

## Video Review

Eric Scholl, director. **The Return of Joe Hill**. VHS, 57 minutes, color. 1990. New York: The Cinema Guild. \$350.00 purchase, \$95.00 rental.

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While almost anyone watching the video would have heard of the International Workers of the World (IWW) and their members, the Wobblies, they may not have heard of the union's first martyr, Joe Hill. Ostensibly, the video is about Joe Hill and his impact on the labor movement of the early 1900s, but ultimately, it relates the efforts of the union and its struggle to stay alive. The story of Joe Hill is told through a series of interviews, either with Wobblies or historians who have researched his life. Hill was a Swedish immigrant who started working in New York but eventually worked his way across the country fighting for the IWW. Carlos Cortez, a Wobbly who knew many of the people who had worked with Joe Hill, described him as an "average kind of bloke," while Gibb Smith, an historian, related stories of him as the best at jumping trains and other Wobbly activities. In 1914, Hill was arrested in Salt Lake City for allegedly murdering a shopkeeper and his son during a robbery. Because Hill was already wounded when he was apprehended and refused to explain why, he was found guilty on the barest of evidence and sentenced to death. Although none of the evidence against conviction was presented in the video, IWW supporters were and are convinced that his death was the result of collusion between the Mormon government and the copper bosses. Joe Hill was never so important as in his death.

Joe Hill was not a union leader. He favored writing songs, poetry, and drawing cartoons relevant to the workers' culture emerging through the unifying influence of the union. The video incorporates four of his songs, two of which were written to the tunes of popular hymns that Joe Hill's fellow Wobblies could pick up easily. Their topics were issues that most concerned workers of the day—getting enough to eat, how to fight the big bosses, the problem of scabs. While various Wobblies sing the songs, the video shows several of Hill's cartoons. Unfortunately, far less time is spent on these. Not only is it unclear which cartoons were drawn by Hill himself, they do not remain on the screen long enough for the viewer to read all the captions. Since the songs are given such attention, it is surprising the cartoons, the only other source in Joe Hill's own words, do not get the same consideration. Nevertheless, it becomes obvious through his work that while the IWW is concerned about higher wages and shorter hours, it is

also concerned about unifying a huge, diverse class of people that constitutes the labor force.

The structure of the video deals with the life of Joe Hill, but the actual story is the IWW. Although the union began before his involvement, Joe Hill has become a quasi-founding father of the union, and as people are asked to relate their knowledge of the man, stories of early union activities often take over the narrative. Joe Hill has become a personification of the union early in the century. His death especially serves as a focal point for the union, which temporarily dissipated in influence. Even his ashes served to revitalize the union when they were distributed to Union offices throughout the United States except for one, since he vowed he would "never be caught dead in Utah." A few years ago one of these packets of ashes was found in the National Archives. The Union recovered the ashes and they were scattered at a memorial service for six Wobblies killed by State Rangers during a mining strike in Colorado.

To the Wobblies, Joe Hill has taken on folk hero status. Utah Phillips, a Wobbly, claims the stories surrounding Hill are wildly contradictory. Some described Hill as having a fiery temper, while others said he was mild-mannered. As mentioned before, Gibb Smith said Hill was the best at all the things Wobblies do. Not only did he stand up and calmly face the bosses and government that accused him, when in front of the firing squad, he reputedly cried "Fire!" himself.

The video is technically well filmed. Unfortunately, the direction sometimes leaves the viewer unclear as to what is actually being discussed. The subject of workers' culture is almost finished before it is obvious that it is the most important aspect of Joe Hill's life. Also, a few rather cryptic remarks are left in and never explained. For instance, at one point Utah Phillips describes Hill as a man in a melon patch. I personally have no idea what this is supposed to mean. But these are minor points. The video is highly instructional and, with its use of Hill's songs, highly watchable. The viewer comes away with an unexpected knowledge of the IWW and the labor movement, both then and now. As Jeff Ditz, a modern day Wobbly, says, the renewed interest in Joe Hill signals the return of the IWW itself.