While Joplin's miners looked backward, they became more and more entangled in the dynamic web of a rapidly maturing industrial economy. The market variables affecting the lead and zinc industry were increasingly interconnected in multiple new ways. The price of lead now depended on the price of silver, because many western mining districts, such as Leadville, Colorado, produced large quantities of lead as a byproduct of more lucrative silver mining. The price of zinc followed the fortunes of coal, as the 1893 Kansas strike demonstrated. Continued railroad expansion throughout the western United States meant that changes in any one mining district were quickly felt in them all. By the 1890s, Joplin miners faced a growing local system of wage labor in an industry regularly whipsawed by the dynamic and complex relationships of modern capitalism.

They could not navigate these relationships without also reacting to the efforts of miners’ unions in the 1890s to challenge the power of corporate employers. Until then, most Joplin miners stood aloof from the national labor movement, even though they remained distrustful of monopolies. Some had rejected the Knights of Labor in Leadville. Others had joined small, short-lived assemblies around Joplin in the 1880s. Viewing themselves as future owner-operators, most did not see the relevance of big national unions premised on permanent class divisions. The Kansas and Missouri coal miners’ strike of 1893 rattled their sense of exceptionalism, but its outcome seemed to validate a turn away from the Knights and solidarity with outsiders, in spite of the depression.

At the same time, however, metal miners in other districts cast their lot with a new union movement of wageworkers who understood their interests in opposition to those of the mine operators. In May 1893, diverse groups of former Knights in western gold, silver, and lead mining camps organized a new union, the Western Federation of Miners (WFM), to achieve better pay, win workplace rights, and reduce the hazards of underground labor. Two years later, miners in the iron and copper ranges of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan’s Upper Peninsula formed the Northern Mineral Mine
Workers’ Union (hereafter referred to as Northern Mineral) to achieve similar goals. Although neither union’s initial regional focus included the Joplin district, their confrontational actions, particularly the WFM’s strikes, would soon pull Joplin miners into the heart of the struggle but not as allies. In the face of emboldened workers, many of them immigrants, mining corporations looked to the Joplin district for miners who might work in place of strikers. The unions, in response, belatedly sought to organize Joplin miners into a labor movement that split over political philosophy, ethnicity, and ultimately, how to grapple with the future of capitalism. Forced to choose amid the structural changes that recast the practice and promise of work in the mines, their decisions would reverberate throughout the industry, affect the strategies and aims of metal miner unions into the new century, and give rise to a racist, nativist, and often violent masculine culture that would, in time, transform their view of the possibilities of wage labor.¹

Joplin miners such as Scott McCollum were not the only American metal miners grappling with the hard imperatives of industrial capitalism in the summer of 1896. After tenuous regional origins, their new unions seemed close to uniting in a national metal miners’ organization with the support of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which had overtaken the Knights as the nation’s largest and strongest federation of workers. Northern Mineral affiliated with the AFL in December 1895; the WFM affiliated in June 1896. AFL president Samuel Gompers hoped to include the Joplin district in this nascent movement. He dispatched E. J. Smith, an Indiana-based organizer for the Cigar Makers’ Union, to southwest Missouri in June 1896 to speak to the miners. The possibilities of this constructive effort were soon dashed by crisis. Elsewhere, the WFM and Northern Mineral both plunged into bitter and costly confrontations with wealthy mining corporations. The WFM’s local in Leadville began the largest and most consequential of those strikes on June 19, the same day that Smith visited Joplin. Desperate to counter the effects of the depression, the union launched into a fight relying on a sense of solidarity that had not yet been built. Neither the WFM, Northern Mineral, nor the AFL would send another organizer to Joplin until 1899. In the meantime, Leadville’s mining corporations offered men such as McCollum a solution to the problems they faced in the summer of 1896: lucrative work as strikebreakers against a union they had never before encountered.²

In Leadville, the WFM local demanded the restoration of a wage cut it had taken in the depths of the depression three years earlier. Bent on destroying the union, the operators of Leadville’s mines refused to negotiate. John Campion, the owner of the Ibex, the camp’s richest mine, hired the

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Thiel Detective Agency to infiltrate the WFM local and soon learned that the union was divided along ethnic lines on strategy. Its Irish-born leaders and rank-and-file majority remained committed to the strike, while the Cornish and American-born minority wanted to return to work. Such divisions were common throughout western mining camps and in the ethnically diverse WFM, although its first and strongest local, in Butte, Montana, was overwhelmingly Irish. Campion and his fellow operators hoped to exploit ethnic divisions by hiring non-Irish miners to return to work, but the union convinced most local workers to stay away. Leadville’s operators realized they needed outsiders to defy the WFM. Joseph Gazzam, superintendent of the Small Hopes Mining Company, later recalled that he “suggested that, if they decided to import labor, they bring in miners from the Joplin, Mo., district, as they were native-born Americans and would not be intimidated.” Both Gazzam and his boss, Seeley W. Mudd, knew Missouri mining. They had trained together in the mine engineering program at Washington University in St. Louis in the early 1880s. Mudd proposed the idea to Campion, his former boss, who instructed the St. Louis-based Thiel Detective Agency to dispatch a recruiting agent to Joplin.3

Missourians had a history in Leadville. Missouri-trained mining experts developed the district’s silver-lead mines in the 1870s. Many Joplin miners sought work there after the lead market collapsed in 1878, and some had helped break the strike of the Leadville Knights in 1880. Many of these miners went on to local management positions as mine superintendents and pit bosses and could have still been in Leadville in 1896. Regardless, Mudd and Gazzam would have been well aware that Joplin miners were skilled and overwhelmingly native born and also probably that the WFM had no presence in southwest Missouri. The state mine inspector’s annual published reports made this information available.4

Thiel agent T. Z. Pickers attracted keen interest from miners when he arrived in the district in mid-August. After meetings in Webb City, Carterville, and Joplin, he reported that over 300 men had agreed to go to Leadville. “This is a good field to work in as the mines are shutting down every day and throwing more men out of employment,” Pickers explained. “Miners here only get from two to four days work a week,” he noted, “and are anxious to go where they can get steady work.” Although Leadville operators sought skilled miners, the district’s mine laborers, now more plentiful than ever before, also showed interest. “There are a great many men here who have worked in and about these lead and zinc mines that are not, what operative calls, experienced miners,” reported John F. Farley, head of Thiel’s Denver office and Pickers’s boss. “They are what they call here, shovelers,”
he explained, and “they can do anything in and about the mines, shoveling, wheeling and working at gigs.” “These men are good, able bodied young men and anxious to learn to use the hammer, and are ready to go.” Whether experienced miners or mine laborers, they were eager to take advantage of Pickers’s offer.5

Not simply desperate, these miners and shovelers were acting on an entrepreneurial ethic with deep roots in the Joplin district. Despite their need, prospective strikebreakers took time negotiating assurances from Pickers: that the Thiel agency would pay their transportation; that they would make three dollars a day, the wage the WFM was striking to achieve; and that they would be able to retain work after the strike ended. Pickers guaranteed these conditions. Beyond that, he reported, none of them cared about the WFM or the strike. “The fact that there is a strike there cuts no figure with them,” he explained, “providing they can get steady work.” “Work is what they are after,” he added.6

Yet when Campion hesitated, perhaps in doubt about their loyalty, Farley reframed Pickers’s reports to appeal to the mine owner’s obsession with foreign-born labor radicals. “Operative has circulated the truth about the Leadville strike among his miners,” Farley assured Campion, “and they are anxious to go. The miners in this country do not believe in Unionism (Labor Unions).” “They have tried to form Labor Unions here, but failed,” he concluded. Then Farley added, for emphasis, “They are all Americans.” Here he embellished the facts because he knew Campion wanted to stoke the ethnic conflict that already plagued the WFM in Leadville. Pickers did not mention nationality in any of his dispatches from the field. Indeed, no contemporary observer or commentator had associated the lack of labor organization in Joplin with nativity or nationality before he did, at least not in any prominent publication. Nor had anyone, local or otherwise, referred to nationality during the 1893 United Mine Workers of America (UMW) strike, when a significant minority of UMW miners had been born abroad. Still, Farley’s point happened to be true, since more than 95 percent of district miners were native born in the 1890s, an increased proportion since the 1870s. Farley’s assertion did not forge a causal link, but it did create a new way of understanding the minds of Joplin miners and, importantly, a new way for Joplin miners to understand themselves.7

