

“Management tells the UAW what to do and they say, ‘Okay!’”

Chicago Ford workers speak out on death of Coby Hennings

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5 December 2017

More than six weeks after the tragic death of Jacoby Hennings, the 21-year-old who died at Ford’s Woodhaven Stamping plant, autoworkers’ anger continues to simmer at the grueling working conditions that led to his death.

Hennings was a temporary part-time (TPT) worker at two plants in the Detroit area. According to the official account, Hennings took his own life on October 20 following a tense interaction with plant management and local UAW representatives. The latter called the police on the young man. However, many questions remain about the exact sequence of events, and the UAW has refused to release any details of their discussions with Hennings immediately preceding his death.

Among rank-and-file autoworkers there has been broad sympathy for Hennings, whose tragic death has exposed the dreadful exploitation TPTs experience. Workers have shared WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* articles on Hennings widely on Facebook. At Ford’s Chicago Assembly Plant reporters for the *Newsletter* encountered many workers who were familiar with the Hennings case and who were eager to discuss the conditions facing TPTs.

TPTs “pretty much have no rights,” said one worker with four years at the Chicago Ford plant. “They definitely got shafted in this last contract.”

He said TPTs still have to pay union dues, “which is crazy. They basically can’t miss a day. They don’t have any vacation, so they can’t call off. If they do miss a day, they’re in fear of losing their job.”

“The TPT that works on my job, in almost two years he’s never called off. He was sick with the flu for two days, and almost lost his job. I mean, when you have

the flu, sometimes you just can’t physically perform anything.”

The worker said that the UAW was even now assisting management in forcing speed-ups on the line, saying, “Yesterday they just bumped the quota up to 700 cars a shift. They’re laying threats on us about being way behind schedule. And the union keeps agreeing to these line speed increases. We’ve already got people getting in trouble over not being able to do their jobs, and you’re going to keep making it faster and faster. How are they supposed to do their jobs?”

Chicago Assembly makes the popular Explorer SUV, with new models costing from \$35,000 to over \$50,000. Sales of the vehicle jumped nearly 25 percent in November.

The worker said he had started out as a “long-term supplemental” (LTS) employee, which among TPTs are one of several tiers earning less pay and reduced benefits. “‘Long-term temporary’ help. How does that go into the same sentence?”

“I’ve been here since 2013, so I’ve seen a lot crap. Same with the whole Lear thing, what happened with ‘eliminating the tiers.’ They just moved the lower-paid workers further away, out to Portage [Indiana].

The worker noted that TPTs’ schedule makes it difficult to find additional work needed to supplement their income. “TPTs work Fridays, Sundays, and Mondays. They don’t work three consecutive days in a row, but those four days are basically consumed, so they can’t even get another part-time job. It doesn’t make sense to me.”

When asked about the growth of social inequality in US society more broadly, in particular the recently passed congressional tax cut bill, the worker responded,

“I’m against stuff like [the tax cuts], because it’s like they take money away from teachers.

“Teachers are making nothing, but they’ve got to buy a bunch of stuff just to teach and do their jobs. It’s pretty vicious. But the whole 1 percent keeps getting tax breaks. The more money you got, the less you pay. It has to stop somewhere, because it can’t keep on going the same route.”

One 20-year-old TPT worker who spoke to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* sympathized with Hennings' plight, and mentioned that he himself had previously held down two jobs but couldn't keep up.

Another two TPT workers said they had been at the plant for nearly a year each, and knew several others who had been kept temporary for two years. “Two years, and still only able to work three days a week.”

“We can’t get sick,” one said. “If we get sick, we have to kiss ass with the union rep to save our job. We pay union dues, but they don’t do anything for us...but take out money!”

“If they [UAW] had did the right thing,” said another worker with several years at the plant, “we wouldn’t have this situation where this young man killed himself.

“I see it all the time on the UAW Facebook page. These workers are living in limbo. They have family emergencies, but they are scared to take off. This is their livelihood. They’re scared to take off a day. Not only that—any day they walk in here they could be told, ‘We don’t need you.’”

He remarked on the ongoing investigation into the illegal diversion of money by the Detroit auto companies from joint union-management training programs into the pockets of UAW officials.

“The bribes the UAW took—that could be used for more money towards us members, towards fixing the plant, more funding towards our education. In our 2015 contract, our union didn’t do anything to put up a fight for us. Management tells the UAW what to do and they say, ‘Okay!’”

A worker with five years at the plant said TPTs “have to face the uncertainty that any day the company could say, ‘We don’t need you.’”

The worker rejected the nationalism continuously pushed by the UAW, noting that although Ford had announced it would not build a plant planned for Mexico, “the TPTs face pretty much the same conditions here anyway, so it’s not like they did

anything hugely different. Everybody’s trying to feed their families. I drive a foreign car, so I have to park all the way in the far parking lot.” But,” he noted, “all these ‘American’ cars are built with foreign parts, so it doesn’t really matter.” He added, “and now most ‘foreign’ cars are built in the United States. So why are you telling me ‘don’t buy a foreign car’? At the end of the day I’ll buy what I want, cause they’re not really trying to help me.”



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