

The unquiet death of a young Ford worker

The parents of Jacoby Hennings demand to know why their son died

By Jerry White
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It is nearly four months since the tragic death of Jacoby Marquis Hennings, a 21-year-old part-time temporary worker at Ford's Woodhaven Stamping plant, just south of Detroit, 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. The official story is laced with contradictions and unanswered questions.

The claims by UAW Local 387 officials—Arnold Miller and Christopher Pfaff—and a Ford Human Resource Manager Martin Hernandez that Jacoby Hennings, “appeared under the influence of alcohol or drugs,” have been refuted by the Wayne County Medical Examiner's autopsy report, which found nothing in the young man's system but caffeine.

The police have dropped the case, ruling it a suicide, while the corporate media presented the incident as just another workplace shooting by a “disgruntled employee.” But Jacoby was a well-loved and popular young man, with nearly 2,000 friends on his Facebook page, who had, as his parents and friends described, an almost infectious optimism. Why would such a young worker kill himself?

“My son loved life,” Jacoby's mother, Shemeeka, a 42-year-old Chrysler worker, told the *World Socialist Web Site* last week during an interview at the family's Harper Woods home. “He was a beautiful person. I never thought in a million years I would be sitting here talking about losing my son. He did not go into that plant intending to hurt anyone. Something went terribly wrong. I want to know what.”

Autoworkers are well aware of the oppressive conditions in the factories, particularly for low-paid temporary part-time workers or TPTs, who pay dues to the UAW but have few if any rights. This tragedy evoked strong feelings among factory workers with hundreds of autoworkers attending the young man's funeral on Detroit's eastside on October 28. Since then workers have repeatedly expressed their sympathy and solidarity with Shemeeka and her husband, Bernard Jr, who is 43 and is also a long-time Chrysler worker.

Workers at Shemeeka's factory, Fiat Chrysler's Warren

Stamping plant, raised over \$5,000 in plant gate collections and other donations and bought a Christmas gift for Jacoby's younger brother, 16-year-old Jarrod. Workers at Bernard's Mopar parts plant have also expressed their solidarity.

The family has received more than 4,000 cards, expressing sympathy and support, and not a day has gone by without people delivering groceries, prepared food or edible arrangements to the family, Winter, a family friend and Warren Truck worker, told the WSW. “People were here every day for months after the funeral,” she said.

On December 27, hundreds of family members, friends and workers, the majority autoworkers, marked what would have been Jacoby's 22nd birthday with a memorial and celebration of his life at the family home, just east of Detroit.

The main floor and basement of the home were overflowing with workers and young people making bracelets with letters spelling out “Long Live Coby” and similar messages, as well as painting pictures to honor the young worker. A DJ played relaxing music, there was singing, and participants released 22 balloons into the air. Seven-day candles were lit to last into the New Year, friends said, so Jacoby's spirit would go into 2018. A committee was set up to plan for a birthday celebration for next year and future “Coby Days,” including barbeques and other celebrations.

After months of inconsolable sadness, Jacoby's mother spoke at the gathering about the unbreakable bond she had with her son. “A treasure is something really special, something irreplaceable, something you wouldn't want to lose for anything. It is something I value highly, hold close to my broken heart, protect and appreciate so much. Since it's your birthday, I send this message with lots of love because you were a treasure to me. Jacoby, I was blessed to see you become a grown man and I will always be your number one fan.”

“You have touched so many hearts and you are so loved,” a card, signed by family and friends, read. “We miss you every second of everyday. We got you forever and that's our word. Your name and most importantly your legacy is here forever. Although we may not be able to see you, we know you are right here every step of the way. Every day is ‘Coby Day!’ We

love you tremendously and that is never going to change. Thinking of your voice helps ease the pain. Happy 22nd birthday Coby baby! Long Live Coby.”