The men who considered going to Leadville had no shortage of information about the controversy or danger involved. Despite a divisive presidential election campaign, Joplin newspapers affiliated with both parties lined up to oppose Pickers and strikebreaking on principle as a dishonorable intrusion into the affairs of others that violated prevailing expectations of respect-
ability and restraint between white men. “Miners will do well to remember first, that if they got any work at Leadville it would be scab work,” the Joplin Daily Globe counseled. “Scabbing in Colorado is a dangerous business, and it is a despicable business anywhere. Stay at home,” the paper’s editor advised, “and give your fellow miners in Leadville a chance to win their fights against the Leadville bosses. That is the fair and right thing to do.” The editor of the Joplin Morning Herald, who had criticized UMW strikers who came to Joplin looking for work in 1893, likewise reckoned that only “thugs and bums” would now go from Joplin to Leadville. Men willing to threaten the work of other men, he declared, “are a menace to any community.” The Joplin Mining News, meanwhile, denounced the men talking to Pickers as “consumptives and bums,” a reference that undermined their status as real men by invoking new eugenic theories of physical weakness. These denunciations also obliquely raised the common association of strikebreaking with African Americans, many of whom had broken the UMW strike in 1893. No paper provided any validation for strikebreaking on the basis of nationality or race. To get more information about Leadville, Scott McCollum wrote to his brother, a telegraph operator in Colorado. “You would be taking ten chances to one of being shot should you attempt to come here to take the places of the strikers,” his sibling replied. “It’s alright to go to mining but these strikers have too much dynamite and Winchesters.”

Weighing the need for money against the threat of death, hundreds of Joplin miners went to Leadville to break the WFM strike. McCollum was among them. In a November letter to the Daily Globe, he reported that he had no complaints “as the work goes—can work seven shifts each week, at $3 a shift,” exactly what they had negotiated from Pickers. Although McCollum did not like the place, he wrote, “it is the money I’m after, and I can speak for the rest of the boys.” Despite the high pay, he felt compelled to explain further. The miners who went to Leadville, McCollum wrote, did so because they could not find work in Joplin. Like those miners who had accepted lower wages in 1893, he justified strikebreaking with an appeal to paternal responsibility. “When they can’t make a living at home they must go somewhere else, for they can’t let their families starve,” he declared. “If we could have got work at home every one of us would be in Joplin today.” McCollum seemed to acknowledge their transgression of the manly code. “The men who came here are the ones who had to have work at once,” he explained a second time. Such special pleading betrayed an unease about the social role of white men as prospecting gave way to wage work, an unease that resounded in McCollum’s denial of the important role of women, and the family economies they ran, in the making of the poor man’s camp. This
interpretation allowed him to assert that Joplin strikebreakers actually deserved respect. “Joplin ought not to blame the men for leaving,” McCollum argued, “for if a man is a man he will do the best he can by his wife and little ones.” For miners like him, the decision to break a strike in lieu of prospecting followed the well-worn risk-and-reward logic of the poor man’s camp, with an emphasis on risky work as the responsibility of individual men as men.9

The first group of strikebreakers arrived to an armed camp on the verge of open war. Five days before, strikers had attacked two mines with dynamite and guns, as McCollum’s brother had warned. The Colorado National Guard, sent to protect the other mines, escorted the Missourians to their new place of employment. Crowds of strike supporters, led by women, jeered, denounced, and threatened to kill them. “The hissing and hooting did not cease for a moment,” the Denver Republican reported. “Oh, the scabs, the hungry Missouri scabs,” shouted one woman. Another told her son, “See the scabs in the middle, darling; when you grow up, get a gun and shoot them.” A man urged the strikers to act now. “If the miners were any good,” he said, “they’d get their guns and wipe the —— scabs off the earth.”10

While the military presence maintained an uneasy peace that allowed the Joplin miners to work, the WFM supporters continued to demonize them in terms that challenged their manhood and racial standing. “Missourians are in bad repute here and about the worst epithet you can apply to a fellow is ‘flat-footed Missourian,’” one soldier wrote. This denunciation implied both physical deformity and mental incompetence, the basis for a new phrase that strikers coined to describe the Joplin men: “Show me.” “An expression much used is, ‘I am from Joplin: you’ll have to show me,’” he continued. In other words, according to strike supporters, Joplin miners would do anything the boss asked but required remedial instruction, a shame for any skilled worker. A Congregationalist minister in Denver, meanwhile, called them “an army of cowards.” These taunts, however, belied a sense of fear. The strikers, one observer noted, “are seeing their old jobs flit away from them and this causes them to be very irritable.”11

Backed by military force, the strikebreakers answered this vitriol with pugnacious swagger. Some Joplin miners, goaded by insult, attacked a group of WFM miners with knives in a Leadville saloon. “Knives, bottles, chairs, and pokers were brought in requisition,” the New York Times reported, “and a terrible battle raged for several minutes, the long dirks of the Missourians bringing streams of blood with every slash.” Deepening rancor between strikebreakers and strikers left little room for union appeals for solidarity. According to a reporter, when some WFM miners tried to persuade three
strikebreakers who came into town for supplies to join the union side, “the Missourians turned a cold ear to these inducements.” Far from ashamed, the Joplin men began to take pride in what they were doing. “We are all good miners and are accustomed to working on harder rock than this,” one said. Although a few did leave, most expressed no regrets. This miner felt vindicated as a white man: “A man couldn’t be treated whiter anywhere than we have been treated here.”

Their labor broke the strike. Despite public support from the AFL, which appealed in its main journal for members to aid the strikers, the WFM could not dislodge the Joplin miners. By the end of 1896, all of Leadville’s major mines were “working with non-union men,” an industry observer reported, “the Missourians who have been imported during the past few weeks.” The union’s Irish leaders refused to back down after the arrival of the Missourians, even as the mines reopened. Many Cornish and American-born union members defied the strike leaders, however, and returned to work alongside the miners from Joplin. By February 1897 the mine owners announced they had “all the men they need,” including over 400 former union members. The remaining strikers abandoned the effort in March. In defeat, the WFM local collapsed. The most strident union miners struggled to find work in Leadville. Mine owners welcomed back “many of the old workmen who were not prominently identified with the strike” but refused “to discharge their non-union men to make room for union miners,” an industry correspondent reported in April. Some strikebreakers returned to Missouri with their earnings. Scott McCollum, for example, came back with enough money to buy a house and go into business as an electrician. Others, such as George Dreiman, decided to stay. They did not cut all ties with Joplin, however. That spring Dreiman returned for a month of vacation, a luxury that surely reflected well on the decision to defy the union.

The defeat shook the whole WFM. Before Leadville, the union had pursued moderate goals that included employer recognition, collective bargaining, and broad working-class electoral politics that reflected the influence of the Knights of Labor and their largest and richest local, the Butte Miners’ Union. The union affiliated with the AFL in 1896 to gain allies in its struggle toward these goals. After Leadville, however, radical voices in the WFM blamed their defeat in part on this approach and on the AFL, which they argued had not done enough to help, particularly in terms of money. While the AFL could have done more, neither it nor the WFM was strong enough to win in Leadville. Reading the strike defeat in the context of William Jennings Bryan’s loss in the 1896 presidential election, WFM president Ed Boyce concluded that the workers of the West were more mili-
tant and attuned to the realities of industrial capitalism than those of the East, who, he asserted, lacked the “manhood to get out and fight with the sword or use the ballot with intelligence.” Sensing “little sympathy existing between the laboring men of the West and their Eastern brothers,” Boyce informed Samuel Gompers that he had lost faith in the AFL and was “strongly in favor of a Western organization.” In May 1897, the WFM effectively cut ties with the AFL. A year later, the WFM led the formation of the Western Labor Union (WLU), an organization for the “unification of all labor unions and assemblies east of the Pacific ocean and west of the Mississippi river,” that would replace the conservative AFL and lead a new anticapitalist movement of all workers, regardless of craft or skill. The union’s clash with Joplin strikebreakers informed the WLU strategy. According to one WFM member, the “Western Federation learned from experiences with the Joplin field that their only safeguard in the West was a thorough organization of all classes of labor.” Despite these claims, neither the WFM nor the WLU rushed to send organizers to southwest Missouri.

