

Are You a Good Witch or a Bad Witch?
The History & Heart of Socialism in America
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
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On November 19, 1915, the State of Utah executed a 36-year-old named Joe Hill for the murder of a former policeman and his son. The Deputy leading the firing squad barely got out the words, “Ready... aim...” before the convicted murderer, without remorse and defiant to the end, shouted out, “*Yes, aim, let it Go! Fire!*”¹ Regardless of how you feel about the Death Penalty, given the brutal nature of his alleged crime, it might surprise to know that less than a week later 5000 people packed into the Westside Auditorium in Chicago to attend Hill’s funeral, with as many as 30,000 people filling three square blocks outside, enough to form a mile-long procession after the lengthy service finally ended. In addition to flowers, mourners left inscriptions in Swedish, Russian, Hungarian, Polish, Italian, German, Yiddish, Lithuanian, and English, among others, along with a large red banner above his coffin stating:²

IN MEMORIAM, JOE HILL
WE NEVER FORGOT
MURDERED BY THE AUTHORITIES OF
THE STATE OF UTAH, NOV. 19, 1915³

Unless you’re a historian, or an octogenarian, or a musicologist, you may never have heard of Joe Hill, who was among many other heroic advocates for the working poor who were falsely accused, maligned, and silenced, one way or another, during the first half of the 20th century, then conveniently forgotten in the annals of America’s whitewashed revisionist history. You see, Joe Hill was part of the labor movement, also called socialism, and was likely killed because of his politics, not for being a murderer.

About two years earlier, in January of 1914, he went to the hospital with a gunshot wound, the same night John Morrison and his teenage son had been shot outside a Salt Lake City grocery store. Although Hill explained that another man had shot him over a mutual love interest, he refused to give other details, concerned about the reputation of the woman involved. That was enough evidence, or lack thereof, to try him for the two murders. “At trial the state of Utah introduced no motive, no murder weapon, no positive identification of Hill,”⁴ his biographer, William Adler, explains. Additionally, the only evidence was circumstantial. Although Morrison’s son had a gun, there was no evidence it had ever been fired or that it was responsible for Hill’s

¹ Adler, William, *The Man Who Never Died*, Bloomsbury USA, New York, NY, Kindle Edition, 2011, loc. 6412

² Ibid., loc. 96

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., loc. 113

gunshot wound. The only hard evidence the prosecution introduced was the IWW card Hill carried in his possession.

The IWW, Industrial Workers of the World, was founded in 1905 to unite workers round the world in their struggle for fair pay and fair treatment. Although the Union only used nonviolent resistance in its endeavors, Adler says, "Town after town denied IWW members the right of free speech and assembly, of use of the mails, of fair trials; the union's halls and offices were raided, its papers unlawfully seized, publications suppressed."⁵

Thus, many have speculated that Hill was but the innocent victim of a witch-hunt, although, until recently, the certainty of his innocence remained in question. A letter has now surfaced, however, written in 1949 by Hilda Erickson, the woman Hill was protecting, confirming his story. We also now know the police at the time had arrested another man in connection with the murders, a career criminal with a bloody handkerchief on his person who had been identified by witnesses and was arrested near the crime scene. But investigators released him as soon as they learned they had one of the IWW's most notorious members in their custody.

Hill was well known because he wrote songs for the IWW workers, also called Wobblies, to sing during their meetings and demonstrations. While in prison he wrote a letter explaining, "I maintain that if a person can put a few cold, common sense facts into a song, and dress them... up in a cloak of humor to take the dryness off them, [one] will succeed in reaching a great number of workers... too indifferent to read a pamphlet or an editorial in economic science."⁶ His most famous song is, "The Preacher and the Slave," sung as a parody of the Salvation Army tune, "In the Sweet Bye and Bye." The refrain goes like this:

*You will eat, bye and bye
In that glorious land in the sky;
Work and pray, live on hay,
You'll get pie in the sky when you die.
(That's a lie)*

Hill wrote this song in 1909, specifically in support of the Spokane Wobblies. For our City Council had recently passed an ordinance banning speaking on the streets. It's kind of like our current sit-and-lie ordinance, only back then you couldn't even stand-and-talk. It was meant specifically to prohibit the Wobblies from organizing, but when the City made an exception for the Salvation Army, the local IWW workers protested by standing on a soapbox, speaking, and immediately getting arrested, one by one, over a hundred people the first day, and more than 500 altogether. When the local jails got too full, the State Department lent a hand by opening up the jails at Fort Wright, on what is now our church property.

⁵ Ibid., loc. 196

⁶ Ibid., loc. 258.

What was happening here in Spokane got worldwide attention and helped spark what came to be called Free Speech Fights all over the country, and lots of support from workers in communities near and far. As Jonathan D. Knight says in his work, *The Spokane & Fresno Free-Speech Fights of the IWW*, “The WFN in the Coeur d’Alene region declared Spokane a ‘scab’ town and moved to boycott all products originating from the city... A short time later the IWW and the Socialists in Butte took similar actions. Resolutions and letters of support arrived from Minneapolis, San Francisco, New York, and Oakland California.”⁷ Joe Hill heard about what was happening while working the docks in San Pedro, California, and wrote, “The Preacher and the Slave,” then sent it to Haywire Mac McClintock, known for writing, “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum,” and, “The Big Rock Candy Mountain.”

