

Death of GM Lake Orion contract worker in apparent personal dispute highlights deplorable conditions

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Work at Lake Orion or another auto plant? We want to hear from you. Contact the WSWS by filling out the form at the end of the article to tell us what health and safety conditions are like in your factory. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Little information has been made available about the apparent murder of 49-year-old Gregory Lanier Robertson early in the morning of August 11 during his shift at GM's Lake Orion Assembly Plant in Southeastern Michigan. The plant builds the electric-powered GM Bolt. Robertson and Astrit Gjon Bushi, the worker charged with killing him, were employed by a third-party cleaning company, whose identity was not revealed by local law enforcement.

Police arrived to discover Robertson unconscious and bleeding on the shop floor. They attempted to resuscitate him but pronounced him dead at the scene around 1:30 a.m. The 48-year-old Bushi was standing nearby and apparently surrendered himself to police without resistance.

The Oakland County Sheriff's Office is investigating the circumstances of the alleged altercation. The results of the autopsy released ruled the death of Robertson a homicide from multiple blows to the head. According to local news reports, the weapon could have been a block of wood. Police say that the altercation was over a small debt.

GM closed the plant Thursday, informing some 1,200 employees at 4:00 a.m. Many workers didn't find out until they arrived for their shifts, when plant security told them to return home.

Robertson was one of 11 siblings. He had a wife, children and grandchildren. One of his daughters told local news, "This just happened this morning, out of

nowhere. At work you're supposed to be secure, and you shouldn't have to worry about 'I am going to die' or anything." He had been on the job just seven months and according to his children, he loved his job.

A worker at the plant told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Some people are shaken up by it. They [GM] did offer counseling. Overall, I still think people are kind of shocked. Hard to process maybe. He was a subcontractor."

For years, as part of cost-cutting measures, GM has contracted outside companies in their operations. Some are companies spun off from GM itself, under the rubric of GM Subsystems. The pay and benefits for employees of these contractors are abysmally low. The killing, having occurred inside their facility, finds GM management running a desperate damage control operation. Key details are being obscured to distance the company from any responsibility.

Over decades of undermining the pay and benefits of autoworkers, with the collaboration of the United Auto Workers union, conditions in the plants have become intolerable. The introduction of lower-tier workers, where new hires get half or less than so-called regulars, has exacerbated the misery imposed on shop-floor workers.

In 2018 a scandal erupted when UAW Vice President Cindy Estrada signed a sweetheart deal with General Motors allowing the hiring of lower-paid subcontract workers at the Lake Orion and Lordstown assembly plants. The deal allowed GM to hire workers from GM Subsystems LLC at the poverty wage of \$15 an hour, half the wages of senior employees, for various jobs at the plants. In some cases, the subcontract workers would be used to replace full-time workers.

In July, the UAW exploited the desperation of GM Subsystems workers to ram through a management-friendly contract maintaining the poverty-level wages. To intimidate workers, the UAW said it would instruct production workers at Lake Orion and other GM plants to cross picket lines in the event of a strike of the contract workers.

There can be no mistake that GM and its loyal servants in the UAW are responsible for this tragedy. They have enforced oppressive conditions allowing the company to maximize profits through the exploitation of a large poverty-level workforce. The real truth about the conditions in the auto factories is being smothered with the aid of all the tools capitalists have available, in the first place the UAW.

The media seeks to present the recent tragedy as an individual question of personal responsibility. Even though the suspect, Bushi, remained only feet away from the scene and surrendered himself to police, he will face the full force of the law. Recent reports indicate that he was in difficult circumstance, living in his van, as he had no permanent address. No doubt he had a difficult time securing proper accommodations due to poverty-level wages paid to subcontract workers. He is being arraigned under the charge of “open murder.”

In that light, it is significant that the *Detroit Free Press*, in its report on the Lake Orion tragedy, tries to compare the death of Robertson to the death of Jacoby (Coby) Hennings at Ford’s Woodhaven Stamping Plant in 2017. The *World Socialist Web Site* has written extensively on the death of Hennings, a 21-year-old temporary part time worker whose life was a living hell, working two auto plant jobs, one at Woodhaven and one at Chrysler’s Warren Truck Assembly Plant, in the hopes of becoming full time.

Prior to his death, under circumstances that have never been fully explained or investigated, UAW officials claimed that the young man shot himself after an undisclosed “dispute” inside the union office at the factory. The UAW circulated lies that Hennings was incoherent and on drugs. In fact, caffeine was the only substance that was detected in his system by an autopsy. His parents insist that “Coby” would have never killed himself, but there was never any serious inquiry into the actions of the union representatives.

The truth is not served by treating incidents such as

the death of Gregory Robertson as the violent, inexplicable acts of individual workers. In fact, definite objective social tensions are being created in workplaces that can explode to the surface in violent outbursts such as the tragedy at Lake Orion.

A worker from a nearby Stellantis factory told the WSWS, “Tensions are high. They got us going back and forth ... It’s the environment! It’s got to the point where we’re fighting against each other rather than fighting the company.”

The auto industry is projecting that production of all-electric vehicles (EVs), which is what is produced at the Lake Orion GM plant, will in the next years overtake and eliminate internal combustion engine vehicles. Auto corporations anticipate that the transformation of the technology will leave them less reliant on the skilled trades required in the milling, production and assembly of complex engines and drive trains. All the automakers have stated their intention to drastically expand the use of cheaper contract labor in EV production. In this they are counting on the complicity of the UAW in enforcing deeper attacks on wages and conditions.

Autoworkers who would like to share information on workplace conditions are encouraged to contact the *Autoworker Newsletter*.



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