“It was an amazing outpouring of support,” said Sheemeka’s sister, Lucretia, who is also a Fiat Chrysler worker. “Workers know Coby had a good mother and good father and they really felt their pain. By supporting Shemeeka and Bernard, they were taking a step forward to do the right thing for all workers. If you’re an autoworker you know the conditions in the plants, especially the way TPTs are mistreated. Workers knew this could be their son or daughter.”

“It’s amazing how much Coby was loved,” Shemeeka told the WSWS as she gave reporters a tour of the family home. She stopped at Jacoby’s bedroom and showed them his framed sign on the wall, reading, “Stay Humble. Be Kind. Work Hard.” On his mantel was a small sculpture of Sisyphus, who according to Greek Mythology had been eternally condemned to roll a boulder up a hill. “Coby saw himself as a man taking on the world.”

“I lost an absolutely unique, beautiful young man,” Shemeeka continued. “My son loved life, he loved his parents and his little brother, Jarrod, who looked up to Coby as his idol. He loved to shop and dress well. This just doesn’t happen to a kid like that.

“Do I believe the way they say things happened? I don’t. The police report says he asked for a black union steward. What made him feel that way? That was a sign that he felt scared, he felt like he was alone, and he called out for anybody that looked like him. He thought because the steward was black he would be protected. My son was only 21. He didn’t know everyone in the union is in cahoots. He was scared and didn’t understand it is not about black and white. If they’re in, they’re in, it doesn’t matter what color they are.”

Shemeeka was livid over the slanders by UAW officials who said Jacoby was under the influence of alcohol or drugs. “I don’t like the way they made things up to ruin my son’s name by saying he was drunk or on pills that day. I know he didn’t drink or smoke and I knew the autopsy would show that. My son was respectful.”

Sheemeka said Jacoby was raised around autoworkers and heard stories his whole life about the struggles autoworkers had gone through, particularly from her grandfather, Johnny Maye Sr., who had been a Ford worker during the battles to organize. Maye, who recently died at the age of 96, she said, “would always talk to Coby about how much he was making, how workers used to make 72 cents an hour, and what it was like coming up to Detroit from Alabama. We’re all autoworkers and we looked forward to grandad coming over.”

These discussions, she said, had a big impact on Jacoby. Just four months before his death, she said, “Coby stopped the line when they wanted him to work when it was unsafe. He started the issue and they didn’t like it because they were losing money. When he came home he talked about it and I said,

‘You did what?’ He said, ‘They wanted me to work and it wasn’t safe.’ That was my son.

“Before that, a skilled tradesman Coby was working with told him to go to human resources and ask about enrolling in the engineering program. When he went there they treated him like crap and told him he had to be full time to get his courses paid for. Coby said, ‘I didn’t ask that. I asked, how do I sign up?’

“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 he was just a little temp with nobody behind him. They didn’t know he worked at Chrysler and was loved.”

In addition to the TPT job at the Ford Woodhaven plant, Jacoby had gotten a job at Fiat Chrysler’s Warren Truck plant in 2016. “Coby would always talk about the job asking when he was going to get hired full time. No one believed he worked two part-time plant jobs at the same time. He didn’t have to work at all. We would have supported him. But he saw how hard we worked, and he never took advantage. He wanted to earn his own money.”

Referring to the conditions that young autoworkers face, she continued, “They’re paying new autoworkers what you can get at McDonald’s and they think they can treat them like crap. Coby told me all he could ever get at Woodhaven was \$19 an hour. I didn’t believe it, but it’s in the UAW contract,” she said, referring to the “competitive wage structure” the UAW imposed at the Woodhaven plant in 2015 to supposedly keep it from closing. After four years new workers max out at \$19.86 while higher paid first-tier, referred to as “surplus” in the UAW contract, are being driven out of the plant.

“Coby was everything to us. He loved his father and his family. Bernard and I were a power couple and we went to every game, every activity. He’s been snatched from us and we want to know why. Workers want respect for their kids, for the TPTs, so they can feel safe when they come to work. We have to open the doors to what is being hidden and help people see the bigger picture, so this doesn’t happen to anyone else’s child. I’m tired of crying, I want answers.”

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