

Joe Hill and Labor Unions Sources Summary

Here are the sources for this inquiry at a glance!

Bold: if you only have time for students to analyze a few sources and are using the central question listed on the webpage, we recommend starting with the bolded ones below. See our [ideas for teaching](#) page for more ways to pare the lesson down.

Source	Type/Sourcing Info	Main points
Song: “Casey Jones the Union Scab”	A song written by Joe Hill in about 1911.	Pro-union message. Hill’s lyrics could be seen as either lighthearted or divisive.
“Youth Partially Identifies Hill”	January 15, 1914 Newspaper article	Merlin Morrison’s recognition of Hill as resembling one of the attackers.
Salt Lake Tribune Article	2015, summarizing events of 1914-1915 An article summarizing some of the controversies of Hill’s trial	A pro-Hill take on the trial that points out missing evidence and holes in the reasoning against Hill. Also gives a good sense of why the trial is still so debated.
Elizabeth Flynn	May 6, 1915 Newspaper article	A semi-hostile account of what Flynn, an IWW organizer, said about Hill. She said he was only in jail because he was an IWW.
Joe Hill Letter	August 15, 1915 Letter published in newspaper	Hill wrote that his attorneys did not defend him and that the trial was unfair. He claimed innocence.
Eugene Debs Letter	August 20, 1915 Letter to Governor Spry	A clemency plea that socialist Eugene Debs wrote to Spry on Hill’s behalf. Mentions Utah’s bias against the labor movement.
Swedish Minister Letter	September 26, 1915 Letter to Governor Spry	Swedish minister in the US asking for the execution to be postponed.
Woodrow Wilson Letter	September 30, 1915 Letter to Governor Spry	Wilson requested that the execution be postponed until the Swedish Minister could speak with Spry.
David O. McKay Letter	September 30 and October 6, 1915 Letter to Governor Spry and response	Letter exchange between an apostle of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Spry. Elder McKay supported the state’s stance on Hill.
Frank Sibley Letter	November 7, 1915	Sibley, a <i>Boston Globe</i> reporter, warned

	Letter to Governor Spry	Spry that the public was becoming convinced of Hill's innocence.
Article About Hill's Funeral	November 26, 1915 Newspaper article	Negative portrayal of Hill's funeral that shows perceptions of the IWW.
Helen Keller Letter	1915 Letter to Governor Spry	Keller wrote that Hill was widely believed to be innocent and asked Spry to spare him.
Hilda Erickson Letter	June 22, 1949 Letter to a historian	Erickson claimed that Otto Applequist shot Hill in a fight over her.
1967 Historian's Account	1967 Academic journal article	Dr. McHugh did not say much at the trial. In 1946, he told a historian that Hill confessed to him in 1914.
Textbook Excerpt	2003 Excerpt from Thomas Alexander's <i>Utah: The Right Place</i>	A summary of the case. Alexander included Vernon Jensen's interview with Dr. McHugh and said that Hill's guilt was "obvious" but that the trial remains controversial.
Bruce Springsteen Song	2014 (song written in 1936) Song entitled "Joe Hill"	This song emphasizes Hill's legacy as a labor activist. Contains lines about Hill being framed by copper bosses.
Morrison Family	2015 Video interview with Morrison descendents, plus some extra quotes from Merlin and his son	The family generally believes Hill was guilty. Merlin reportedly started talking about a threatening encounter with Hill before the murders later in his life.
Joe Hill Murals	2015 Pictures and text describing a controversy over a Joe Hill mural in Salt Lake City	Joe Hill is still a union symbol and can be used in a lot of ways (some of which are divisive even within unions).
Pat Bagley Cartoon	2015 Graphic novel/cartoon strip about the Joe Hill story.	Bagley says outright that the narrative is biased. It depicts Hill as an innocent man framed.