

“We have to make sure Jacoby Hennings didn’t die in vain”

Workers denounce scourge of suicides inside US auto plants

By Jerry White
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In the wake of the apparent suicide of 21-year-old Jacoby Hennings at the Woodhaven Stamping plant outside of Detroit on October 21, autoworkers from around the country have denounced the collusion of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union with management and the oppressive conditions in the auto factories which have literally driven workers to take their own lives.

Workers have contacted the World Socialist Web Site *Autoworker Newsletter* to report that suicides are tragically common occurrence at their factories. A worker at Fiat Chrysler’s Jeep factory in Toledo, Ohio reported that five workers at her plant had killed themselves over the last three years, including three temporary part-time employees (TPTs).

A worker at Ford’s Chicago Assembly Plant said four workers at his factory had committed suicide this year alone. Other TPTs who have written to the newsletter have said they have contemplated suicide after being denied full-time status for years, or after an abusive encounter with management or the UAW.

While exact figures still must be gathered for the auto industry, factory and production workers have the fourth highest suicide rate of the top 20 occupations in the US, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, with 35 deaths per 100,000 workers.

Only farmers, fishermen, lumberjacks and others in forestry or agriculture (85 per 100,000), carpenters, miners, electricians, construction trades (53) and mechanics and those who do installation, maintenance and repair (48), have a higher suicide rate.

Overall, the CDC reports suicide rates rose by a staggering 21 percent from 2000 to 2012.

This rise coincides with the ever-worsening social crisis, the growth of part-time and other precarious forms of employment in the so-called Gig Economy, and the complete abandonment of any semblance of opposition by the unions to the corporate offensive against workers’ jobs, living standards and working conditions.

Far from providing workers with a collective voice and means to oppose arbitrary firings and ever worsening conditions, unions like the UAW have become the chief enforcers of the corporate dictatorship over the working class. Far from uniting workers the UAW works relentlessly to undermine class solidarity, pit workers against each other and offer them up as raw material for exploitation.

During the eight years of the Obama administration, the unions all but abandoned strikes, which fell to historic lows, paving the way for the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top in American history. All of the growth in jobs over the last decade is attributable to the proliferation of part-time, temporary and contract jobs.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the auto industry, which, due to previous struggles of autoworkers, once set the standard for job protections and so-called middle-class wages.

Since Obama’s 2009 bankruptcy restructuring of General Motors and Chrysler, labor costs have been drastically reduced as a result of UAW-backed labor agreements that pushed out older, higher-paid workers and replaced them with thousands of low-paid second- and third-tier workers. Due primarily to the increase in the number of temps allowed by the 2015 UAW contract, labor costs per vehicle have actually fallen for GM while remaining flat at Ford.

Although they pay union dues, TPTs have no job security and can be fired, without recourse, for being late or missing a day of work. Hennings was a TPT at Ford’s Woodhaven Stamping plant while holding down a second temp job at Fiat Chrysler’s Warren Truck Assembly Plant, 37 miles away. His coworkers said he was hardworking and wanted to get a full-time position but often looked exhausted. He also reportedly was worried he might lose his job when production of the Dodge Ram pickup was removed from Warren Truck next year.

While the exact details are not fully known, on the morning of October 20, Hennings was reportedly told by a supervisor to go to the UAW office in the Woodhaven plant after he came in late. After an hour in the union office, where his concerns were apparently left unaddressed, the young worker reportedly took out a gun to threaten the union officials. Afterwards, police say, Hennings shot himself when confronted by the cops.

Except for a perfunctory statement the day of the incident, the UAW has not issued any further explanation of the tragic incident. A police report obtained by the WSWs through a Freedom of Information request does not include statements by the three UAW Local 387 officials who were with Hennings that morning. The Wayne County Medical Examiner has still not released an autopsy report.

The *Autoworker Newsletter* urges workers to form rank-and-file

committees to unite and demand the truth about this tragedy, and to collectively defend themselves against the abuses of the auto bosses and their paid-off henchmen in the UAW. Such committees must take up the grievances and concerns of all workers and revive the principle that an injury to one is an injury to all and take up the methods of class struggle to abolish the two-tier system, demand the hiring of all TPTs as full-time workers, and restore all UAW-backed concessions.

