

Joe Hill

Albert Meltzer

1991

Emmanuel Joe Hagglund arrived in the USA as a penniless immigrant — just like rhymester Irving Berlin around the same time. But whereas Berlin glorified the American dream and slavishly followed the patriotic road to commercial success to become a millionaire songwriter, Hagglund — now Joe Hill by far the superior talent, remained an itinerant worker and became an industrial organiser for the IWW. His songs are known around the world, ‘where working folk defend their rights there you will find Joe Hill’. He was framed on a murder charge by the copper bosses in the Mormon state of Utah 76 years ago last November.

In his native town of Gavle (Sweden) there is a statue to him in a town square round from where he lived (opposite a people’s palace), while the room where his family lived is preserved as a museum (15,000 visitors a year come to see it, listed as a town sight). Some years ago the owner of the house (a distant relative) sold it to the SAC in preference to others, to preserve Joe’s memory. The rest of the house are the offices of the forestry union — in accordance with his last message “Don’t mourn, organise” — and the backyard is converted to an attractive summer meeting place — the Joe Hill Garden.

He asked for his ashes to be sent to Chicago for burial (jesting “I wouldn’t be found dead in Utah”) but the FBI had the last sick laugh — they intercepted them in the post and, perhaps thinking they too might be unquenchable and inflammatory, kept them until recently.

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