Meanwhile, miners in the Joplin district discovered that their willingness to oppose the WFM created new demand for their labor from other companies. In Ouray County, Colorado, the Caroline Mining Company responded to a brief strike by WFM miners, most of them Italian, in December 1896 by recruiting Joplin miners through agents based in Leadville. Observers believed that the operators wanted to provoke trouble. According to the Emporia Daily Gazette, “it appears that Ouray and San Miguel counties are on the verge of a miners’ strike that may surpass the one now in progress in Leadville, caused by the importation of non-union miners from Missouri.” When a special train arrived in January 1897 “bearing a large number of zinc miners from Joplin,” however, the union miners remained peaceful to forestall another military deployment. That failed too. Another group from Joplin, at least 100 strong, arrived two weeks later. Although many left the camp due to altitude sickness, the miners who remained helped break the union in Ouray. Again, the opponents of the WFM emphasized the nativity of the strikebreakers. “We got rid of the foreigners,” the county attorney boasted in February. “The citizens of Ouray are feeling very kindly towards the new arrivals,” who seemed like good, trustworthy Americans, he said.

More than 400 Joplin miners went to Colorado in 1896 and 1897. In the conflicts at Leadville and Ouray, they earned a reputation as a group of non-union, native-born miners with the skill and disposition to defy the WFM, a reputation that created new, good-paying opportunities for work wherever and whenever the increasingly militant union went on strike—a cycle of escalation that would yield more violence and hatred on both sides. Farley’s
nativist assertions to Campion from the previous summer were becoming true. In 1897, George Quinby, the Missouri state mine inspector, made similar claims in his official report. The Joplin district would prosper again, he declared, because of an “entire absence of labor troubles of any kind” and the “exceptionally high character of the miners, who are almost exclusively of American birth.”16

As the Colorado clash concluded, however, miners in Joplin enjoyed a resurgence of prosperity that brought the economic crisis of the 1890s to a spectacular halt. In the spring of 1898, as the nation mobilized for war against Spain, armament manufacturers’ demand for brass sent zinc ore prices surging above twenty-three dollars per ton in March to a stunning thirty-seven dollars per ton in December. Alongside war industries, other manufacturers also demanded more metal following President McKinley’s electoral victory in 1896, the subsequent passage of a high protective tariff, and the 1897 discovery of rich new gold mines in the Klondike. Ore prices continued to rise, from an annual average of twenty-eight dollars a ton in 1898 to thirty-eight dollars a ton in 1899. That April, mining companies in Joplin reported sales over fifty-one dollars per ton. Those companies hired more mine laborers at higher wages than ever before in 1899, the richest year yet as district mines produced over 255,000 tons of zinc ore worth $9.5 million and 23,000 tons of lead mineral worth $1.3 million.17

As the new century dawned, more than 7,000 men worked in district mines, twice as many as in 1895, for an average daily wage over two dollars. The populations of Joplin, Webb City–Carterville, and Galena surged above 26,000, 13,400, and 13,000, respectively. At a time when immigrants were entering the United States in larger numbers than ever before, these places, by contrast, were even more dominated by native-born whites, who in 1900 comprised 94 percent of the population in Joplin, the most diverse place, and 97 percent of the population in Webb City. More than 100 African Americans still worked in the mines, but their opportunities were closing. Seventy-six of them lived in Galena; none lived in Webb City or Carterville. After five years of depression, good times had returned to the Joplin district, now an icon of what native-born white Americans could achieve under capitalism.18

Prosperity attracted new investors, who financed further mechanization in the district that consolidated the transition to a permanent system of wage labor. Observers reported that firms invested over $10 million during the 1898–99 year, over $2 million in land titles and leases and the remainder in prospecting drills and upgrades to machinery. These efforts rejuvenated
old mining fields and opened new ones at Chitwood Hollow and Central City, west of Joplin; at Hell’s Neck, north of Oronogo; and near Peoria, just south of Galena, in Indian Territory. Of the new land companies, only one, the Boston-based American Zinc, Lead, and Smelting Company, attempted to run actual mining operations on its holdings. The rest relied on the traditional leasehold system that favored local mining companies, which now numbered more than 500.19

Industry commentators lauded the district’s native-born miners and its poor man’s camp tradition, portraying the place as a safe bet for further investment. “The relations between operators and their employees are close and agreeable,” a correspondent to the industry-leading Engineering and Mining Journal reported in early 1899, “and the district is noted for the entire absence of all labor disturbances.” To help account for the company-miner accord, which was certainly unusual in the mining industry in the 1890s, he claimed that the system of subleasing made it possible that “the miner of to-day may be the operator of to-morrow” and fostered “a spirit of good fellowship peculiar to this district.” Miners trusted that fellowship, he explained, because they “are almost exclusively native born Americans.” Quinby repeated a similar explanation in his official 1899 report. Subleasing “has the greatest advantage of making the miner independent of control except so far as he is bound by the conditions of his lease,” he claimed, “thereby utterly eliminating any danger of labor disturbances on a large scale.” He called “the mining population of the Missouri zinc fields the most intelligent of any in the world,” an unmistakable assertion that their nativity and race enabled them to appreciate and accept the logic of capitalism. These gospel-like narrations not only rejuvenated the poor man’s camp tradition despite its demise in reality but also reassured native-born white men that they were favored under the prevailing system. Miners responded with renewed support for the governing Republican Party. After William Jennings Bryan swept Jasper and Newton Counties with 59 percent of the vote in 1896, Republican candidates surged in 1898; while barely losing both counties, they won eleven of the twenty precincts where miners predominated.20

Critics warned miners that the poor man’s camp was dead. Writers for the Appeal to Reason, a socialist newspaper published since 1897 in Girard, Kansas, forty miles northwest of Joplin, predicted that “the lead and zinc mining business will be monopolized, the little fellows frozen out of their properties without any return, just as in other fields of industry.” While admitting that the industry “has made fortunes for many men,” the Appeal observed that high ore prices had now attracted big investors, who would leave “no more pickings in this business for those who lease and sub-rent.”21
The district’s most powerful producers soon seemed to prove that analysis. In December 1898, the largest land and mining companies organized the Missouri and Kansas Zinc Miners’ Association to protect the new price levels against the efforts of smelters to lower the benchmark. Smelting companies that used coal insisted on price cuts because they faced pressure from new Kansas competitors using cheaper natural gas fuel and from the UMW, which was striking for higher wages. In late June 1899, the association’s members, who collectively controlled 80 percent of the district’s ore production, closed operations for two weeks to enforce their preferred price scale. The Associated Press reported that “over ten thousand laborers were thrown out of employment” as mines, mills, machine shops, and rail yards closed. Yet according to the Joplin Daily News, the “shut-down of the mines has been received with universal favor by operators and miners.” Not all, surely, but most miners understood the market provisions of zinc leaseholds and widely accepted the connection between the price of ore and wages, as they had in 1893. “The wage earner of the district was equally interested with the producer, as a cut in price of ore meant a cut in wages—their interests were identical,” a miner named Daniels claimed. The association’s strategy, however, prompted coal-fired smelters to shut down in retaliation. While some mining companies resumed operations in July, the association called for periodic closures that disrupted production, until the two sides reached an agreement in November. Despite the year’s prosperity, district miners again faced precarious employment in the summer and fall of 1899.22

Now, however, Joplin miners could look to the West, where their reputation as nonunion workers created opportunities for highly paid work. Western mine owners looked to them, too, as the WFM increased its campaign across the region. These interests aligned again in the summer of 1899 when the WFM clashed with mine owners in the silver and lead district of Coeur d’Alene, Idaho. In April 1899, union miners requested a union contract and pay scale from the Bunker Hill and Sullivan Mining and Concentrating Company, the only firm in the district that did not employ union labor. Rather than submit, the company fired all known or suspected union members. In response, the WFM went on strike and blockaded the mine, which prompted the company to ask Governor Frank Steunenberg to send soldiers to protect its property. In the violent clashes that followed, someone, perhaps from the WFM, dynamited Bunker Hill’s main mill. After the attack, Steunenberg declared martial law and asked President McKinley to dispatch federal soldiers to keep the peace. With help from the mine operators, the army detained all known union miners and their sympathizers in the district, more than 1,000
men, without counsel or charge in a rough stockade known as the bullpen. The state government also instituted a permit system that required anyone who wished to work in the mines to register their name, country of birth, recent employment, and history of union membership and “to renounce and forever abjure all allegiance” to the WFM. Some union miners who remained free vowed to resist, but most fled the area.23

