

“We are treated like garbage, like we are disposable”

Detroit autoworkers condemn UAW in death of young Ford worker

A WSWS reporting team
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Autoworkers in Detroit, Michigan area Ford and Fiat Chrysler plants expressed sympathy for the family and friends of Jacoby Hennings, the 21-year-old temporary part-time (TPT) worker who apparently took his own life at Ford's Woodhaven Stamping plant on October 20. The tragedy shone light on the cruel abuse of so-called TPTs that is sanctioned and overseen by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union.

Woodhaven police say the young worker shot himself after he pulled a gun in a UAW office at the plant where he had gone after a supervisor sent him home for being late. Although they pay union dues to the UAW, TPTs make substandard pay and few if any benefits and can be stuck in part-time status for years on end. They can be denied any chance to become a full-time worker or face dismissal without recourse if they are late to work, miss a day or have another “occurrence.”

In addition to the Ford plant, Hennings held down another part-time job at Fiat Chrysler's (FCA) Warren Truck Assembly Plant, 37 miles away. Co-workers at the truck plant who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* described the young man as hard-working and quiet. One said he often looked exhausted, however, and would grab naps during breaks. He also said the young worker was anxious that he might lose his job when Fiat Chrysler moves production of the Dodge Ram pickup truck to another factory next year.

A WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* campaign team distributed newsletters at the Warren Truck assembly and stamping plants over the weekend, and at Ford's Dearborn Assembly plant in suburban Detroit.

“Coby,” as he was known among family and friends, comes from a family of autoworkers. His mother

Shemeka Hennings works at the FCA Warren Stamping plant and his father, Bernard Jr., works at Chrysler's Mopar parts division. Several aunts, uncles, cousins and other relatives currently work or have retired from the Jefferson North Plant, Sterling Heights Assembly Plant and Warren Truck. His aunt Lucretia told the WSWS it took her and her sister 11 years to go from a part-time position to full-time at Chrysler.

Workers at the Fiat Chrysler plants expressed their sympathy towards Coby's mother and family and denounced the stressful conditions TPTs and all workers confront at the factory, where the workday is 10 hours, and the UAW has long collaborated with the FCA bosses to cut wages and increase production. After speaking to a young TPT about his working conditions a WSWS reporter reached out to shake his hand. The worker pulled back and apologized, saying his hands were too swollen to shake after a few days of work.

Another worker expressed anger over the UAW corruption scandal, agreeing that the UAW basically functions as a temp agency and cheap labor contractor, funneling young workers into the plants and getting paid millions in bribes. “I can't believe the local was going to have a memorial for General Holiefield when he died—he was a complete crook.”

Ford workers at the Dearborn plant, which builds the popular F-150 pickup, were eager to speak about Jacoby Hennings. Several, especially higher seniority workers, who have witnessed the rapid deterioration of conditions over the course of the last several UAW contracts, directly attributed the young man's death to the intense harassment and relentless stress to which TPTs are subjected.

Speaking about the UAW, a worker with 21 years in the plant said, “They are supposed to represent us, but they represent the company. Unless we, the people, stick together, nothing is going to change.

“The conditions are especially rough on TPTs. Their hours get cut. They have no benefits, no rights. I know he felt left out. You are doing the same work, and you get nothing for it. You are helping the company make a profit, but you get nothing but humiliation.”

Another veteran worker said, “The union is no good. You have to represent yourself. I have 38 years in the plant. You know I know what is going on.”

Another older worker was particularly saddened at the young man’s death. “I have a 21-year-old son myself. I saw your article. It makes me wonder. What happened to make him take his own life? He seemed like a positive person with so much to live for.”

“It is sad, horrible,” said a young worker on his way into the night shift. “I am a temp myself. I have been here close to 90 days.”

Another older worker added, “I was a TPT. LTS (Long-Term Supplemental) it’s the same. I have seen what they do. They are stressing them out for two years or more. That is ridiculous! The contract says they can have 48 percent temps and I am sure they are way over that now.

“We did not vote for this contract. It was going down to defeat with a 53 percent no vote. Then all of a sudden, the next day, it was 57 percent yes.

“If you are counting the votes, why can’t we be there to watch you count the votes? There should be numbers on each piece of paper. And there were no numbers. How do we know they are not stuffing the ballot box?

“They are killing the younger workers. They need eight years before they get to top pay.”

There is widespread anger and resentment against the union because of the deteriorating conditions, which resulted from the 2015 contract betrayal. “I heard a guy denouncing the union the other day in the bathroom,” the older worker continued. “He was saying the union doesn’t give a damn and they don’t stick up for the workers.

“The contract is pretty clear. There is a clause that anything which threatens the company in any way, the company has the right to override the contract. What about our rights?

“The company reasons that if you keep them part-

time and hungry, you can make them do anything. Now we have people who have been here for two years and they are still part-time.

“I have been there. They give you three days to learn a job, and then the supervisor will harass you. ‘So-and-so can do it, why can’t you?’”

“They have girls doing jobs on the engine line that they should not be doing. That is what causes absenteeism. We try to tell management how it would work better. But they do not want to listen to us.”

A former Ford worker in the Detroit area wrote in to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. She said she completely understood what the young man went through as a part-time, temporary worker.

“We are treated like garbage, like we are disposable. Everything is about them, not about you.

“I got fired for basically nothing. I was never compensated. I was thrown out of work like trash. They pulled a trick. I had to leave early one day because my grandmother was sick. Later she died and I attended her funeral. They said that was two ‘occurrences’ and I was fired.

“By law, you are supposed to have three days bereavement for the death of an immediate family member.” She added, “I have two daughters the age of Jacoby. One is an autoworker and one is a flight attendant.

“Jacoby had so much life and vibrancy in him, but no one would listen to him. I wish people would be a little more understanding. It is hard to wake up as a parent and not see your child anymore.”

After losing her job, she said, “I felt like contemplating suicide myself. I couldn’t make ends meet. I was facing the shutoff of utilities and eviction.

“We don’t have a voice. There needs to be an awareness of what is going on. It needs to be exposed and brought to light and those responsible held accountable.”



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