

“Coby was loved by so many people”

Outpouring of support to honor Jacoby Hennings, young autoworker who died in October

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In a powerful outpouring of solidarity, hundreds of family members, friends and co-workers attended a memorial picnic in suburban Detroit Sunday afternoon for Jacoby Hennings, the young autoworker who died at the Ford Woodhaven Stamping plant on October 20, 2017.

The police and United Auto Workers officials claim the young man pulled a gun on UAW officials during an unexplained dispute in their office, and then took his own life as police charged up the stairs and confronted him. Although the case is full of inconsistencies and unanswered questions, the police shut down their investigation in less than 24 hours. The UAW has refused to reveal the nature of Jacoby’s concerns or grievances. For its part, the corporate media wrote off the tragedy as another workplace shooting by a “disgruntled employee” and quickly dropped the story.

The large turnout for the “Coby Day” event, however, expressed the desire of autoworkers in the Detroit area for truth and justice for the Hennings family. The death of the 21-year-old temporary part-time (TPT) worker has evoked strong feelings among autoworkers who are well aware of the oppressive conditions in the factories, particularly for low-paid TPTs, who pay dues to the UAW but have few, if any, rights.

A large portion of Kennedy Park in the Detroit suburb of Eastpointe was covered with balloons spelling out “Coby” and photographs and paintings of the young worker and his mother and father—Shemeeka and Bernard Jr. (known as Junior) who are both long-time Chrysler workers—and Coby’s younger brother, Jarrod. Many participants wore T-shirts printed up with the Dodge logo and “Coby Day,” while others, including Coby’s fellow students at East Detroit High School, printed up their own T-shirts with Coby’s photo and name. There were musical performances, games, slides and home-cooked food.

Shemeeka spoke, saying her “heart was beyond broken”

for Coby “who loved hanging out with his mom, singing and acting silly.” She said the day was to honor Coby’s memory and celebrate his life. She asked the DJ to play Coby’s favorite song and joined a dance with his young friends.

Those who came represented a cross section of workers in Detroit and several generations. There were Fiat Chrysler, Ford and General Motors workers, auto parts workers, hospital workers and young retail workers and students. The experiences of different generations of workers present reflected the sharp deterioration in conditions and wages due to the collaboration of the UAW with the auto companies.

Coby’s great-grandfather, Johnny Maye Sr., who recently died at the age of 96, migrated from the South to Detroit and had been a Ford worker during the battles to organize. That generation of workers was able to raise a family on one paycheck. Coby’s parents were the first generation to hire into the auto plants in the mid-1990s, after the wave of plant closings, mass layoffs and UAW-backed concessions over the previous 15 years. Both parents had to work to raise their children. A young TPT worker like Coby, who was hired into the plants in 2016, was forced to work two jobs—both at Ford and Fiat Chrysler—to earn the same wage each parent did with one job.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several family members, friends and co-workers at the memorial picnic.

DaSheena said, “I worked with [Bernard] Jr. for more than 13 years at the Mopar plant, which warehouses and ships replacement parts to Chrysler dealers. We hired into the plant when we were 18 or 19 years old, before we all got married and had kids, and we grew up together. I got my first car and then my first house when I was 21. I watched Bernard and Shemeeka get married and Coby grow up. Plant life was hard, and management would try to humiliate you. I was hurt and disabled and had to leave the plant in 2008.”

Valeria Oliver is Shemeeka’s aunt and a casino worker in

downtown Detroit. “Hundreds of people showed up at Shemeeka’s house after they heard the news about Coby,” she said. “As you can see, we are a tight knit family, and we came together to help Shemeeka and Junior. The news tried to turn the story around and claim Coby was drunk or on drugs. Anyone who knew Coby knew that was not true. The autopsy proved it, showing that he had nothing in his system but caffeine.

“Like a lot of autoworkers, my parents came up from the South to try to get a better life. My dad was a Chrysler worker, and my mother stayed home to raise nine kids. Coby and his generation also want a better life.”

Pat Kwarsick was Coby’s seventh and eighth grade language arts teacher at Kelly Middle School in East Detroit (now known as Eastpointe). “Coby always had a smile. He was a jokester when he was 12-13 years old. Sometimes he would dance in the hall and then come to class late. I called Shemeeka to discuss it, and even though she worked the night shift until 6 am that morning she came to school right away. She stood in the office and watched Coby as he was singing and dancing in the hall. After that we worked together to keep Coby on track.

“It was a tight family unit, and they cared about education and Coby doing well. I watched him bloom right in front of me. You could see it in his eyes when he got something I was teaching; they would just light up. Coby loved to debate more than anything. He loved football and sports. I remember him debating whether young athletes should get the new helmets like the NFL players to prevent concussions.

“When Coby graduated from East Detroit High School in 2014, he brought me a bouquet of roses and a handwritten thank you note. He even remembered my favorite color was purple.

“I only learned about Coby dying when Shemeeka posted your article on her Facebook page. I called her and said I couldn’t believe what the news media was saying about Coby. I was concerned how fast the police dropped the investigation, and I was upset that the union wouldn’t say what happened. One thing about Coby; he knew right from wrong.”

Wynter, a close family friend and a Fiat Chrysler worker, said, “This is very nice. There is music and singing. Coby was loved. This is a way we can feel his spirit. It’s very positive when there are so many negative things happening.”

Jarrold, Coby’s brother, said, “Everybody came. Coby was the type of person who was positive and very giving.”

Eric, an AT&T worker whose wife works at the Ford Sterling Axle plant, said, “There is a great deal of love for Shemeeka and Junior, and we are here to support them. The family and everybody deserves to know what really

happened. We are tired of the cover up. This young man was working two jobs. All workers are going through the same thing. The union doesn’t defend us.”

Broderick, a Mopar worker in Marysville, Michigan, added, “This is beautiful. Coby was loved by so many people. We all want to know what really happened. Junior and I have been friends since we were in high school. I’ve known Coby since he was born. This is a hardworking family that did everything for Coby and Jarrod.

“I hired into Chrysler in 1999 and was kept on part-time for 10 years. The first time I was offered a full-time position was in 2010 after the two-tier wage system had been implemented. When I flipped over to full-time, my pay fell from \$30 an hour to \$15 overnight. I’m still not making what I was in 2010. Now we find out that the union had its hand in the cookie jar, getting bribes when it signed the contracts.”

Taja is Coby’s cousin and a worker at General Motors’ Romulus Engine Plant. “I was working the day Coby died. The company called a meeting in the plant and said some guy at Ford was crazy and did this and did that, but I didn’t know they were talking about my cousin. My family called me afterwards, and I was crushed and angry about what they were saying.

“I printed out a few copies of your article about Coby and gave them to workers at my plant. They copied them and distributed the article all throughout the plant. Management called me in and said only flyers approved by the UAW plant chairman could be distributed. They kept their eyes on me. The EAP [Employee Assistance Program] lady said it was bad to distribute the article because there are so many suicides. But what causes that?

“I know how TPTs are treated, I was one. If you’re sick, they don’t care, and they tell you to come to work. My grandfather passed away, and I wasn’t able to go the funeral. There are a lot of temps at Romulus, and they pay union dues and have no rights. They’re never given time off, and they are working side-by-side with me making half the wage.”

The WSWS Autoworker Newsletter will post further articles on Coby Day this week.



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