Unable to find enough workers who qualified for permits, Amasa Campbell, co-owner of the Standard Mining Company, dispatched an agent to Joplin in June with instructions to hire nonunion miners. And so, just as the zinc miners’ association prepared for the latest district-wide shutdown, Campbell’s man, J. R. Smith, placed a tantalizing advertisement in local newspapers offering “steady work the year round” in Coeur d’Alene for up to 1,000 miners at $3.50 per day.24

With the shutdown looming, Joplin miners accepted the offer of work in Coeur d’Alene more quickly than they had in Leadville. More than 100 “first class miners,” “a husky looking lot,” joined the first contingent to depart for Idaho. Upon arrival, S. B. Willis, whom the press described as “one of the leaders,” explained that “we are perfectly satisfied with the situation. . . . Before coming we were told that old miners had blown up the Bunker Hill mine, and that we were only needed because the former hands were either in the bull pen or would not be employed again.” Unlike in 1896, the Joplin press did not denounce them, a sign that public opinion was moving in favor of the strikebreakers. The Joplin Daily Globe had printed a pared-down tale, similar to Willis’s, that omitted key events, such as the initial strike, martial law, and the permit, but Joplin miners found the explanation sufficient. Although wary of calling himself a strikebreaker, Willis clearly understood the economic value of being nonunion. “There are plenty more miners, and good ones, around Joplin, who will start as soon as they hear from us,” he promised a local reporter. “There are no unions there.” Whether Willis was against unions or simply saying what he thought mine owners wanted to hear, he clearly sought to take advantage of the absence of labor organization in Joplin.25

Their primary goal was good-paying work. “The mines near Joplin are being worked on a modest scale,” Willis explained, but the real “trouble there is the uncertainty of employment, for small shutdowns are continuous.” Willis’s colleagues “expressed determination to remain in the Coeur d’Alenes and hold the jobs.” Notably, Willis did not justify the decision with appeals to family security as McCollum and others had in 1896. For him, the quest for work with high pay was its own justification. Most of the others agreed. Within days they sent letters and telegrams home with reports of
ample work, good wages, and no strike. “I found everything in much better shape than I expected,” John Maddy informed his nephew. “If a man comes out to have a good time this is not the place he wants to find,” he counseled, “but if he wants to work and to make money, here is the place.” “This is the best company I ever worked for,” Maddy declared. “They want experienced miners who want work,” Lyon Hopkins explained. Ira Esry assured his mother that the “Joplin boys are all well pleased.” Indeed, hundreds more followed them to Idaho that summer.26

Some of the miners, however, found sympathy with the union men in Idaho and rejected employment. Despite military efforts to keep the union and nonunion miners apart, WFM organizers managed “to make a representation of the case” to a group of new arrivals, some of whom “tore up their permits and refused to go to work.” This group of eleven men sent a statement to the Joplin newspapers that claimed they had been deceived about the conflict in Coeur d’Alene and warned others to stay away. “The condition of things here has been grossly misrepresented to us,” they wrote. Unlike those who stayed, they voiced concern for the suffering families of union miners. “We have witnessed the heart-rending sight of women and children whose husbands and fathers have been torn from them and cast into the second Andersonville (the bull pen),” they explained, “for no other crime than that of being good union men and adhering to the principle of the Declaration of Independence which makes us free American citizens.” They were coming home and wanted to “warn innocent men from being beguiled into this state where a scab is beneath the notice of a bootblack,” both the contemporary name for shoe shiners and a derogatory term for African Americans, who were often employed as strikebreakers. Their argument, influenced by the WFM, used the terms of respectable manhood and white American nationalism to make a case for union solidarity. The union made a similar argument in a notice sent to Joplin newspapers urging men to stay away. The WFM explained that the union was not on strike but had been locked out because it would not abide a permit system that asked men “to swear away their rights in this un-American and servile manner.” While the effect of this appeal was unclear, the union had created a way for at least some Joplin miners to respect its cause.27

Yet as in Leadville, most of the Joplin miners in Idaho were learning that native-born white men who were also nonunion enjoyed a special advantage with mining companies against a majority foreign-born, unionized workforce. The operators stated their demand for workers in language that placed a premium on linked markers of race, nativity, and trustworthiness. This was made clearest in the terms of the permit system. The Spokane Spokesman-
Review reported that of the first group to arrive, “all but two of them are native-born Americans, and typical Anglo-Saxons at that,” the latter a term that reflected the burgeoning national politics of racism and xenophobia. When presented with the permits, the Joplin miners “signed the applications with alacrity,” the paper reported, “well satisfied with the situation.” The permit not only allowed miners to work but also marked them as good, loyal white men. Whereas before the April strike more than 80 percent of miners in the district were foreign born, the state afterward issued nearly all of its permits to American-born miners. John Maddy was not bothered at all about signing the permit. “We had to sign a paper,” he informed his uncle, “but all there was in that is that we are ‘American-born and belong to no union’” and played no part in the April bombing. He was proud to answer these affirmatively. “Now if that takes away a man’s liberty mine is gone.” As for the men held in the bullpen, he said, “only 20 can speak good English.”

The detention of trouble-making foreigners meant more work for Americans. Frank Meyers likewise appreciated the opportunity. Martial law had been declared, he told his father, because union men blew up the Bunker Hill mill and declared that “no white man (or in other words, no non-unions) could live in this canyon.” That Joplin miners now considered nonunion status a positive marker of racial and gendered standing was significant. The WFM had called for a closed shop, but Meyers read beyond this, aided by the terms of the permit system, to frame the struggle as one of hardworking, nonunion American men against work-shy, unionized foreign radicals.28

Unlike the small group that sided with the WFM, many strikebreakers articulated this emerging ideal of patriotic, native-born antiunionism through public aggression and even violence against the union. During a Fourth of July celebration in Wallace, Meyers bragged, “the Joplin boys had about fifty fights with the union men, and they never lost a fight.” “We go where we please, and if a man calls us ‘scab’ we knock him down.” These comments, all printed in Joplin newspapers, not only overwhelmed the WFM’s appeals for solidarity but also showed the miners redefining strikebreaking in new terms that emphasized the bellicose prerogatives of native-born white men acting in their own self-interest. Men like Meyers did not justify strikebreaking as a reluctant defense of family but now bragged about their power to smash the faces of foreign strikers and get paid for it.29

WFM miners again fueled the animosity, which further complicated the union’s efforts to reason with nonunion men. Some union members directly confronted the Missourians, but martial law made that dangerous. Doe Isbell recounted how two Italian miners who accosted him were quickly arrested and imprisoned. Without physical means, the union resorted to moral
attacks. Like “show me” in Leadville, “Joplin” and “Missourian” became synonyms in Coeur d’Alene slang for “scab” or “cut-rate laborer.” The union men wrote a song, “Strike Breaker’s Lament,” inspired by the poem “Bingen on the Rhine,” that imagined the dying words of a greedy Missouri strikebreaker:

They told us that our wages would be three to four a day,
And that, you know, in Joplin is more than double pay;
The thought of such great riches, it made my heart to glow,
For I’d felt the rack of poverty in Joplin, Joplin, Mo. . . .
Just then his voice it faltered, he ceased to murmur low,
His soul it went a-scooting to Joplin, Joplin, Mo.
His partner wept above him, and sadly fell his tears,
Then tried to drown his sorrow by drinking many beers;
He boxed the stiff and shipped him, as fast as he could go,
To the land of scabbing miners in Joplin, Joplin, Mo.30

Harsh moralizing shored up union confidence but did little to soften the hearts of strikebreakers toward the WFM or toward unions more broadly. Again, as in Leadville and Ouray, Missouri strikebreakers proved essential to the antiunion campaign of Idaho’s mine owners. More than 1,000 Joplin miners went to Idaho that summer. The operators vowed to “make no concession whatever to union miners.” As production increased, state authorities closed the bullpen in December 1899. Hundreds of miners from Joplin remained in the camp; the WFM was broken in northern Idaho. Many other strikebreakers, however, brought their gains and their experiences home to Joplin.31

Yet just as it seemed that Joplin miners had turned decisively against unions, labor organizers found a more complex situation in the district. In May 1899, an AFL organizer named Baxter helped a group of masons, bricklayers, and printers in Joplin form a laborers’ protective union, an institutional form that gave workers direct affiliation with the AFL in the absence of national union representation. This was the first AFL-affiliated union in the area. Baxter’s next goal was to organize the “lead and zinc miners.” In August, amid shutdowns and the Idaho conflict, miners in Oronogo, led by zinc miner S. G. Dodson, formed a local union for zinc and lead miners, also directly affiliated with the AFL. This group was small—AFL rules required a minimum of seven paying members in these local bodies—but its formation suggested that some miners had not accepted the district’s new system of wage labor with as much equanimity as most observers thought, perhaps influenced by the UM Welfare Mine Workers’ recent victory in the 1899 coal strike. The new union
also suggested that Joplin miners might find agreement with the policies of the AFL, as an alternative to the WFM, if offered a means of affiliation. The AFL pursued a pragmatic strategy that focused on organizing the nation’s most skilled workers into well-funded national unions that provided benefits for members and their families, particularly financial security in case of injury, unemployment, and death, while pursuing conciliatory negotiations with employers over pay and hours, especially the eight-hour day. The AFL sought to avoid strikes that it could not win, particularly those launched by local unions, a lesson influenced by the crushing defeats of the Knights of Labor and the WFM, particularly in Leadville. With this approach, the AFL explicitly appealed to the country’s most privileged white workers, both native born and of northern and western European origin, often backed by calls from Gompers and other national leaders for immigration restriction. If Joplin’s native-born white miners would join a labor organization in the late 1890s, surely this would be it.

