

Remembering Joe Hill, There is Power in a Song

By Benjamin Castro

“If you like sluggers to beat off your head,
Then don’t organize, all unions despise,
If you want nothing before you are dead,
Shake hands with your boss and look wise.”

- There is Power in a Union, Joe Hill (1913)

The International Longshoreman Association (ILA) went on [strike](#) early on October 1, 2024, halting the vital movement of goods coming into port all across the east coast from Maine to Texas. The ILA represents 45,000 longshoremen and their demands, which includes a 77% wage increase over six years and a complete ban on port automation that would ultimately render their jobs obsolete. Longshoremen are critical to America’s supply chain and the power of their union is expressed succinctly by their president, Harold J. Daggett, who threatened in an interview, “[I’ll cripple you](#),” if their demands are not met. His words carried weight because, in just three days, he brought the bosses [back to the negotiating table](#).

There is power in a union. If anyone ever truly knew that it was [Joe Hill](#), a man who dedicated his life and death to projecting union power through song. He never stopped writing union hymns even as he was imprisoned, awaiting his firing squad in Utah. The 109th anniversary of his wrongful execution is this November 19.

Joe Hill was a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a Gilded Age-era revolutionary union that sought to include all members of the working class in their ranks. The IWW was an organization that genuinely frightened the upper classes, they were eventually persecuted by government forces during the [Palmer Raids](#) of 1919. The IWW has [persisted](#) at a much-reduced capacity ever since, but its motto remains: “An injury to one is an injury to all.” Though the IWW has, for the most part, been reduced to a footnote in history, its founders in 1905 were the angry victims of industrial capitalism.

Founder William “Big Bill” Haywood, was 3 years old when his father succumbed to a pulmonary illness related to the mines, and he was [15](#) years old when he began work in the [mines](#). Founder Eugene V. Debs, then-president of the American Railroad Union (ARU), was arrested after federal marshals and state militia gunned down [13 strikers](#) in Chicago during the Pullman Strike in 1894. Founder Lucy Parsons was born into slavery in 1851 and, soon after emancipation, married fellow labor organizer Albert Parsons. They stayed together until 1886, when he was [wrongfully hanged](#) for alleged involvement in the Haymarket Square Incident. Founder Mary Harris “Mother” Jones fled from the [Potato Famine](#) in Ireland, lost her husband and her four children to yellow fever in 1867, and worked as a dressmaker in Chicago. Here, [she](#)

[saw](#), “the poor, shivering wretches, jobless and hungry, walking alongside the frozen lake front...the tropical contrast of their condition with that of the tropical comfort of the people for whom I sewed was painful to me. My employers seemed neither to notice nor to care.” It was their shared pain that was the foundation for their radical solidarity. They could turn to no one else but their own: people who understood the depths of Gilded Age anguish.

The trouble with solidarity spurred by pain is that the memory of that pain is eroded by time and, with it, that natural desire for solidarity with your peers. The millions that joined with unions or created their own radical unions during the Gilded Age years are all dead and buried, the memory of their suffering turns to dust.

Union membership [peaked in 1947](#) at nearly 35% of the US workforce and held strong for a decade before beginning its decline to the present day at about 10%. There are several reasons for this decline. One could blame constricting labor laws, exporting jobs overseas, immigration, or union busting. However, all of these factors were still present and prominent during the Gilded Age. The difference is that the sting of industrial capitalism is forgotten. It is lessened by labor protections that keep most of us from working for a pittance on dangerous tasks, that keep our children in school and not on the factory floor. It is lessened by the US exporting our most grueling work overseas and importing cheap goods. More and more, we identify as gluttonous consumers and not industrious producers. More than that, however, is that there is an enchanting collective amnesia to the pain that the older generations endured. We must remember the heroes and martyrs of our own class, their names, fates, and truths must stand the test of time. Without knowledge of our timeless struggle, we are like the man blindfolded and standing against a wall, contently smoking his cigarette and waiting for the shot that will end him.

Joe Hill was that man against the wall in 1915. The state of Utah fatally shot him for a crime he did not commit. But Joe Hill is stubbornly resistant to that bullet that would have permanently silenced him. His body is ash, yet, his voice carries with the winds of change and persists despite the march of time. He has been dead for more than 100 years, but his influence on the labor movement is codified by his music. The biting and wittily radical lyrics of his many songs are a time capsule sent to us from a century’s past. His music was the cry of the oppressed in 1915 frozen in time, memorable and reproducible, and it can just as easily be adapted as the cry of the oppressed in 2024. Music is a medium that is simply easier to share and remember, catchier than any verbose essay or speech could ever hope to be.

Joe Hill’s songs can inspire hope and clarity in the meek and downtrodden. His music is still patiently waiting for that revolution that Joe Hill hoped for. That revolution may never come and yet the music persists in two-minute digestible songs riddled with clever radicalism that can be molded for any purpose or to any setting. His songs can be played for any person and any industry, even the smallest of strikes, the most minor of resistances. Hill’s friend “Big Bill”

Haywood is quoted saying, “A strike is an incipient revolution. Many large revolutions have grown out of a small strike.”

Joe Hill was a faceless Swedish immigrant. He was born Joel Hägglund in 1879. When he was eight, his father died from a workplace injury, and at the age of [nine](#) Joe Hill left school to begin work at a rope factory. Once his mother died in 1900, he and his brother booked joint passage to the US in 1902. Arriving in New York, the brothers parted ways and Joe Hill began work as an itinerant worker traveling across the entirety of the US. He was in Cleveland, Ohio in 1905 and in San Francisco, California in 1906 to survive the Great San Francisco Earthquake. There in California, he joined ranks with the IWW, and later, in 1911, border-hopped to Mexico to fight briefly in the Mexican Revolution on the side of the Mexicans crying for “Tierra y Libertad!” His experiences fighting in Mexico, moving from job to job, hearing about strike after strike, and living through the IWW’s [Free Speech Fights](#) were the basis of many of his songs.

His roaming lifestyle eventually led him to Utah to look for work. It was in Salt Lake City that Joe Hill was wrongly found guilty of a grocery store murder based on dubious evidence. The only shared connection between Joe Hill and the assailant is that both had bullet wounds, the timeline and eyewitnesses were unconvincing. Nevertheless, this working-class hero was sentenced to death by firing squad. The state of Utah, which at the time was run by Mormon mineral merchants, had their excuse to silence the songbird, but Joe Hill could never be silenced. Joe Hill’s last letter to William “Big Bill Haywood” is as follows: "Goodbye Bill: I die like a true rebel. Don't waste any time mourning, organize! It is a hundred miles from here to Wyoming. 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."

I leave Joe Hill’s final will and testament below:

My Will is easy to decide
For there is nothing to divide.
My kin don't need to fuss and moan.
"Moss does not cling to rolling stone."

My body?—Oh!—If I could choose
I would to ashes it reduce
And let the merry breezes blow
My dust to where some flowers grow.

Perhaps some fading flower then
Would come to life and bloom again.

This is my Last and Final Will—
Good Luck to All of you,

- Joe Hill