An FCA worker with more than two decades in the plant told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, "I've seen things happen to TPTs but I am afraid due to retaliation to help them. I am glad the newsletter is taking up this issue. It is very unfortunate that this young man had to pass away and this had to come about. I'm very concerned about how the second and third tier workers are being treated.

"I've seen the interaction between the union and management and a lot of things are being done behind closed doors. There have been times when employees have spoken up and were retaliated against, and we haven't even seen them anymore. I want to fight. The treatment of the TPTs is deplorable. Sometimes people think that the older workers don't care because we have our retirement in place, our positions and seniority, but that is not true. When we came in, it was the elders who are all gone now that warned us and tried to educate us about what would happen when they were gone, and we have to do the same now for the younger generation.

"It is hard to educate the TPTs and the new hires because you're fearful of the retaliation. But we need unity and a lot of people coming together to make sure that this young man's passing is not in vain. There are a lot of us out here willing to come forward, but we can't do it as individuals because we have families to feed. We need the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* to educate us on how to unify and fight to do better."

"We have to do this for Jacoby, for future TPTs, so we can drive down this suicide rate, and definitely make a change," another worker added.

A worker at Fiat Chrysler's Jeep plant in Toledo, where more than 1,200 TPTs are employed, told the newsletter, "The TPTs are bossed around and bullied by the supervisors and the union stewards. If a TPT has an issue on the line, they tell him 'You are here to do as you are told or you can leave.' You hear it every day, they tell the TPT's they have no rights and if they don't like it they can walk.

"The TPTs pay union dues and are union members but they are not treated that way. One TPT felt what he was being told to do was unsafe. The team leader and the union rep told the TPT he better do it or he would lose his job. That worker was paying for his kids to go to school and he felt he had no choice.

"With the holidays approaching, the company is hiring 50 TPTs every week until the end of the year. That gives management more leverage to tell these workers, 'You do what you're told or we've got a lot of workers willing to take your job.'

"We are all under stress to pay our bills. At the Jeep plant, they have hundreds of workers from Detroit who were employed under what most people think was a kickback scheme for former UAW Vice President General Holiefield. A lot of these workers were on welfare and are too poor to have a car to come to work. There is a service called 'V-Ride' that drives about 700 workers in vans

from Detroit to the Toledo plant each day. On top of the stress of working here, and the poverty many of these workers face, they have to come an hour and a half to work each day.

"If a TPT is a half hour from work or just about to get there, the company can call them and tell them they aren't needed for the day, and they won't get paid. If they've already stepped in the plant when they get a call, they are supposed to get paid for four hours. There are problems with the new Jeep launch and they called off a lot of TPTs coming in for a shift. One worker said she lost \$50 that day after paying for gas and a babysitter.

"They try to get you before you come through the gates, and, if you do, they hope you'll just get upset and leave instead of sticking around. A lot of TPTs don't know the company has to pay them for four hours if they stay there for four hours. Some just get sick of waiting and leave but others wait or try to find someplace to sleep. If they are found sleeping they can get fired.

"We just had a TPT fired for being sick for three days. It's better to be off sick for five days and hope that Human Resources will excuse you with a doctor's note. If you are out three days you have to rely on a supervisor who has the power to accept or decline a doctor's note. We've had TPTs who get pregnant and have to be off for doctor's visits. If they don't have a good relationship with their supervisors, they will let you go. You can't qualify for FMLA (Family and Medical Leave Act) protections unless you've worked 1,250 hours.

"A lot of times, the company will screw up the hours you worked or mark a TPT late even though they were on time. They can be called into work to replace someone who went home early. That might mean a TPT arrives, let's say at 7:30 or later in the morning, instead of the regular start time for the shift. They could be given an 'occurrence' for coming in late even though they came in on time. I don't know what the policy is at Ford but we should look to see if that happened to Jacoby. After three 'occurrences,' which include latenesses or absences, they will fire you."

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>