

Memorial in Detroit for young autoworker who died in Ford plant

By Jerry White
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Family and friends held a moving ceremony Thursday night for Jacoby Hennings, the 21-year-old part-time autoworker who died October 20 at Ford's Woodhaven Stamping plant, just outside of Detroit.

Full details of the incident have still not been revealed, but police and local United Auto Workers officials say Hennings shot himself in a second-floor union office at the plant as Woodhaven police confronted him. The young man had apparently gone to the UAW office for help from the union plant manager and other Local 387 union officers after a supervisor reportedly wrote him up for being late and sent him home. Police claim the distressed young man barricaded himself in the union office with a gun.

Jacoby was a temporary part-time employee (TPT) who had worked at the stamping plant for nearly eight months, while holding down another part-time job at Fiat Chrysler's Warren Truck Assembly Plant, 37 miles away. According to co-workers, he was a hard-working young man who wanted to be hired into a full-time position.

The description of the young man by family and friends, and the outpouring of sympathy on social media, has undermined efforts by the media and authorities to dismiss this tragedy as just another workplace shooting by a "disgruntled employee" and sweep it under the rug.

Nearly 100 people, young and old, showed up for a memorial at Chene Park on Detroit's riverfront that was organized via Facebook on short notice. While solemn, the event was marked by a strong sense of solidarity with the grieving parents who had just days before experienced the loss of another close relative. There were large numbers of Jacoby's young peers from school and his neighborhood who, despite their sorrow and anger, lent the event an air of optimism.

Jacoby, who lived in the eastern Detroit suburb of Harper Woods and only graduated from East Detroit High School in 2014, came from a family of autoworkers. His

parents, Meeka and Bernard, and several aunts and uncles work at Chrysler's stamping plant and Mopar parts division.

Family and friends spoke warmly of the young man and then released several paper sky lanterns with special inscriptions written on them into the night air, before the crowd in unison released scores of balloons into the sky, amid shouts of "We love you Coby."

A funeral service is being held today, Saturday, October 28, at 10:30 a.m. at the New Greater Zion Hill Baptist Church, 18891 St. Louis Street in Detroit.

"Coby was big-hearted, loving and caring, and always spirited," said an uncle, Sivad Thomas, who is a General Motors worker at the Detroit-Hamtramck plant. "His smile would brighten up the room."

"If you knew him, you would love him," added friend Breanca Adams, who was there with Lana and Aeja. "But it is tough for young people, especially for men. You try to work hard and get enough to raise a family, but the cost of living is expensive and wages are low. A lot of older workers are holding onto their jobs because they can't afford to retire, and young people can't get in these jobs."

Chris Parks, who went to school with Jacoby told the WSWs, "He made everybody laugh, everybody happy. That's why so many people are out here. You don't see anybody down. Anything anybody needed, he had it for you."

Noting that his family has worked in the auto factories for years, Chris added, "Everybody knows what happens in the plant. The horrible conditions aren't any good for anybody."

"Everybody here knows Jacoby wasn't going to take his life for no reason. There had to be something going on. He was trying to make a statement to somebody. Nobody knows what happened except him and the people who were there. But whatever happened, there's got to be justice for it."

Uncle Tommy Hammonds, another Chrysler worker, said, “This is very sad but there has to be more to this than what has been revealed.”

“This is hard for me,” stated uncle Thomas Kyle. “He worked two jobs. His dad has been in the auto plant since 1996. He came in and worked hard at Ford and Chrysler. Whichever one was going to take him in full time, he was doing it. He saw what the other guys had but said ‘I’m going get it the right way.’”

“You know it used to be you came in and after 90 days you were in. He has been working since March. What is that, over six months? And he still wasn’t hired in. He was working every day. Don’t know what it was. I don’t know what happened to my nephew but I want to know.”

An aunt told reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* that the immediate family has not been contacted by the company, the union or any other authorities.

After the shooting, the UAW issued a perfunctory statement referring to the “unfortunate incident” at the Woodhaven Stamping Plant “that resulted in one of our members taking their own life with a firearm.” The union has not issued any other statements, and calls to the UAW by WSWS reporters have not been returned.

“Coby should not die in vain,” another worker told the WSWS. “We need to build a movement out of this to change things. The older workers are doing slave labor for \$30 an hour in the plants, and the younger workers are getting even less for the same work. It used to be when garbage men or teachers went on strike, everybody would join the fight. It was about solidarity. But the unions don’t fight anymore, they’re with the companies. Things are tough here in Detroit. Money is going downtown but not to the neighborhoods. It’s not a race thing, though, it’s about class—the haves and the have-nots.”

This tragedy is an indictment of the UAW, which long ago abandoned the most elemental responsibilities to provide shop floor representation and protection to workers. Instead it has collaborated with the employers to ramp up the exploitation of workers and create an entirely new layer of super-exploited and disposable temporary and part-time workers. The memorial for Coby took place the same day Ford posted \$1.7 billion in third-quarter profits, up from \$1.1 billion a year ago.

Ironically, the memorial service for the young man was held just blocks from the UAW-Chrysler National Training Center, which was used to funnel millions in bribes from FCA executives to UAW Vice President General Holiefield and top union execs in exchange for negotiating “company friendly” labor agreements.

A Warren Truck worker who worked with Jacoby posted the following statement on Facebook. “I worked next to Jacoby! Saw him THE DAY before he DIED...This kid was working two full time jobs mind you....no sleep, often times he would work thru his breaks just to get a power nap in! This fella had been just stressed to no end...they don't care about you...I watched another co-worker last year have a f.... heart attack on the LINE....no one but his fellow team members gave a damn, then they turned LINE back on and kept it moving...wake up folks before they take your livelihood from up under you. Dude had enough HEART to buy me a fan the summer for my Hilo...you can't tell me he was heartless!! RIP Jacoby!! One luv bruh.”

Reached by the WSWS, the worker said, “He barely got enough sleep with two jobs. The AWS (Alternative Work Schedule—four 10-hour shifts each week) is hellacious and makes your home life difficult. You can’t plan anything.

“Prior to 2015 it would take 120 days for temporary TPT workers to become full-time. But the UAW used tactics to get workers to sign the contract after we voted it down. They got some young workers to vote for the second offer by adding a few dollars but they took away our long-term interests. The TPTs work as hard or even harder than the older workers and get half the pay and no vision or dental coverage. They want to phase out the legacy workers and replace them with low-cost temps.

“I know what it’s like working at the plant and holding down another job. I used to be an Uber driver to make my bills. It’s like we’re going back in time. Rights that workers fought for are gone. We pay dues to the UAW but they steal our money. Look at the payoffs Chrysler made to top union officials who negotiated our contract. I want a change now.”

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>