Haywire, who was also one of the Wobbly organizers in Spokane, used the song as his impetus for putting together the nucleus of what became the IWW Band, which first began performing here on the streets of Spokane. This was the beginning of using folk music to fuel the work of social justice, which went on to inspire Woody Guthrie, Paul Robison, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and Bruce Springsteen, among others. It was also at this time that the *Industrial Worker*, which has remained the official IWW magazine for more than 100 years, was first published, once again, in Spokane. Who knew our city has played such a historic and pivotal role in the American labor movement?

Joe Hill’s story is but one among countless other stories of those who were unjustly persecuted, prosecuted, punished, and sometimes put to death, by communities just like our own, simply because they were part of the international labor movement, which is synonymous with *Socialism*. This is an important point to understand, that Socialism has always been fundamentally about fair pay and fair treatment for the working class. Today the term is largely overshadowed, especially in our country, by the gross failures of the USSR and Communist China, as well as the decades long Cold War. But keep in mind; at the time of Joe Hill and the Free Speech Fights, there weren’t any Socialist or Communist nations. The USSR wasn’t established until 1922, and the Communist revolution in China didn’t happen until 1949.

The term “socialist,” rather, had only been around a few decades, first coined in 1827, in a London magazine, and was purely theoretical, meaning it was but an idea about how society might better work, envisioning egalitarian communities based upon the principles of cooperation and solidarity, of human goodness and human agency, nonviolent revolution, and a rejection of self-interest, private property, competition, and large governments. When philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote his objective treaty on Socialism in 1879, the same year Joe Hill was born, he noted that these principles were, “unconfirmed as yet by any experimental verification.”⁸ There

⁷ Jonathan D. Knight, *The Spokane & Fresno Free-Speech Fights of the IWW*, Washington State University, Department of History, August 1991, p. 106f.

⁸ Mill, John Stuart, *Socialism*, Chicago, Belfords, Clarke & Co., 1879, p. 61.

had been a few small socialist communes established in Europe and America, a few with minor success, but on a grand scale the idea of socialism remained theoretical.

The French aristocrat, Henri Saint-Simon, who renounced his title at the start of the French Revolution in 1789, sought to establish utopian communes based on science, or, what he called, the “religion of Newton,” believing they could end poverty and provide employment and education to everyone. His communes were made illegal after his death in 1830. Another French socialist, Étienne Cabet, wanted to establish socialist communes benefiting the most productive members of society, namely workers, and had as many as 200,000 followers before he was exiled to England for his anti-monarchist views in 1834. Charles Fourier, yet another French utopian socialist at the same time, believed most inequality is caused by society’s repression of natural human inclinations. Although he wasn’t as popular among struggling workers as other socialist thinkers, his views were extremely egalitarian for the time. He called for a sexual revolution, gender equality, and coined the term, *feminism*. The slightly younger Welsh reformer, Robert Owen, felt the major problem with society was the *laissez-faire*, “leave it alone,” economics, along with religion. For him the ideal community would use science and reason and education to intentionally end human suffering and inequality.

In addition to these Utopian socialists were the anarchists, who believed socialist principles couldn’t become a reality with a worldwide revolution. They didn’t believe true democracy or freedom could coincide so long as large governments and their ruling elites remain in control. This is the reason Socialism is also called Communism, because of the belief that society can succeed only in the form of small communities, or communes. Among the most famous and influential anarchists, of course, were Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, who wrote the *Communist Manifesto*, and developed *Marxism*. They did not, however, believe these changes would or should come abruptly or violently, only that they were inevitable and would occur over a long period as the “revolutionary” idea began to take hold.

These were the major ideas that resulted in the nationwide injustices against members of the labor movement in the US during the first half of the 20th century, culminating with McCarthyism in the 1950s, but also continuing on to influence foreign relations for decades to come, resulting in the Korean War, Vietnam, the Cold War, hostilities with China, South America, and, of course, Cuba, which only now, 16 years into the 21st century, is finally changing. But, again, these conflicts were the result of our nation’s general dislike of the idea of treating workers fairly, not because it could have felt threatened by foreign governments that didn’t yet exist.

Prior to the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, propelling the Communist Party into power in Russia, those who held socialist views, be they Utopian, Anarchist, or Marxist, generally referred to themselves as social democrats. *Bolshevik* is the Russian word meaning, “majority,” and the word *soviet* means, “workers committee.” The Bolsheviks came into power under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin

in 1922, promising enough “bread, land, and peace,”⁹ for everyone. We all know how that ended up, with more than 6 million people starving to death within just a few years.

