

Young Ford worker sought UAW help before apparent suicide

Jerry White

3 November 2017

A newly released police report details how 21-year-old autoworker Jacoby Hennings sought help from the United Auto Workers on the morning of October 20 before the young man, who was struggling to hold two temporary part-time jobs at Detroit area auto plants, apparently killed himself inside Ford's Woodhaven Stamping plant.

Although the news media had dropped the story, writing it off as another workplace shooting by a “disgruntled employee,” the tragic death of the son of two Detroit Chrysler workers has struck a deep chord among workers angered over the cruel conditions facing this young man and other Temporary Part-Time workers (TPT). A *World Socialist Web Site* article on Hennings' October 28 funeral has been viewed more than 50,000 times on social media.

The Woodhaven Police Department report was obtained by the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* through a Freedom of Information Act request.

According to the “Narrative” section of the 11-page report, Martin Hernandez, who identified himself as a Ford Human Resources manager, told officers that “Hennings came to his office this morning seeking advice because he was late for work.” Hernandez told the police Hennings was clearly disoriented and “was talking in circles.”

“Hennings requested to be taken to an office that did not have windows and wanted to speak with and [sic] African American UAW Representative. Hennings mentioned several times that people were out to get him.”

The police report says, “Hennings was taken to the second level to speak with Arnold Miller and Christopher Pfaff,” two UAW Local 387 officials who were in the union office in the plant. Miller, who is African American, is the Trustee Chair and Pfaff, who is white, is listed as a Bargaining Representative on Local 387's site.

“Miller and Pfaff both stated Hennings appeared very paranoid” and that “they spoke with Hennings in the

office for over one hour. Hennings brought a black pack into the office that he continually looked at during their conversation. Miller and Pfaff suggested Hennings call his parents to come pick him up from the plant and leave for the day. Hennings placed his cell phone on the desk in front of him. However, he never attempted to make a phone call. Hennings continually stated people were out to get him.

“Hennings pulled a black handgun from his waistband,” the report continues. “Pfaff attempted to disarm Hennings and gain control of the gun, but was unsuccessful. Miller and Pfaff ran from the office and began yelling to alert other employees of the threat.”

It is not known what was said during more than one hour in the union office. Although the report notes that “Hernandez, Pfaff, Miller and Jablowski [presumably Bill Jablonski, the Midnights Representative (D4) for UAW Local 387] all completed Woodhaven Police Witness Statement Forms, which were forwarded to the DB (Detective Bureau),” the police denied a request for a copy of these statements. A representative of the Woodhaven Police Department told the WSWS that their statements were not covered by Freedom of Information Act and could only be obtained by an attorney through a motion for discovery.

One thing is clear, however; far from addressing the young man's concerns and giving him confidence that the union would protect his job and livelihood, whatever the local union officials said did not assuage his despair.

Shortly after union officials sounded the alarm police and SWAT teams from several local departments and the Michigan State Police responding to an “active shooter with possible shots fired” call descended on the plant.

The police responded in a typically heavy-handed, militaristic manner. Despite the fact that no shots had been fired, there was apparently not the slightest effort made to establish contact with the clearly frightened and

disoriented young man and attempt to de-escalate the situation.

According to the Woodhaven Police report, four policemen reached the second floor, spotted Hennings 30-40 feet away, “hiding behind a row of lockers” and shouted orders at him to show his hands and move away from the wall. At that point the police reported, “a gunshot was heard, and he fell to the ground.” Hennings, the report continued, “appeared to have shot himself in the head and appeared deceased.”

Police later said there was the only one shot fired and no one else in the plant was hurt.

In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, the UAW issued a one-paragraph statement lamenting the “unfortunate incident” that resulted in “one of our members taking their own life with a firearm.” UAW 387 officials have made no public comments and have not returned calls from the WSWS.

According to accounts in the local news media, including from a few Ford workers, Hennings was disciplined for coming into work late that morning and escorted out of the plant. He apparently returned to talk to the HR manager and local UAW officials.

Hennings was not only working a temporary part-time job at Ford, but another one at Fiat Chrysler’s Warren Truck Assembly Plant, 37 miles away. In addition to fearing the loss of his job at Ford, co-workers at the Warren Truck plant said he was also concerned about imminent layoffs when Fiat Chrysler shifts production of its top-selling Dodge Ram pick-up trucks to another plant.

Whatever the specific circumstances which led to Hennings’ death, the roots of this tragedy lie in the brutal conditions faced by young workers in the auto industry and throughout the economy, which tell the real story behind the boom in corporate profits and the stock market. Recent studies show that 100 percent of the job growth in the US between 2005 and 2015 came from temporary help agency workers, on-call workers, contract workers, and so-called independent contractors.

The notion that Hennings was a “disgruntled employee” is being promoted by the UAW because it is complicit in the creation of a sub-class of highly exploited temporary part-timers who, while being forced to pay dues to the UAW, have no job security and can be fired at will. Like Jacoby Hennings, they work irregular hours and are on call, while constantly under the threat that their chance to gain full-time status will be snatched away if they miss a day of work or are late.

As the WSWS has detailed, beginning in 2007 and then

under Obama’s 2009 restructuring of the auto industry, the UAW agreed to a vast expansion of TPTs. This enabled the corporations to replace tens of thousands of higher-paid “legacy” workers with disposable workers being paid near poverty wages who could be quickly tossed out of the plants when vehicle demand fell and production was cut back. As a reward, the UAW was given control of a multi-billion-dollar retiree health care trust fund and its top figures were paid off, as the expanding FBI probe into the UAW bribery scandal has revealed.

Below is a selection of statements of sympathy for Hennings left by workers on WSWS articles. We are concealing their names to protect them against management-UAW retaliation.

“This is painful to read, but it needs to be an eye opener to the reality that many people are facing,” said KR. “These plant jobs and the union are nothing like they used to be. I come from a GM, Ford, and Chrysler family...union and management. There used to be respect that came with these jobs, but they’re just short of a sweatshop now.”

“It is so sad how the company has bought the union,” said JB. “I have worked for Chrysler for many years and the union used to help people but now these young people are on their own. The next contract you better change things.”

BT said, “This is so sad on every level & it hit very close to home. I work very close to one of his [Hennings] family members and I see the hurt she’s going through but it’s very true, if the UAW doesn’t step in and help these temps get hired, unfortunately I can see something like this happening again or worse. We see it every day, how they get treated. It’s almost unreal, no vacation, no personal days, can’t miss a day or be late, management talking to you crazy & union leaders really not helping you as much but you pay union dues anyway. It’s super stressful and combined with whatever else you have going on it’s not a good situation.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact