

Death of Jacoby Hennings highlights UAW collusion with auto companies

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The death of 21-year-old Jacoby Marquis Hennings at Ford's Woodhaven Stamping plant in Michigan on October 20 shines light on the oppressive conditions of temporary part-time (TPT) employees in the auto industry.

Police say the young worker died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound after they confronted him outside a union office inside the plant. Hennings, whose parents are both Chrysler workers, apparently went to the United Auto Workers (UAW) for help after a supervisor disciplined him and sent him home for reportedly coming in late to work.

In addition to working at Ford, Hennings worked another part-time job at Fiat Chrysler's Warren Truck Assembly Plant, 37 miles away, and, according to coworkers there, he was concerned he might lose his job when FCA removes production of its top-selling Ram pickup from the plant in coming months.

While they must pay union dues—equivalent to two hours of pay each month, and in the case of Jacoby Hennings, \$60 or more a month for two jobs—TPTs have no job security, can be fired at will, and exploited for years on end without ever reaching the carrot of full-time employment, which the company and UAW dangles before them.

"TPTs are constantly harassed," Rob, a worker at Fiat Chrysler's Toledo, Ohio Jeep Plant told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. "This poor kid must have been completely stressed working two auto jobs at the same time. We now have a UAW-sponsored culture of being worked to death.

"Instead of hiring new full-time workers, the companies are hiring TPTs and stringing them along with promises of full-time positions. At our plant, it took 12 years for the TPTs hired in 2001 to get to full time. Even though TPTs pay dues, the contract says the UAW cannot do anything to stop them from being fired unless it's a case of race, gender or some other kind of discrimination.

"It took me six years to get full time. They used to scream at us and blame us for everything even if our team didn't build the part they were complaining about. We were the pariahs, everything that went wrong was our fault because they couldn't scream at the full-timers. It was like boot camp except the army is nicer."

The UAW first agreed to the creation of a new sub-class of

autoworkers in the so-called transformational contracts of 2007. For the first time this established a two-tier wage structure, at that time limited to "non-core functions," such as material movement, with workers getting a starting wage of \$14 an hour, or 50 percent less than workers hired before 2007.

The contracts also sanctioned the hiring of TPTs to replace the tens of thousands of older, higher paid "legacy workers" who were pushed out through a combination of intolerable speedup, supposed voluntary retirements and buyouts. Instead of being transformed into full-time workers after completing a 90-day probationary period, these TPTs could labor indefinitely without making any progress towards seniority or eventual full-time status.

In exchange, the UAW was handed control of a newly created retiree health care trust—also known as the Voluntary Employees' Beneficiary Association (VEBA). It would later receive billions of dollars in cash and corporate stock, making the union-controlled trust the single largest shareholder of GM and Chrysler.

During the 2009 bankruptcy restructuring of GM and Chrysler, the Obama administration and the Wall Street financiers it put in charge of its Auto Task Force demanded a whole series of new concessions as the condition for a federal bailout. This included imposing second tier wages on all new hires, regardless of their job classifications, and a further expansion of part-time temps.

In its contract summary of the deal, the UAW said, "To enhance operational efficiency, the union and company have agreed that the use of Temporary Part-Time (TPT) employees may be extended beyond the usual Mondays, Fridays and premium time, to address special circumstances as they arise.

"In addition, to meet cost savings required by the terms of federal loans to Chrysler, the parties agree that future TPT hires will be at the TPT Team Member Support (TMS) 2 rate in effect on January 5, 2009. Wage formula increases will be frozen for the duration of the 2007 UAW Chrysler National Agreement. TPT employees will not be eligible for a performance bonus or any vacation entitlement. Any deviations from the current language are subject to the approval of the UAW Vice President."

The UAW vice president for Chrysler at the time was the late

General Holiefield, who federal prosecutors say was handed millions in bribes by Chrysler executives to sign “company friendly” agreements. In the years that followed, widespread suspicions grew that Holiefield and other UAW officials were selling new jobs as part of the corrupt operations of the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center.

In 2011, the UAW signed a four-year deal that institutionalized the two-tier pay and benefit scheme, kept TPTs on the unending treadmill without full-time status, and did not count TPTs and Summer Vacation Replacements (SVR) towards the 25 percent cap on “entry level” workers that was supposed to go into effect in September 2015.

By 2015, the UAW dumped any caps on low-wage second-tier workers, greatly expanded the number of TPTs the auto companies could exploit, and gave the companies greater power to turn laid off full-time workers into TPTs. The creation of a largely disposable workforce, including young workers like Jacoby Hennings, was part of a UAW-backed plan to allow the auto bosses to quickly downsize their workforces without having to pay out Supplemental Unemployment Benefits (SUB) and other benefits.

The 2015 sellout provoked a rebellion by rank-and-file workers and the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* emerged as a center of opposition, prompting the UAW to denounce the newsletter as “outside agitators” and purveyors of “fake news.” For the first time in 33 years, workers rejected a national contract backed by the UAW, in what one industry analyst called a “grass-roots movement of alienated UAW members armed with smartphones and social media channels.”

The UAW was only able to push through contracts at FCA, GM and Ford through a campaign of intimidation, lies and outright vote-rigging. As the WSWS warned, the contracts were followed to a new wave of layoffs and downsizing, facilitated by the UAW.

The death of Jacoby Hennings has touched a deep chord. Thousands have shared articles on the young man’s death from the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*. Below is a selection of comments from workers whose identities we are protecting to prevent retaliation by management and the UAW.

T said, “No, the UAW doesn’t work for the workers, they work for the company for sure. On day 89 before my 90th day I arrived at work to clock in and was told by my team leader to report to HR and don’t clock into work. I went to HR to see an office full of people. I asked why I was there and they sat me down with the president of the union and told me I was being fired. I asked why and they told me I had one occurrence. I told them it was for leaving early on my shift with the approval from supervisor and my union rep because my 80-plus grandmother got sick, was hospitalized and nearly lost her life.

“I tried to take it through arbitration. After a long time off work, with no pay I couldn’t get my job back because they added a second occurrence when I was out 3 days on bereavement. I was heartbroken because my 90 days of work

was actually 179 days because we had 90 with the temp service and then another 89 after they actually gave you your hire-in papers.

“I contemplated taking my own life. I was very depressed because I couldn’t provide for my family with the holidays around the corner. If you don’t have any gifts for your children you look in their faces with the feeling of hopelessness and helplessness. It was not a good feeling at all and until this day I cry because I finally thought for once in my life I had a chance to make a change for my family.”

Another worker posted: “I’m an employee for the Big Three and the union is definitely working with the companies against its employees. I’ve been here 18 years and have experienced all types of injustices, from being fired twice, once while I was on medical and the second time, due to a new boss trying to climb the corporate ladder at my expense, to all the injuries you accumulate over the years, that they make your problem, not theirs.

“They don’t care about nothing but their numbers. The politicians have changed the rules so these companies don’t have to be responsible. I understand totally where everybody is coming from, you feel helpless and backed into a corner and the people that you pay to help you, have no interest in helping you, not for real. I myself was on the verge of suicide from all the things they’ve put me through. I lost everything when they took my job, and the only thing they gave me back was profit sharing. The union had the audacity to say the company is not giving you your job back and your back pay.”

AY said, “Reading this about this young man was touching and tearful. I have a grandson myself around Coby’s age and a son who worked for Chrysler during the bankruptcy of UAW/Big Three. Who used that opportunity to hurt, bait, and trick those young black men to their advantage? Who takes responsibility for this tragedy?”



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