

Still no investigation into death of young autoworker

One year since the death of Jacoby Hennings

Jerry White
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Today marks one year since the death of Jacoby Hennings, a 21-year-old temporary part-time worker at Ford's Woodhaven Stamping Plant, just south of Detroit. In the year since the tragedy of October 20, 2017, there has been no serious investigation into the circumstances surrounding Jacoby's death, which police declared a suicide.

Known as "Coby" by family and friends, this popular youth, with some 2,000 Facebook friends, did not fit the profile of a despondent or suicidal individual. From birth, he had been nurtured by a close-knit community of autoworkers, including his parents, Shemeeka and Bernard Jr., and dozens of aunts, uncles and cousins. Three years out of high school, he worked as a part-time temp at both Ford and Fiat Chrysler's Warren Truck plant, hoping to follow in his family's footsteps and become a full-time worker.

The horrific news of Jacoby's sudden and unexpected death sent shockwaves throughout Detroit-area plants. Hundreds of autoworkers attended the young man's funeral, and workers contributed thousands of dollars at plant gate collections for the grieving family. Three months ago, hundreds of family, friends and co-workers gathered at a "Coby Day" memorial picnic to express solidarity with his family.

Essential facts surrounding the death of Jacoby remain shrouded in secrecy. Police say Jacoby was involved in an unexplained "labor dispute" with United Auto Workers officials, but no explanation has been provided about what his concerns or grievances were or how the UAW responded. Based on statements from union officials, police say the young man "waved a gun" at them during an hour-plus meeting in the UAW plant chairman's office, and then shot himself as police charged up the stairs and confronted him.

After taking these statements and gathering physical

evidence, the Woodhaven police closed their investigation in less than 24 hours. A Woodhaven police detective told the WSWs that what happened during the meeting in the UAW office or what Jacoby's concerns were had no bearing on their investigation and conclusion. This is ludicrous.

With the exception of a perfunctory statement the day of the incident, UAW officials from the national headquarters in Detroit and Local 387 have been completely silent. They did not even communicate with Jacoby's bereaved parents.

In statements to the police, which were immediately picked up by local news media, UAW officials claimed that the young man "appeared under the influence of drugs or alcohol." This slander was refuted by the autopsy performed by the Wayne County Medical Examiner, obtained by the *World Socialist Web Site*, which found nothing in the young man's system except caffeine.

The corporate media portrayed Jacoby's death as yet another senseless workplace shooting by a "disgruntled employee." After sensationalized news coverage of SWAT teams and helicopters descending on the plant, the media dropped the story the next day. This is in keeping with the mainstream media in general, which ignores the realities of working class life in capitalist America, making no effort to document or analyze the growing number of injuries, fatal accidents and suicides in workplaces.

While the mainstream media has remained silent, the WSWs has uncovered important information and provided a voice to the Hennings family and other autoworkers who have demanded a full investigation.

The specific details of the events of October 20, 2017 must be exposed. There is no question that if the victim had been a corporate executive, the police would have

undertaken a thorough investigation. A working class family who lost a loving son, and autoworkers in general, deserve no less.

An understanding of the causes of Jacoby's death must take into account the circumstances of the tragedy.

First, the brutal conditions in factories and workplaces across the US. Second, the abandonment of any shop floor representation by the UAW and other unions, which function not as mechanisms for advancing the interests of workers, but as tools of corporate management to increase their exploitation. As a direct result, the working class, and in particular the younger generation of workers, has been thrown back to conditions of industrial slavery that resemble 19th century sweatshops.

The Woodhaven Stamping Plant, which produces truck body sides, floor panels and other metal parts for the company's top-selling pick-up trucks and other vehicles, is a case in point. In interviews with the *World Socialist Web Site*, workers describe a brutal shop floor regime ruled over by Ford management and its UAW agents. Under a special "competitive cost structure" agreement, more experienced "legacy" workers have been pushed out of the plant and replaced by low-paid second- and third-tier workers, making as little as the \$9 Michigan minimum wage.

The UAW physically segregates more experienced workers from the new-hires like Jacoby, who are relegated to a part of the plant known as "the ghetto" and forced to take on jobs that would have been performed by three older workers. The purpose is to prevent older workers from "schooling" the younger ones about resisting speed-up and unsafe conditions. "The TPTs [temporary part-time workers] are treated like slaves," one veteran Woodhaven worker told the WSWS, "whether they are black or white."

According Jacoby's mother, four months after her son was hired into the plant, he stopped the production line because of unsafe conditions. She attributed her son's courage to the frequent discussions Jacoby had with his great-grandfather, Johnny Maye Sr., who had migrated to Detroit from Alabama and had participated in the battles that united black, white and immigrant workers to build the UAW in the 1940s.

"Coby stopped the line when they wanted him to work when it was unsafe," Shemeeka told the WSWS.

"He started the issue and they didn't like it because they were losing money... Coby wasn't a kid. He wasn't scared. But they don't want someone who has their eyes open. The company and the union were probably saying, 'Who does he think he is?' They thought that he was just a little temp with nobody behind him."

In the year since Jacoby's death, the corruption scandal that has engulfed the UAW has confirmed that this organization is nothing but a paid enforcer for corporate management. Top union executives took millions in bribes to sign pro-company contracts, which destroyed the eight-hour day, established multi-tier wage and benefit systems, ending the principle of equal pay for equal work, and vastly increased the number of highly exploited TPT workers, who pay union dues but have no rights.

New organizations of struggle, including factory and workplace committees, must be built. These organizations, democratically controlled by rank-and-file workers, must be independent of the UAW and other corporate-controlled unions, and base themselves on the principles of the class struggle, not labor-management "partnership." They must take up the responsibilities long abandoned by the UAW and champion the cause of young workers like Jacoby Hennings by fighting for workers' control over production and industrial democracy.

The entire ruling class would like to reduce workers to docile slaves who believe they can't fight back. But the popular outpouring in response to Jacoby's death expresses a countervailing movement, one that has been seen more broadly this year in the outbreak of strikes and mass working class protests by teachers and other sections of workers in the US and around the world, along with the increasing interest in socialism by a new generation of young workers and students.

Not just the death, but the courageous life of Jacoby Hennings, should propel workers and young people forward in the struggles that lie ahead.



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