Although socialists didn’t believe in big government, furthermore, the Communists in both Russia and China convinced themselves tight governmental controls would be briefly necessary until socialist principles began working. The result has been decades of brutal dictatorships and some of the worst human rights violations in history. And very recently, after the release of the “Panama papers,” top leaders in both these countries are reported to have illegally compiled billions of dollars for themselves in secret offshore accounts. There are also reports that the State controlled media in both countries are being censored to prevent this news from getting out. So much for the just distribution of wealth and freedom from government tyranny that are supposed to be associated with socialism. The failures and abuses of these two superpowers have also largely overshadowed those nations in which socialism is working well, including Canada, Sweden, Norway, New Zealand, and, to some extent, Cuba, among others.

Prior to the Cold war there were also numerous communities in the US that experimented with socialism, mostly without lasting success, including the Brook Farm in Massachusetts, founded by Unitarian Minister, Rev. George Ripley in 1840, and supported by other famous Unitarians, including William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, and Margaret Fuller. And, between 1911 and 1920 there were 74 members of the Socialist Party elected as Mayors in American cities. I bring all this up now, not to promote socialism, but to prove that our nation, which is supposed to value and protect freedom, including the free flow of ideas and freedom of speech above all, unjustly persecuted, prosecuted, and punished its own citizens, has engaged in numerous wars, and sustained international conflict, because of its initial reaction to an idea that has become unspeakable anathema in our culture and been all but illegal here for nearly a hundred years.

I’ve taken a little time sharing the story of Joe Hill, and of how communities just like our own once sought to unjustly repress this idea, to, once again, point out our nation’s historical disdain for Socialism didn’t begin with the emergence of the Soviet Union or Communist China, but with it’s disdain for the very idea of a major labor movement in our own country. I’ve shared similar stories in the past, like the story of Peekskill, New York, in 1949, during which the entire community, assisted by the Police and the Federal Government, attempted to lynch international celebrity, Paul Robeson, a leader of the Civil Rights and the labor movements, during a concert there. Robeson, was also blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Committee under Joseph McCarthy, and was eventually lobotomized with electric shock treatments, and his important legacy is all but forgotten in our histories. Peekskill is also the place where Pete Seeger, along with thousands of concertgoers

⁹ Newman, Michael, *Socialism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2005, (Kindle) Loc. 702.

were beaten and stoned as the Police forced them through a gauntlet of angry townfolk.

Without local police or feds willing to protect their freedoms, as well as local ordinances and laws passed against them, and McCarthyism's success in linking the very idea of Socialism to sedition under the Federal Espionage Act, Socialism became an unspeakable evil in our nation, a repressed idea, that is, again, all but illegal. McCarthy blacklisted more than 500 individuals during his modern day witch-hunt, simply because of their political beliefs, prohibiting them from finding work. Sometime before this, in 1920, Republican lawmakers in Albany, New York managed to expel five duly elected Socialist legislators for being part of the Socialist Party, which they described as a, "disloyal organization composed exclusively of perpetual traitors."¹⁰

So, for me, as a Unitarian Universalist, perhaps, even, as an American, a term I don't use very often to describe myself, I bring all of this up, not because I consider myself a socialist, but because I highly value freedom, especially the free flow of ideas and speech. I also know that since the end of McCarthyism and, more recently, the Cold War, the hate mongers have largely stopped labeling those they most fear as *Reds*, *commies*, and, *socialists*, and began calling them *liberals* instead. As a liberal myself, and proud to be part of a liberal religious tradition, I am grieved to think that I or anyone else might be stoned by a mob while the authorities stand by, or find myself unable to work because of my beliefs (which has already happened to me once), or hauled off to jail, or even executed because I dare mention my support for workers' rights, my belief in the just distribution of wealth, in public services, in regulations that protect workers and our environment, in fairness for people of all backgrounds, beliefs, and lifestyles, in addition to gender and racial equality.

Yet, as Joe Hill wrote in a note to his supporters the last night of his life, "Don't waste any time mourning. Organize!"¹¹ In other words, don't fall silent or give up just because we might get burned at the stake. Whether they call us witches or socialists, demons or liberals, burn us or blacklist us, the Joe Hill's of history urge us to carry on, to find the courage to create the change we wish to see by living it out for all to see. So, in honor of his forgotten memory, and in lieu of our closing hymn today, let's instead let Paul Robeson have the final word...

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night,
Alive as you and me.
Says I "But Joe, you're ten years dead"
"I never died" said he,
"I never died" said he.

"The Copper Bosses killed you Joe,

¹⁰https://www.google.com/search?q=New+York+socialists+expelled+from+office&hl=en&gbv=2&og=&gs_l=

¹¹ Adler, *ibid.*, loc. 289.

Are You a Good Witch or a Bad Witch?

They shot you Joe" says I.
"Takes more than guns to kill a man"
Says Joe "I didn't die"
Says Joe "I didn't die"

"In Salt Lake City, Joe," says I,
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."

And standing there as big as life
And smiling with his eyes.
Says Joe "What they can never kill
Went on to organize,
Went on to organize"

From San Diego up to Maine,
In every mine and mill,
Where working men defend their rights,
It's there you find Joe Hill,
It's there you find Joe Hill!

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night,
Alive as you and me.
Says I "But Joe, you're ten years dead"
"I never died" said he,
"I never died" said he.

(A song by Alfred Hayes, Music by Earl Robinson©1938 by Bob Miller, Inc.)