With similar inclinations, and perhaps influenced by AFL organizers, miners in Joplin formed an independent union that August that paralleled developments in Oronogo. Claiming 350 charter members, the Joplin Miners’ Union declared a pragmatic set of aims: to “protect the interests of the craft of mining,” “to protect members against dishonest men who attempt to cheat employees out of pay for their labor,” “to assist in having passed and enforced laws intended to protect the lives of men working in the ground,” to provide sickness and death benefits for members, and “to co-operate with laboring men of all callings for the advancement of the general interests of the laboring man.” The union also announced commitments to find accord with local mining companies: to promote “the interests of the mining industry in general,” “to protect just and honorable operators from dishonest and incompetent workmen,” and “to encourage the principle of conciliation and arbitration in the settlement of differences between employers and employees.” With these resolutions, the Joplin Miners’ Union recognized the possibility, if not the inevitability, of disputes with employers, even while advocating against strikes, as miners in the district had always done. While the origins of the independent union are unclear, its resolutions tracked the aims of the AFL, although with more generosity toward members’ employers. In September, for example, the Joplin Miners’ Union publicly supported another round of mine closures by the Missouri and Kansas Zinc Miners’ Association to resist efforts by the smelters to reduce ore prices.

The movement to form local AFL unions soon subsumed this independent group. In October 1899, AFL members in Oronogo organized new local miners’ unions in Hell’s Neck and Webb City, “towns where there has never
been a labor union of any kind before,” organizer J. A. Burkett reported. In Joplin, meanwhile, the first laborers’ protective union had split as national craft unions established constituent locals among sheet metal workers, carpenters and joiners, bricklayers and stonemasons, cigar makers, electrical workers, iron molders, machinists, musicians, printers, and painters. Representatives of these unions chartered a Central Labor Union (CLU) governing body with the AFL to coordinate activity and to continue organizing “the lead and zinc miners as well as all other wage earners.” The Joplin Miners’ Union, meanwhile, left no trace of continued activity; presumably, its members joined the ranks of the AFL.34

These developments caught the attention of Samuel Gompers. He wanted to build a national AFL union of metal miners that would incorporate or replace the WFM. Gompers believed that the only way to counter the power of organized capital was “for the combined forces of labor in this country to unite more thoroughly than ever before” on a national, not a regional, basis. In late 1899, he proposed “that the mineral mine workers ought to be organized under one national head, upon a comprehensive, broad basis, where the interests of one would be promoted in the interests of all.” Although relations with the WFM had collapsed after the formation of the WLU in 1898, Gompers continued to urge the WFM to rejoin the AFL. In the summer of 1899, the AFL publicly supported the WFM’s struggle in Coeur d’Alene and even sent money. Gompers refused to recognize the WLU, however, and began preparing for the possibility that the WFM would never abandon its regional strategy. He planned to use Northern Mineral, which was badly weakened by strike defeats, as a foundation for the new national union, which would, if successful, provide a stronger institutional home for miners like those in Joplin than the small, isolated local unions. Gompers dispatched two national organizers, Frank Weber and Robert Askew, both from Northern Mineral, to connect the nascent union movement in Joplin to this new national organizing plan.35

Gompers’s commitment of two trusted organizers at a time when AFL resources were scarce testified to how much he valued the mission. While no doubt looking to steal a march on the WFM, Gompers also seemed to legitimately care about establishing the AFL in Joplin. “You understand,” he informed Weber, “that I shall accept nothing but success at the hands of yourself and brother Askew. The workers of Joplin must be organized and in affiliation with the American Federation of Labor.” He did not directly acknowledge the district’s strikebreakers but advised Askew that the AFL’s conservative strategy “presents the most comprehensible platform upon which all may stand, united in heart and hand, mind and spirit, to secure
justice for the workers,” especially in contrast to the radicalism of the WFM. “There is no reason in the world why the workers, miners included, of Joplin as well as in any other part of the country,” Gompers insisted, “should not be in full affiliation with the” AFL.36

Some Joplin miners seemed to agree. Weber and Askew organized new local unions in Duenweg, Zincite, and Central City in November and December 1899. “These men until recently have not deemed it necessary to organize their trade,” Weber explained to Gompers, “and have scoffed at the idea of ever being compelled to unite for mutual protection.” Weber, like so many others, blamed the promise of the poor man’s camp tradition. Yet “the change of conditions in mining” away from prospecting and small operations, he argued, “has caused them to realize the danger awaiting them.” Now, Weber reported, they “are beginning to understand that the wornout cry ‘every man has an equal chance to become rich’ is a delusion and a snare.” He was confident in his ability to convince the rest of their errant thinking. Both cocksure and condescending, Weber reported that “the zinc and lead miners and mine workers are now thoroughly aroused from their mental lethargy.”37

Joplin’s AFL miners led the chorus in support of Gompers’s plan at the federation’s convention in Detroit in December 1899. Burkett proposed a resolution to create a new national union that would give local metal miners’ groups regular affiliation with the AFL. “The Zinc and Lead Miners and Mine Workers are not satisfied with their mode of organization and request that an International Federation of all mineral unions and mine workers be formed,” he wrote, preferably “to be known as Federation of Mineral Miners and Mine Workers of America.” The AFL’s committee on organization approved Burkett’s resolution with the recommendation “that the incoming Executive Officers be instructed to use their best endeavors to bring about an amalgamation of the Mineral Mine Workers of America.” It also urged Gompers to continue to appeal to the WFM to rejoin the AFL fold. Organized labor finally had some momentum in the Joplin district, propelled in part by the AFL’s strategy to outflank the WFM on the right. “The cry that is going forth to-day” from Joplin, Weber wrote, “is the organization of all the mineral miners into an international union to be known as the American Federation of Mineral Miners.”38

The AFL’s focus on Joplin prompted the WFM to send its first organizer to the district later that month. The WFM dispatched John Lewis, a Welsh silver miner from Colorado, who, at least early on, “was working hard to show those people the error of their way and meeting with good success.” After a month, however, Lewis gave up and returned to Colorado. He re-
ported “that another man who was more familiar with the situation could do better” in Joplin. Lewis died in an avalanche soon after, without leaving further explanation. His struggles possibly stemmed from a lack of experience outside of the capital-intensive, deep mines of the Rocky Mountains, where he had worked since arriving in the United States in 1892. Lewis would have known little about the Joplin district or why miners there might have favored the AFL's approach. Of course, the WFM’s failure to send an organizer to Joplin for more than three years after the first strikebreakers arrived in Leadville also made his task more difficult. Lewis not only encountered anti-WFM sentiment but also had to contend with the AFL's proposed alternative organization.39

There were some Joplin miners who were not completely opposed to the WFM. Organizer Solon Cress, Lewis’s successor, formed WFM Local 88 in Joplin in March 1900. In contrast to Lewis, Cress claimed several points of identification with miners in Joplin. Born in California, he had worked as a lead miner in Colorado since the 1870s, including in Leadville in 1881. His reports to the WFM displayed a keen understanding of the old prospecting and leasehold system and its recent demise. “The advent of labor saving machinery and improved methods of mining and treating ores have doubtless made mining more profitable for operators,” Cress explained, “but for the man with his bare hands it becomes increasingly harder for him either to find leases or employment.” He reported enthusiasm for Local 88, with “new members at every meeting.” Cress even hoped to cooperate with the local AFL movement. This stance set him apart from many in the WFM but aligned with recent AFL unity overtures and so probably aided his efforts in Joplin. Cress commented favorably on the city’s CLU, which, he explained, was “beginning to create a healthy sentiment in favor of unionism.” He did not believe that the WFM would sweep Joplin soon but voiced cautious optimism. Miners were “beginning to join the unions,” he informed Miners Magazine and, much like competing organizers in the AFL, pledged that “we will ere long be able to give a good account of ourselves in the Joplin district.” But, like Weber and Lewis, Cress could not resist scolding the miners for past transgressions. “We shall do our best to see that this shameful thing”—strikebreaking—“shall not again occur.”40

