

Woodhaven Ford workers speak on still unexplained death of Jacoby Hennings

Jerry White
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It is almost six weeks since the tragic death of Jacoby Hennings, a 21-year-old part-time temporary worker at Ford's Woodhaven Stamping plant, just outside of Detroit. According to police and United Auto Workers (UAW) officials, the young man took his life as heavily armed police confronted him in the plant on the morning of October 20, shortly after union officials said he waved a gun at them inside the UAW office in the factory.

The circumstances of the confrontation and the shooting remain unclear. Initial reports indicated a supervisor told the young man to go to the UAW office after he was disciplined or terminated for coming in late. The UAW has not released any details of the discussion, which reportedly lasted over an hour, between Hennings and Local UAW 387 officials Arnold Miller, Christopher Pfaff and Bill Jablonski. The Woodhaven police have rejected a request by the WSWS to see the witness statements of the three, along with Ford Human Resource Manager Martin Hernandez.

The Wayne County Medical Examiner's office, which immediately declared that the young man died of a self-inflicted wound, has still not released an autopsy report and ballistics information.

What is known is that Jacoby, like thousands of other temporary part-time employees (TPTs) in the auto industry, was under intense pressure at work. TPTs have no job security and although they pay union dues the UAW tells them when they hire in that it will do nothing to protect them against dismissal for the slightest infraction. Four "occurrences," including late arrival, absence, or even showing up for work on a day you are not assigned, results in immediate firing.

Jacoby, whose parents and many uncles and aunts are long-time Chrysler workers, did not hold down just one

TPT job, but two. He also worked at Fiat Chrysler's Warren Truck Assembly Plant, 37 miles away. Coworkers there said he was hard-working, yet looked exhausted and was worried he might lose his job when FCA moves production of the Ram pickup truck to another plant next year.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* spoke with Woodhaven Ford workers about the tragic death of the young worker, and the conditions at the factory.

"He was a good worker," a Woodhaven Ford worker with 20 years, who worked with Jacoby, told reporters outside the factory. "He was very quiet and I heard that he came from a good family."

"They treat contract workers like crap in there so I can only imagine how they treat TPTs," an electrician working for a contractor hired by Ford told the WSWS. "Electricians are required to have degrees, licenses and certifications to work and they still mistreat us."

On the day of the shooting, the electrician said, "They kept us in the parking lot for eight hours. We couldn't even get to our lunch boxes until after the weekend. There were guys who needed their eye glasses to drive home, or medications; and they wouldn't help. They treat us like cattle."

"The rumor was that [Jacoby] looked like he was exhausted and they accused him of being on drugs. He said, 'I'm not,' but the company fired him anyway."

"They don't tell us anything. It was all hush-hush. But the truth is the truth, and it needs to come out. The SWAT teams they brought were young guys, all gung ho, with shaved heads and all kinds of weapons. They had dogs, helicopters and everything. We don't know what really happened. This much I know for sure—this man did not deserve this."

The worker continued, "They won't tell us anything."

The UAW witnesses' statements should be part of the public record. Instead they cover it up and act like it never happened."

Hennings' death, he said, "shook a lot of our guys mentally. They said it was suicide. But they said it was suicide when our union brother fell at Little Caesars Arena in Detroit last June. He worked with low voltage wiring and had a wife and daughter. That upset a lot of people. Then it came out that it wasn't suicide."

Shortly after WSWS reporters began speaking to workers Ford security guards arrived and ordered them to stop handing out newsletters and talking to workers as they stopped at a traffic light outside the plant. Security guards threatened to call the Woodhaven cops if the WSWS team did not leave immediately.

Conditions for the approximately 500 workers at the 53-year-old stamping plant, now known as Woodhaven Hot Metal Forming, are particularly brutal because of the terms of the 2015 UAW-Ford agreement. Under a "competitive wage rate structure" agreed to by the UAW to supposedly keep the factory from closing, workers can make as little as \$9 an hour, just 10 cents more than the state's minimum wage, and top out at \$12 an hour after years of service.

The company has installed new, faster equipment to stamp out door panels, floor pans, hoods, quarter panels, roofs, tailgates and truck body sides. Under the UAW agreement, however, higher-paid "legacy workers" (earning around \$29 an hour) or even second tier workers, who earn between \$15 and \$19 per hour, are prevented from taking jobs on the new lines, which are filled exclusively by new third-tier workers making the near poverty level wages.

While the news media has swept the October 20 tragedy under the rug, presenting it as just another inexplicable workplace shooting by a "disgruntled employee," this event has touched deep chord among rank-and-file workers who are demanding answers. Workers in contact with the *Autoworker Newsletter* have also spoken about a wave of suicides by workers, including five in the last three years at FCA's Toledo, Ohio Jeep plant, including three TPTs, and four others at Ford's Chicago Assembly Plant this year alone.

Speaking on the oppressive conditions facing autoworkers and the collusion of the UAW, a veteran worker from the nearby Dearborn Assembly Plant told the WSWS, "It's management by intimidation. That's

all they want to do is scare you to do the job, even if it is unsafe. They run that line as fast as they want. We all know they are running the line faster and our bodies know they are running it faster. There is supposed to be a limit to the number of cars we can produce in 10.7 hours but if they want to run more, they are going to do it, and the union is not going to say anything. They are going along with the program.

"If we don't stand together it is going to be business as usual. Under the UAW contract, you have to wait eight years to get top pay. At the end of this contract in 2019, everybody who has four years or more should automatically be at top pay. You shouldn't have to wait four more years because you might not be around that long. The TPTs and STS [Short-Term Supplementals] should all flipped and made full-time with all their benefits. Ford is making billions of dollars in profits. There is enough to go around and then some.

"We don't need to be split up in three tiers. You should come in, prove yourself and get your pay. Everybody has to stick together to fight. We can't let them keep taking away from us.

"We voted 'no' on the last contract, but it was flipped because of the union. If we were sitting there when the ballots were counted, we would know the truth. But they don't want you to know the truth. They want to treat you like a mushroom—keep you in the dark and feed you a bunch of mess. We'll be mushrooms, until we can come to the light."

"We have to build rank-and-file committees now to fight for our rights. In the meantime, don't forget Jacoby, and the other nine workers in Toledo and Chicago who committed suicide. Enough is enough."



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