

Holidays painful for family of young Ford worker killed in Detroit area plant

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The holiday season is particularly heart-breaking and traumatic for families and friends who have lost loved ones in workplace fatalities in the United States. According to the most recent figures by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than 5,000 workers—the equivalent of the entire workforce of a major auto assembly plant—lost their lives in the workplace in 2016, leaving behind tens of thousands of spouses, parents, children, other relatives and friends.

December 27 would have been the 22nd birthday of Jacoby Marquis “Coby” Hennings, a young part-time temporary worker who tragically died at Ford’s Woodhaven Stamping Plant, just outside Detroit, on October 20. According to police and United Auto Workers officials, Hennings took his own life after a confrontation inside a local UAW office at the plant.

“Coby’s birthday is just two days after Christmas,” a relative told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “This is a very tough time for the family.” The still unexplained circumstances surrounding the death of the young worker, who only graduated from high school in 2014, have added to the pain of Jacoby’s many relatives and friends.

“I don’t accept what they are saying about Coby taking his life,” the relative told the WSWS. “For two weeks, I asked myself why. He was meeting in the union office for an hour. Where was his steward and committeeman? Why aren’t the Local 387 union officials speaking? Why isn’t the union president saying anything?”

In addition to the Woodhaven Stamping job, Coby held down another part-time job at Fiat Chrysler’s Warren Truck Assembly plant, and he hoped to attain a full-time position and a semblance of economic security so elusive to young workers. Both of Coby’s parents—Shemeeka and Bernard Jr. —and many of his

aunts and uncles are long-time Chrysler workers.

Co-workers say Coby was hard working but often looked exhausted. While they pay union dues, temporary part-time workers (TPTs) are treated like disposable laborers, hired and fired at will, with the approval of the UAW. Coby was already concerned over the fate of his job at Warren Truck job—where production of Fiat Chrysler’s top selling pickup model is being transferred to another plant next year—before he was reportedly disciplined for arriving a few minutes late to the Woodhaven plant on October 20.

After being sent to the UAW office, union officials claim the young man pulled out a gun and waved it at them before they fled and alerted police. Responding to an “active shooter” alert—although no shots had been fired—heavily armed SWAT teams and other cops arrived on the scene, where, they say, Coby shot himself, as they confronted him. No ballistic information, either about the gun or the round used, has been released. In addition, the initial claims by management, union officials and the news media that Coby was under the influence of drugs or alcohol have been categorically disproven by the Wayne County Medical Examiner’s autopsy report.

While management, the UAW and news media have sought to sweep this matter under the rug, labelling Coby as a “disgruntled employee,” tens of thousands of autoworkers have circulated WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* articles on the case, provoking discussion over the cruel mistreatment of TPTs and autoworkers in general, which has produced a record number of workplace suicides on the one hand, and record corporate profits on the other.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workplace suicides increased to 291 in 2016, the highest number of suicides since the Census of Fatal

Occupational Injuries began reporting data in 1992. Overall, the number of workplace fatalities rose from 4,836 in 2015 to 5,190 in 2016, a seven percent increase and the third consecutive annual increase since 2013.

Coby, who graduated from East Detroit High School in 2014 and attended Western Michigan University, was well loved and popular. His Facebook page lists 1,865 friends whose jobs run the gamut from fast food workers, factory workers and low-level managers at banks and other businesses, to loan-burdened college and university students.

Sam, a high school friend who works at the General Motors Tech Center, spoke with the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* about Coby's life and the stress and economic insecurity confronting a whole layer of younger workers.

"I knew Coby since 9th grade in 2010. We played football together at East Detroit High School," Sam said. "It blew my mind to find out what happened to him. Everyone has trials and tribulations but if you knew his personality you would know he was a very protective, standup guy. I was proud to call him my friend, he was a great individual. I couldn't believe this happened to such a young kid.

"Coby was the best football player I ever played with. He was so talented that he made the varsity team when he was a ninth-grade freshman. Coby was small but stout and played the defensive line. He would break through the offensive line even though those guys were much heavier and bigger. We were blood brothers who shared our blood, sweat and tears in those games.

"Coby had great parents. They came to every game to cheer for him and back Coby up 100 percent. They were fully involved in his life. You can see that from the prom video, where they went all out for Coby and his friends. I can't believe this happened. I don't have an answer but if I tried to make sense out of this I would say he was under pressure.

"Working in a factory is rough. The conditions are not good and some managers are on power trips," said Sam, who is working 70 hours a week. He said conditions were even tougher for young autoworkers. "It's like they are waiting for us to mess up. But no human being is a robot. There is a lot of repetition and strain in a factory and on top of that TPTs face a lot of pressure. They never know if they are going to work, or

even have a job tomorrow.

"Why doesn't the UAW protect them? Ninety-five percent of the TPTs work real hard, sometimes a lot harder than the full-timers. The fact that Coby was working two jobs, showed what his work ethic was. Why didn't the UAW have his back? Why didn't they go to bat for him? TPTs are busting their asses but they don't get any representation. That should be investigated," he insisted.

Referring to the UAW's sanctioning of second-and third-tier workers, who earn half the wages of older workers, Sam added, "The workforce should not be divided. It's not fair. TPTs are working ten hours on the crappiest jobs and get less pay. It should be equal for everyone who is making a car."

Sam described what it was like for young people like Coby and his friends to grow up in the Detroit area. "It is hard. Detroit isn't exactly Beverly Hills, California. Our parents weren't rich. Growing up in the city may not be like it is in Afghanistan, but it's not easy. If you are not rich, you are set up to fail. And, if you lose your job, you could lose everything you worked and studied for. You have to work to eat here.

"It's like you're raised in a jungle and you're not supposed to get out. You have to struggle your entire life. East Detroit High School had some good teachers but it was terrible because it didn't have funding like private schools, or even public schools in the better-off suburbs. There were cracks in the walls and I don't remember ever having a textbook.

"The poorer you are, the more you have to struggle," said Sam, whose mother is a nurse and father a cable worker. "There is no middle class anymore, just the working class and the rich. They make you work your brains out and use up all your ambition, so they can get rich."



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