

Four months since the death of a young Ford worker

Still no serious investigation into death of Jacoby Hennings

Jerry White
22 February 2018

Tuesday marked four months since the death of Jacoby Marquis Hennings, a 21-year-old temporary part-time worker who police say took his own life at Ford's Woodhaven Stamping Plant, just outside Detroit, on the morning of October 20, 2017.

There are growing calls from family, friends and autoworkers throughout the Detroit area for a serious investigation of the still unknown circumstances surrounding the tragedy. Jacoby was a well-loved and popular young man, who had, as his parents described, an infectious optimism. Why would such a young worker kill himself?

The Woodhaven Police Department closed its investigation less than 24 hours after the shooting, declaring it a suicide. However, the official report from the Woodhaven Police Department, obtained by the *World Socialist Web Site*, leaves many critical questions unanswered.

One of the most important is: What happened in the hour preceding Jacoby Hennings' death, when he was in the office of the United Auto Workers plant chairman with several other UAW Local 387 officials? According to statements given to the police, Hennings had reached out to the union officials to get advice about some as yet unknown problem, but no explanation has been provided about what this problem was or how the UAW responded.

Contacted last week by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the lead detective in the case, Woodhaven Police Lt. Gary McSweeney, said, "I have no idea what the union dispute was about. What happened in the union office was not something we were concerned with."

However, what occurred at the union meeting has an immense bearing on what occurred next. Pressed on

this question, McSweeney said, "I have no idea what was going through his mind. We got a man with a gun call. I can't speculate." But how can "what was going through Jacoby's mind" not have relevance in the investigation of his death?

Asked who made the calls to the police, the detective said, "We had several phone calls. I wasn't up in the front that morning, but we had multiple calls from employees, and I guess some came from the union."

Challenged on why the police department shut the case so quickly, the police detective responded, "I don't know how many suicides you have been to, but the physical evidence and the scene itself was consistent with the information in our reports."

In other words, once the detective had taken the photographs, reviewed witness statements and run a check on the gun and other physical evidence, there was nothing else to do. The evidence showed it was suicide—case closed.

For the Hennings family and thousands of autoworkers, however, the context is everything. Without that it is impossible to determine what happened and why.

When pressed further, the detective backtracked somewhat. "I did talk to the union people. It's not like I don't have any idea what they talked about. But I am not allowed to say, for privacy reasons. What the union dispute was, was not part of determining whether this was suicide."

The *World Socialist Web Site* obtained an 11-page report from the police department through a Freedom of Information Act request. The report noted that Ford Human Resource Manager Martin Hernandez and UAW officials Christopher Pfaff, Arnold Miller and

Bill Jablonski had “all completed Woodhaven Police Witness Statement Forms, which were forwarded to the DB [Detective Bureau].”

A request for these statements, however, was denied on the grounds that it constituted an “unwarranted invasion of an individual’s privacy.”

The Hennings family and the public have the right to know what the UAW officials told the police. Why are their statements being kept secret? What do they know about the nature of Jacoby Hennings’ concerns and grievances? What did they say to Hennings in response?

There are many other questions that remain about what happened on October 20. UAW officials assert that at some point during the hour-long meeting, Hennings suddenly pulled out a gun and threatened them, forcing them to flee and order the evacuation of the plant. Within minutes, officers from several police departments, including heavily armed SWAT teams, descended on the factory. As they confronted the young man, the police say, he turned the gun on himself.

Statements by workers on the shop floor indicate that union officials were texting “active shooter situation” and telling everyone to get out of the plant. Among the police radio traffic released after the incident were calls that said, “Active shooter—unknown on shots fired.”

However, there was no “active shooter.” Police acknowledge that Hennings did not fire any shots. According to at least one witness, he did not even pull out a gun. On the day of the shooting, the daughter of UAW Plant Chairman Kirk Yancey—who was not listed as a police witness—told WWJ radio, “The guy came into his office ... I don’t know what was going on, but there was something he wasn’t happy with and he walked out and then my dad noticed he had a gun. So, he went out the other door of his office and told everyone on the floor to evacuate.”

Whether Jacoby pulled a gun or not, police acknowledge that he did not threaten anyone else in the plant. Who called the police and what did they say? Who said that there was an “active shooter” at the plant and why? What is the precise timeline of the events leading up to Jacoby’s death?

Previous statements by the company and UAW officials have already been refuted. UAW Local 387 officials Arnold Miller and Christopher Pfaff, and a Ford Human Resource Manager Martin Hernandez,

asserted that Hennings appeared under the influence of alcohol or drugs on the morning of his death. However, the Wayne County Medical Examiner’s autopsy report, obtained by the WSWs, found that there was nothing in the young man’s system but caffeine.

Ford management, the UAW and the police must release all records, videos, phone recordings and copies of text messages pertaining to this case. A full and complete investigation must be carried out.

If the victim had been a corporate executive or a banker, there is no question that the police would have undertaken a thorough investigation. A working-class family who lost a loving son, and autoworkers in general, deserve no less.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact