

Joe Hill Revisited

July 29, 2012

Dance among the standing cars,
Each suit will blow his horn...
Let's make them doubt the system
To which they were lately born.

I RECENTLY READ *The Man Who Never Died*, William Adler's new biography of Joe Hill. Before he died a martyr to the Industrial Workers of the World and the radical labor movement in general in 1915, Joe Hill wrote songs to encourage workers who were striking or demonstrating, and sometimes workers whom he felt needed convincing.

Joe Hill's songs, like those of Woody Guthrie, united and inspired the people who were singing them.

It doesn't feel as if it should be necessary to tell anybody about Joe Hill, but recently I was speaking to the adult daughter of two radicals, and she'd never heard of him.

The occupiers talk for hours...
What a patient bunch.
I hope that dinner time don't come
Before they vote on lunch.

But from their talk there comes a sound,
A great, united roar
About the few who have so much,
The many who need more.

Joe Hill would have written about the Occupy Movement if he'd been around to do it. His songs were collected in several editions of a volume called *The Little Red Songbook*. It was passed around in mines and mills and labor camps. It's preposterous to suppose that a man could be railroaded and ultimately murdered by the state (Utah, in Joe Hill's case) for writing songs about solidarity and workers' rights. Therefore, officially Hill was executed after he was found guilty of murder, though the case against him was at best shaky.

They tell me I must vote, and who's to say? Perhaps I should.
But how am I supposed to think that it would do much good?
For both sides running candidates are funded by the men
Who've always been the winners, and they're out to win again.

Republican or Democrat, you're gonna need the dough
That only corporations have if you're inclined to show
The people watching TV that they ought to vote for you...
Their lives will be much better, right, if that is what they do?

Joe Hill and many of his fellow IWW members believed that wars pitted young men—many of them feeling they didn't have a lot of options other than the military—against each other to achieve various ends desired by corporations and politicians. This position is certainly as valid today as it ever was, perhaps more so. Nations have always celebrated their war machines and even as investigations have demonstrated that soldiers returning from war are poorly served in terms of medical care, psychological and psychiatric care, job counseling, housing, and various other less obvious needs, this nation celebrates the glorious IDEA of the soldier with noisy martial demonstrations and flyovers between halves of football games.

It's said that nations can't make peace by gearing up for war,
But those who build the guns and bombs are crying out for more...
And we are urged to back the troops, no matter whom they kill.
It's always been that way, I guess. Perhaps it always will.
But maybe there should be a day for recognizing those
Who've walked away from "duty," punched a general in the nose,
Or spiked the mighty cannons so those cannons couldn't roar...
The ones who've seen in mankind higher purposes than war.

Doggerel isn't song, of course, and it certainly can be argued that Joe Hill's songs and even his death changed nothing, and that Woody Guthrie's guitar didn't really kill fascists. On the other hand, perhaps there's something to be said for remembering their efforts and adding a few lines in their memory...especially when considering some of the more stubborn notions poisoning our political discourse these days.

I've heard it said that Mexicans who've moved should move on back.
But let us look to history to keep us on the track.
An awful lot of Mexicans would get along just fine,
If we could hear them when they said,
"Hombre, you moved the line!"

I don't have any idea how the Occupy Movement will influence people in the long run. It does seem to me that it's a heartening development, since at least it means people are feeling the impulse to squawk about the obvious and persistent inequities in this country and elsewhere.

Joe Hill squawked, too.

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill at every Occupying site.
His voice rang out, encouraging those folks that they were right.
And when the parks were emptied, Joe was jailed, but not for long...
Wherever protest flourishes, Joe Hill will sing along.



Footnotes