Franklin Rosemont’s *Joe Hill* is in many ways a beautiful book. In these days of war without end in the Middle East and visible ‘politics’ in the US seemingly reduced to a right-wing party and a far-right party, the book gives me a high that makes me want to run out the door and organise. I feel like a curmudgeon criticising it in any serious way. The book is above all important for a new generation of activists trying to situate itself in the rubble bequeathed by the twentieth-century bureaucratic-statist ‘Left’ (social-democratic, Stalinist, Third-Worldist, Trotskyist) and the latter’s wooden ideologies.

There’s something breathtaking and exhilarating about a book that gets Hill and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) into the same narrative with Apollinaire, Artaud, Franz von Baader, Basho, Blake, Bosch, Lester Bowie, Byron, Duerer, Victor Hugo, Bob Kaufman, Philip Lamantia, Man Ray, Thelonious Monk, Gérard de Nerval, Charlie Parker, Erik Satie, Shelley, Vico and Hoene Wronski, to give the reader just a faint whiff of its breadth. The book is abundantly illustrated and is a labour of love pulling together the scant traces of Hill’s itinerant life to connect them, and the IWW, to much of the radical culture and politics of the twentieth century. Rosemont manages to make it all seem effortlessly self-evident. For initial inspiration, Rosemont had the good fortune of discovering the IWW in 1959 and of being able to meet a fair number of ‘old timers’ who still gathered at the remaining Wobbly offices in places such as Chicago and Seattle, some of whom had known Hill personally. Thus, before getting into any criticism, it is necessary to outline what Rosemont has done.

The book provides an admonitory ‘review of the literature’, concluding that a ‘first-rate, truly comprehensive history of the IWW is yet to be written’. As Rosemont points out, such a task is made far more difficult by the outrageous crime of the US government’s 1917 seizure and destruction of the IWW’s records. He talks about the vitality of the IWW’s relationship to Marx, with worker self-education and study groups on *Capital* an ongoing part of the organisation’s life. In contrast to much of the subsequent Left, the Wobblies ‘actually read and studied Marx’. Their story, and this dimension of it, is interwoven with that of Charles H. Kerr Publishers. Whereas
later leftist vanguards mainly produced publications, ‘some of them admittedly of high quality’, for workers, IWW publications were ‘of and by as well as for’. Most Wobblies, in Rosemont’s view, rejected the ‘syndicalist’ label, and were considered too Marxist by most actual syndicalists and as too anarchist by other (and subsequent) currents of Marxism. The IWW was ‘truly informal, wide open, constantly rejuvenated by new energies from the rank and file’. By the ‘high place it always accorded to spontaneity, poetry and humor, the IWW was unique in the history of the labor movement’. They knew ‘too much about work to be “workerist”’. Rosemont also evokes the social space created by the IWW’s meeting halls scattered across the US.

Rosemont confronts the problem that ‘biographical data on Hill is discouragingly skimpy’, though ‘he is probably the best-known hobo in US history’. Without false modesty, Hill, in his own words, did ‘not have much to say about [his] own person’. Rosemont particularly (and rightly) takes apart Wallace Stegner’s 1948 slanderous portrayal of Hill as a common criminal. He gives a brief biography from the ‘armful of solid facts, some strong probabilities, and a bedraggled suitcase of educated guesses and plausible suppositions’ about Hill’s life. ‘In his own lifetime’, writes Rosemont, Hill ‘was above all known for his poetry and his song’, contributing many songs to the IWW’s Little Red Song Book. While the IWW press was full of poetry written by its members, the true ‘Wobbly poets’ as poets have received almost no recognition. The Wobblies sang, at meetings, on strike, and in their halls. Hill, like many Wobblies, went to Mexico during the revolution there. He participated in the Fraser River Strike in Canada in 1912. Then, in January 1914, passing through Salt Lake City, he was arrested as a suspect in the murder of a local grocer, framed and, in spite of an international defence campaign, was executed in November 1915. Tens of thousands of people attended his funeral in Chicago, the biggest such gathering since the funeral of the Haymarket martyrs in 1887.

Hill was an artist: a poet, a composer, songwriter, painter and cartoonist. Once again, the role of poetry and song in the daily life and struggles of the IWW, anticipating such strikers’ festivals as May 1968 in France, and, as such, antipodes to the grim atmosphere of the politics of much of the organised Left in the US since World War I, cannot be overemphasised.

Rosemont also takes apart the posthumous myths, positive and negative, which have clouded the historical reality. Hill was neither a larger-than-life super-militant nor an itinerant petty criminal; as Rosemont points out, to mystify the organising role of the modest Hill is to feed into an alienated cult of ‘leaders’ for an organisation that prided itself on the anti-demagogic slogan ‘We Are All Leaders!’.

Rosemont shows commendable nuance on the issue of race, one on which the IWW, for its time, went radically against the grain of the dominant reactionary culture. ‘Even Joe Hill’, he writes, ‘... fell somewhat short of perfection in this regard’, citing Hill’s