Joplin miners entered the new century with considerable confusion about the best way forward. Conditions in the district seemed good. Mining companies produced around 250,000 tons of zinc ore a year on average from 1900 to 1903, as well as over 30,000 tons of lead mineral each year. While the price of zinc ore fell back from the average high of thirty-eight dollars
per ton in 1899, companies achieved prices that bettered those in any year before 1898 and were rising: twenty-four dollars per ton in 1901, thirty in 1902, and thirty-four in 1903. For the thousands of miners who now relied on wage labor, however, conditions remained uncertain. Wage scales varied considerably across the district. The biggest companies in Webb City, Carterville, and parts of Joplin paid top wages, between $2.25 and $2.50 per day. Smaller companies, particularly those in Aurora, Granby, or Galena, paid less, between $1.75 and $2.00 per day. Miners could not rely on steady wages, especially if they worked for one of the big companies. Those firms led continued efforts through the producers’ association to defend ore prices by shutting down operations. But miners had choices. Western mine operators offered frequent strikebreaking opportunities as their conflict with the WFM sharpened and spread across the region. The WFM and AFL, meanwhile, presented miners with related but rival visions of collective action. Although more Joplin miners came to favor the possibilities of unionism, most found little of interest in either appeal.41

In 1900, conditions in the district seemed to provide an opening for AFL and WFM organizers. As prices retreated from the all-time high set in 1899, the producers’ association closed many mines for six weeks. According to Cress, more than 3,000 miners were thrown out of work. He noted that most received lower wages when the producers’ association resumed operations. They “are still wondering where their part of the unexampled prosperity is to come in,” Cress reported. Weber, meanwhile, recognized that “the individual prospectors and the small producers are being driven out of the field” and with them any hope of the survival of the poor man’s camp tradition.42

The unions, however, struggled. The AFL’s plans to create a national metal miners’ union, so grand in late 1899, faded away. In January 1900, Gompers reassigned Weber to campaigns in New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Robert Askew remained in the district and organized another laborers’ protective union, which probably included some miners, in Galena, Kansas. Despite little support from the national office, some Oronogo miners launched a wildcat strike in June to protest the recent wage cut. The ill-advised strike failed within the week. None of the district’s seven AFL miners’ locals survived into 1901. As much as he wanted to supersede the WFM, Gompers believed foremost in consolidating organizations in places where union members could achieve the most leverage at work and at the ballot box, such as Buffalo or Cleveland. As AFL membership in these places surged in 1900, the executive council devoted all available resources and national organizers, such as Weber, to ensure effective institution building, often to the detriment of new organizing drives. When the federation sent Edwin Trappe
to Joplin in 1901, he reported that it was “the hardest town to organize he ever went into.” Trappe hoped to reinforce the city’s CLU but noted nothing about union sentiment among the miners.43

The WFM likewise failed to build on Local 88. After a promising start in early 1900, Cress seemed to speak past local miners. A Socialist, like many others in the WFM, he gave a series of speeches that emphasized political action to overthrow capitalism. “Labor cannot hope to participate in the advancing gains of civilization under a competitive system,” Cress argued. However true this statement might have seemed, many Joplin miners would have struggled to reconcile it with the potent traditions of the poor man’s camp that supported the opposite view. Cress also challenged their motivations during recent strikebreaking episodes. “All men have not liberty to work, but only liberty to hunt for work,” he argued, “and they have not even that liberty in Idaho, where one must obtain a permit from a state official who is a paid hireling of the Standard Oil Company.” Cress’s claim that the men who worked as strikebreakers had no liberty made for a risky appeal to men who likely had been strikebreakers. His effort soon faded. That autumn, Cress ran as a Social Democrat to represent western Jasper County in the Missouri House of Representatives. He received 241 votes, a sad showing compared to 7,162 for the victorious Democrat and 6,178 for the Republican runner-up. Many miners were willing to vote for Democrats in response to new economic uncertainties, but few were willing to go further. Local 88 collapsed soon after.44

While both unions staggered, Joplin miners saw fresh evidence of the advantages of strikebreaking as conflict flared again in Idaho. After breaking the WFM in Coeur d’Alene in 1899, the mine owners ended martial law and the permit system in April 1901. Union miners believed that many nonunion Missourians would leave the camp rather than work without armed protection. The mine owners, however, planned to hire more Joplin miners to ensure that the union could not reorganize. J. R. Smith returned to Joplin in February 1901. He praised the productivity of the miners who went to Idaho in 1899 and again offered high wages, from $3.50 to $5.00 per day. Although miners would have to pay their own transportation costs, Smith guaranteed them a job upon arrival. He claimed that over 100 miners signed up in a few days. Smith “has no trouble in securing men,” the Engineering and Mining Journal reported, “as those who went before indorse the methods of the company.”45

Once in Idaho, the Missourians met renewed resistance from covert union miners. The WFM diehards concluded that the Joplin miners would never join the union and would instead give the owners undeniable lever-
age to maintain open-shop mines. According to company informants who infiltrated their ranks, many union miners reacted “in a disheartened sort of way and act as if they were very much discouraged concerning the future of unionism in the Coeur de Alenes.” Some called for violent resistance, but most realized that state authorities would crush such efforts. As an alternative, some hoped that rudeness and social isolation would convince the Missourians to leave. One union miner advised colleagues who shared a boardinghouse with them not to “speak to the Missourians also not to pass them any thing at the table.” He aimed to make them “sick and tired of the place as soon as possible.” None of these strategies had much effect. One miner told the company informant “that it hurt the old-timers to see new men come in here in bunches as they could not now get up a mob to beat them off as they once could.” Others, according to the informant, “remarked that it seemed that the only proper thing for union men to do was to leave the camp, which many of them are doing.”

A few strategic thinkers tried to convince the Missourians to join the WFM. In contrast to Smith’s claims, union miners told the company informant that several of the Joplin miners were not happy with conditions in Coeur d’Alene. Apparently some companies paid less than promised and occasionally closed operations for days or weeks at a time, just like in Joplin. “These men say that a good many of the Missourians are good men, when they understand how things are here, and they claim that Agent Smith misrepresented things in Joplin.” According to one report, some of the Missourians even joined the union in Idaho. But most could not countenance that, no matter how much they came to dislike the Idaho mine operators. Many Joplin miners “are willing to set in sympathy with the Union,” the informant noted, “but are unwilling to join as the Union has such a bad name.” Other Missourians did not even extend sympathy to union miners. They relished the opportunity to work. While “most of the Missourians were good men,” one union miner said, “some of them were scab at heart.”

The WFM’s leadership denounced them all as bad men in terms that framed the union as the defender of manly fairness and self-restraint. In May 1901, Ed Boyce, who as president of the union also edited its new official journal, Miners Magazine, published a piece that cast all Joplin miners beyond the pale of honorable workers. “For a number of years,” he reminded readers, the Joplin district “has been the recruiting station for scabs to take the places of miners struggling for their rights throughout the mining regions of the West.” Despite union efforts to slow it, “this insufferable influx of scabs has not abated in the least,” as the arrival of hundreds of Missourians in Idaho made clear. According to Boyce, miners from the Joplin district
were so corrupt that they should no longer be considered full men according to existing ideals. “It is strange,” he continued, “how degraded some men can become, when, for a miserable job in a cold, damp mine, they will sell their honor and manhood and try to deceive others so they may follow in their footsteps.” In this view, Joplin miners were irredeemable, perhaps congenitally so, and should be shunned. “They are a dangerous class of men and not to be relied upon,” Boyce explained. “They will seek admission into unions when they find it is to their advantage, but union men should not tolerate them because they are a disgrace to themselves and to any organization that harbors them.” “No wonder,” he concluded, “that the few decent men who came from Joplin are ashamed of the name and deny that they ever worked in such a scab hole.”

