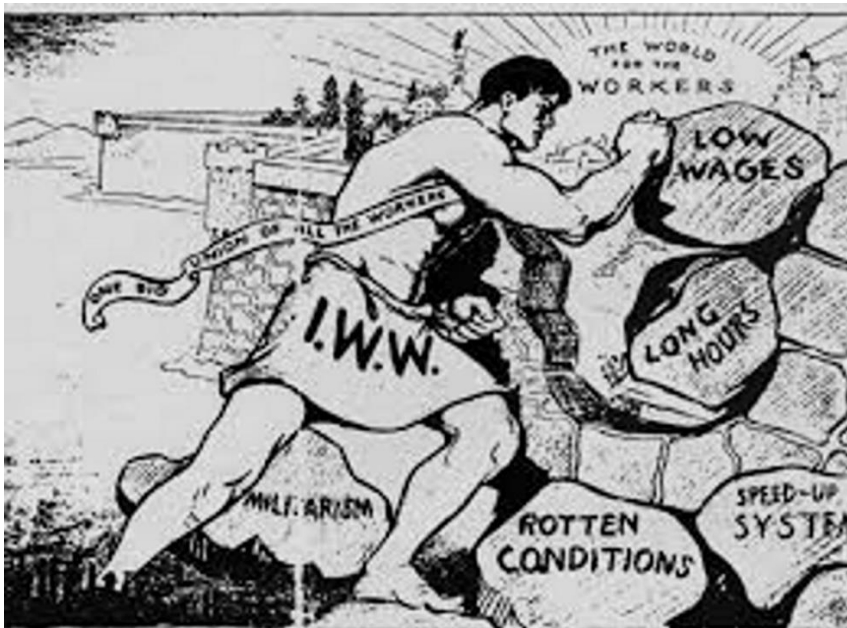
Joe Hill Park in his hometown Gävle



Joe Hill Visitor Center

<https://www.visitjoehill.se/>

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61558385548040>



What the IWW was fighting against: low wages, long hours, rotten conditions, speed-up system militarism