As the WFM became more militant and confrontational following the defeats in Leadville and Coeur d’Alene, it launched more strikes that multiplied the potential points of conflict with nonunion miners from Joplin. Those conflicts came thick and fast after July 1901 when the WFM struck the copper mines and the smelter of the Rossland Great Western Company in Rossland, Washington, and Northport, British Columbia. The WFM objected to the dismissal of union members at the Northport smelter and to wage cuts at the mines in Rossland. Many of the union miners had recently fled there from Coeur d’Alene. They were in no mood to compromise with the powerful Idaho-based capitalists who controlled the Rossland Western holdings. Company directors, in turn, sent agents to Joplin to recruit strikebreakers. Over 200 miners accepted the offer of work “in spite of the warnings coming from there to the effect that there is a strike on and warning the men to stay away.” This lot was only the most visible contingent of nonunion Missourians to go west in 1901. That summer, in the months after the AFL and WFM locals in Joplin failed, the Missouri Pacific Railroad office in Joplin reported selling nearly 2,000 tickets for journeys to metal-mining camps in Utah, Idaho, and Colorado.

These clashes, which reprised scenes from Leadville and Coeur d’Alene, deepened the chasm that separated union and nonunion miners. In Northport, the first trainload of strikebreakers ran a gauntlet of armed strikers. This time, the strikebreakers armed themselves. “Since the Missourians arrived,” one report stated, “the most of them have carried firearms, as have also the striking smelter men.” According to the local press, “a crisis should be imminent.” The first battle erupted when “a number of Joplin men who were in the saloon drinking” took offense when a group of union men began “singing a song which made some reference to ‘scabs,’” likely one of the songs from the Idaho struggle, probably “Strike Breaker’s Lament.” After exchang-
ing threats, according to the bartender, “the Joplin men went into the restaurant next door, and came back with their coats off. They said they were from Missouri, and they were ready for business.” A brawl ensued and someone fired shots—“bullets for the chorus,” the Los Angeles Times quipped—one of which killed a prominent union miner.50

Afterward, the strikebreakers became more aggressive in public. “The Missourians have been inclined to carry things with a very high hand of late,” the local press reported. “Things are in a very critical and dangerous state, and unless something is done in the near future, it may be necessary to declare martial law.” The sheriff disarmed both sides, but that worked to the advantage of the mine owners and strikebreakers, who defeated the strike and the WFM in both camps. In response, WFM miners stepped up pressure against nonunion miners across the region. In Cripple Creek, Colorado, the WFM local posted signs that autumn warning that any nonunion miners, particularly those “from Missouri,” caught in the camp “will be considered a scab and an enemy to us, himself, and the community at large, and will be treated as such.” “You are for us or against us,” the Cripple Creek WFM declared. “There is no middle ground.”51

The WFM’s Miners Magazine responded with more intense denunciations of all Joplin miners, whether they broke strikes or not, that denied their manhood, patriotism, and even basic humanity. The Joplin district, Boyce declared, was a “scab incubator” full of men who, “dead to all sense of honor and manhood, have never attempted to improve their condition, financially, morally or intellectually.” Rather, he claimed, Joplin miners “take peculiar pleasure in hindering the advancement of other workingmen in their efforts to better their condition.” They possessed a “brute spirit” and “will hesitate at nothing, not even robbery and murder.” This account recycled epithets widely used at the time to vilify foreign-born radicals and African Americans to attack Missouri strikebreakers who had justified their own actions in Leadville and Coeur d’Alene in patriotic, nativist terms. Now, the WFM pointed out, these hypocritical, native-born Americans had done what they claimed to despise by going to British Columbia as strikebreakers. “What a splendid sight it is,” the journal concluded, “to see those ‘free born’ American citizens of whom we hear so much in these days of flag worshipping crossing the Canadian line, armed with a six shooter and bowie knife,” as “hired thugs” to undercut “workingmen struggling for their rights.” A letter to Miners Magazine from a former Local 88 member confirmed this interpretation. “I have always done what I could in my humble way to point out to the miners in Joplin the error of their ways in not organizing for their own protection in place of going to the Coeur d’Alenes and Northport at the

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solicitation of the mine owners,” he explained. He interpreted their refusal to respect the WFM as evidence of an almost pathological lack of solidarity. He and some others who had belonged to Local 88 “have had many round ups with them, but it doesn’t seem to do them any good; it is bred in them and they can’t help it.” He saw little future for any union in the district, although some diehards remained. “The few of us who are here,” this miner concluded, “hope the time will come when men from Joplin can associate with other working men and not be looked upon as scabs wherever we go.”52

These views heaped bitterness upon the already tenuous politics of metal miner unionism. The WFM now blamed the AFL for destroying unionism in Joplin. Miners Magazine printed a letter from the Cripple Creek local that blamed “the pernicious work of the A. F. of L. agents at Joplin, Missouri, two years ago” for the failure of Local 88. The letter claimed that “the paid wreckers of the A. F. of L. appeared upon the scene to spread discord” after the WFM had already organized a local, an untrue account that reversed the actual order of events. To make matters worse, the editorial continued, Weber and Askew, “the wreckers, having accomplished their work of destruction, made no effort to restore the organization under their own sovereignty.” It was true that Gompers reassigned Weber from Joplin and that his plan for a national metal miners’ union vanished. But was it true, as an editorial in the next issue asserted, that the AFL’s withdrawal from Joplin “allowed unionism to die”? Some WFM leaders thought so, including Boyce, who still blamed Gompers and the AFL for what had happened in Leadville. “From that dead sea,” Miners Magazine stated, “have come thousands of ‘scab’ miners who aided the mine owners in the Coeur d’Alenes and every place the Mine Owners’ Association has attempted to defeat unionism.” Because of the AFL, the Cripple Creek writer concluded, “Joplin remains the menace that it has ever been to the W. F. of M.” These conclusions, whether right or wrong, pushed the WFM and AFL even further apart. In 1902, the WFM reorganized the WLU as the American Labor Union, a new national radical alternative to the AFL that would, with leading Socialist allies, found the Industrial Workers of the World in 1905. AFL leaders, meanwhile, vowed to destroy the American Labor Union. Any future effort to organize Joplin miners would have to navigate this yawning divide.53

AFL organizers with the Joplin CLU tried to restart the defunct local miners’ unions in late 1901. That summer, S. G. Dodson reported to the AFL national office that a new Missouri law mandating an eight-hour workday in all mines had started to awaken interest in unionization in the district. Democrats backed by coal miners in the northern part of the state had created the bill, and a large majority of the general assembly, including the two
representatives from Jasper County, approved it in March 1901. In Joplin, Dodson explained, many companies refused to obey the law and challenged it in court. The miners he talked to “are determined that the 8-hour law shall be enforced everywhere that it applies.” Although Dodson made little organizational headway, the CLU persisted. In the summer of 1902, while Boyce and others in the WFM directed a torrent of invective against Joplin miners, F. N. Ford, who represented Joplin carpenters, reported that he had organized a local union of miners in Chitwood and that “prospects are good for organizing the whole district of Miners.” Whatever opportunity Ford saw soon vanished. The AFL never registered the Chitwood local. Dodson left Joplin. At the 1903 AFL convention, Ford requested a national organizer to replace him, but the AFL focused resources elsewhere. Once again, without national support, the Joplin CLU could not sustain its efforts to organize area miners.54

The WFM, meanwhile, restarted its push to organize Joplin miners in early 1903 under the leadership of new president Charles Moyer, a South Dakota miner. In contrast to Boyce, who retired in 1902, Moyer pushed “a vigorous campaign of organization” among metal miners in the East. He courted the leaders of Northern Mineral, which suffered after the AFL’s shift away from the industry; it would merge with the WFM in early 1904. Moyer believed organizing Joplin’s nonunion miners, even those who had worked as strikebreakers, was essential for the union’s survival. In the spring of 1903, he sent organizer D. C. Copley, who hailed from Cripple Creek, to Missouri. Copley had success in eastern Missouri, where Northern Mineral had organized locals the year before. He then held a series of meetings in the Joplin district that slowly but steadily attracted support. Despite finding “quite an opposition to organization,” Copley organized three new locals in April and May: Local 186 in Chitwood, where the AFL had made some headway; Local 195 in Joplin; and Local 205 in Webb City. In August, the WFM sent William M. Burns, a miner from Ouray, to carry the work forward. By the end of the year he organized two additional locals: 207 in Neck City and 210 in Aurora. The locals were small, around fifty members each, but showed promise for growth. To signal the WFM’s commitment to the district, Moyer visited the new locals himself in November.55

The arrival of labor agents seeking more strikebreakers that fall added new urgency to the WFM organizing campaign. Throughout September 1903, agents placed help wanted advertisements in Joplin newspapers offering work at high wages ranging from three to four dollars a day to replace union labor in mines in Prescott, Arizona; Tonopah, Nevada; Randsburg, California; and Cripple Creek and Telluride, Colorado. The most important
fight for the WFM was at Cripple Creek, a gold camp where union miners sustained a strike against a well-financed group of mine owners backed by the Colorado National Guard for almost a year in 1903 and 1904. Determined to break the strike and the union, the Cripple Creek mine owners deliberately copied the model that Idaho’s mine owners had used in 1899: secure mine property with an armed force, recruit nonunion replacement miners, and institute an open-shop system using permits. As in Coeur d’Alene, the Cripple Creek owners dispatched labor agents to Joplin. Now, those agents appealed to the most violent forms of masculinity that had emerged in Idaho and later conflicts. The Cripple Creek owners explained that they wanted Joplin miners because of their reputation for being “the toughest in the whole country” and their eagerness “to undertake whatever hardship will be incurred in putting the first blows at organized labor.” In Leadville and Idaho, one owner explained, nonunion Missourians had “distinguished themselves by making a ‘rough house’ with union men whenever the two factions met.” Joplin miners were now sought not just for their lack of union organization but more so for their aggressive antipathy toward the WFM. The Cripple Creek owners hoped that the ensuing conflict would give them the excuse they needed to crush the union for good. The WFM recognized the trap but was not sure it could be avoided. As one representative admitted, “Trouble will ensue as soon as the new men strike the camp.”

WFM leaders understood that the union’s fate in Cripple Creek was linked to the fortunes of the nascent union movement in Joplin. The union worked hard to frustrate the recruitment of strikebreakers, often in conjunction with the Joplin CLU. Copley and Burns realized that collaboration with the AFL was the only way to overcome local animosity toward the WFM. They held rallies to educate miners about the strikes. The Joplin WFM local distributed handbills that countered the claims of labor agents. The CLU circulated these handbills among AFL members in other trades and raised donations to aid the strikers in Colorado. “May success crown your efforts,” Thomas Sheridan, the president of the CLU, wrote to the WFM executive council in late 1903. They achieved some success. Sheridan heralded the WFM’s newfound commitment in Joplin and predicted that the district would “take its place in the industrial army of labor which will bring about freedom and peace.” Despite the past record of strikebreaking, he argued “that there is just as good material here to make union men out of, as anywhere else in the world, and we will demonstrate it in the future.” Likewise, Copley reported with confidence to the executive council upon his return to Colorado that “the seeds of unionism sown there will grow and Joplin shall redeem itself of the odium that has so long attached to her, and finally become one of the strongholds
of the Federation.” Neck City Local 207 concurred with this sentiment. “We have a nice little union here,” a representative informed Miners Magazine in early 1904. “I think if we win the Colorado strike we will have as strong a union in Missouri as there is in the West.”

Despite this rare example of cooperation between the WFM and the AFL, however, hundreds of Joplin miners went west in late 1903. At least 400 Missourians went to Cripple Creek as strikebreakers, around 100 of them by way of Coeur d’Alene. Some of these, particularly those from Idaho, were veteran enemies of the WFM. Others, however, took the opportunity to earn high wages after the lead and zinc miners’ association again shut many large mines that fall.

The local movement could not escape the poisonous legacy of violence and ethnic animosity between the district’s strikebreakers and the WFM. Cripple Creek mine owners, backed by the Colorado state militia, had pushed the WFM to the brink over the winter by declaring martial law, imprisoning union leaders, including Copley and Moyer, and enforcing a new permit system. On June 6, while the WFM held its annual convention in Denver, where delegates read Copley’s hopeful report from the previous fall about prospects in Joplin, a bomb exploded among a large group of nonunion miners waiting to board a train in Cripple Creek. Thirteen men died and six sustained severe injuries, including the loss of limbs. In Joplin, the bombing opened old wounds. Local newspapers carried reports of the attack that blamed the violence on the WFM and deceitful foreigners. “The blowing up of a railroad depot and the killing of nearly a score of miners was an act of cowardly and hellish malice,” the Webb City Register declared. The culprits, the paper continued, could not be “a product of this free and manly country” because “the American spirit hates assassination and will not endure such foul means of revenge.” The WFM’s organizer in the Joplin district, Matt Wasley, a former president of Northern Mineral, reported that the bombing undercut support. “The prevailing impression with many people was that the miners of Cripple Creek, Colo., were responsible for the atrocities committed in that section,” he stated. Although no records indicate any Missourians among the casualties, Joplin miners, union and nonunion alike, still sympathized with nonunion victims of WFM violence.

Joplin miners soon abandoned the WFM outright. In August 1904, Wasley reported that all of the locals were in disarray, with most members several months delinquent in the payment of dues. In Joplin, he discovered that only a dozen or so members still attended meetings. The Chitwood local had stopped meeting altogether. In Webb City, Wasley could not find the local officers and spoke with some former members “who thought that they could
get along without organization.” He reported that although more than 2,000 people marched under the CLU’s banner in the annual Joplin Labor Day parade, only three were miners, including himself. With Sheridan and the CLU he arranged a public meeting to rebuild Joplin Local 195, “but no one came.” Wasley was about to leave when he received a letter from Moyer, fresh out of jail, with orders “not to give up the fight in this district.” He held more meetings “with but little success.”

The Cripple Creek violence destroyed whatever basis for union solidarity had been built in the Joplin district. As the locals weakened, a duplicitous local officer ran away with remaining union funds, which utterly decimated the WFM’s reputation. While Wasley acknowledged that the theft of money made it hard to rebuild any of the locals, he blamed the collapse of the WFM locals on the inability of most Joplin miners to think and act in solidarity with union members elsewhere. Wasley concluded that too many miners in the district had given themselves over to an aggressive, selfish perspective that the union’s version of respectable manhood could not overcome. By early 1905 none of the locals survived. “I must say,” Wasley declared, “that I attribute the present deplorable condition of the unions there to a lack of dignity and utter disregard for their welfare and that of their fellows.” He concluded, “There was no chance to reorganize.”

By 1905, many miners in the Joplin district held a powerful animus against the WFM. That animus stemmed, for the most part, from conflicts between Joplin strikebreakers and union miners in the western mining camps. In those conflicts, Joplin miners learned to define their interests, once thought insulated and separate, in direct opposition to those of union miners as the national metal economy tangled their fates together. Joplin’s strikebreakers began with defensive intentions aimed at family survival amid a national depression. Over time, however, they came to claim a special economic advantage, a privilege, as native-born white men who were willing to crush mostly foreign-born union miners, who were, in their view, lesser men. When the WFM fought back, with words and fists, Joplin strikebreakers claimed defense of those privileges as justification for further aggression. Across the West, they learned to assert racial privilege through a newly violent masculinity, often backed by state force. The cascade of conflict was impossible to escape, whether one was in a strike zone or in Missouri, where the WFM grappled with the AFL to organize the miners it fought against in places like Cripple Creek. Miners in Joplin were also learning to seek power with violence against perceived racial enemies in their midst. In Joplin in April 1903, a mob lynched Thomas Gilyard, an African American laborer, for allegedly...
murdering a policeman. In the aftermath, the mob burned the small black section of town. The *Joplin Globe* assured readers that no “honest toilers” from the mines were involved, but a trial revealed that many miners took part, a few as leaders of the mob. Their attacks would drive the few remaining black miners out of the district.⁶²

Joplin strikebreakers brought their aggressive, racist sense of masculine self-interest home, where it set “the Joplin man” against the WFM and even the more conservative AFL. In an era of rampant racism and nativism across the country, that sense of self-interest would also give Joplin miners a positive way to understand their potential power as white men who worked for wages. They displayed it in the 1904 presidential election by giving a substantial majority to Republican Theodore Roosevelt, who championed both the new ideal of rugged white masculinity and the need to restore the democratic possibilities of capitalism. As an industry observer declared, “Joplin has the best American spirit” because “Joplin has no union.” What that meant was plain. “The Joplin man simply takes his chances—often they are big chances—puts in an honest day’s work, and gets on in the world if there is anything in him at all.”⁶³