

“There could be so many more Jacoby Hennings out there”

Autoworkers want truth about young Ford worker’s death

By a WSWs reporting team
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The demand by the parents of Jacoby Hennings for the truth about the death of their 21-year-old son at Ford’s Woodhaven Stamping Plant on October 20, 2017 has resonated deeply among autoworkers throughout the Detroit metro area.

The police and United Auto Workers officials claim the young part-time temporary worker pulled a gun on UAW officials during an unexplained dispute in the union’s office in the plant, and then took his own life as police charged up the stairs and confronted him. The official story, however, is laced with contradictions and unanswered questions.

The February 12 *World Socialist Web Site* article, featuring Jacoby’s mother and father—Shemeeka and Bernard Hennings, Jr., two long-time Chrysler workers—has been viewed nearly ten thousand times. Autoworkers have widely circulated the article on Facebook, Instagram and other social media. In addition, thousands of workers have read the article in the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, which has been distributed at area Ford and Fiat Chrysler factories.

Since the posting of their statement, Shemeeka Hennings told the WSWs the family has received an abundance of phone calls and text messages from autoworkers, Jacoby’s former teachers, and others expressing their sympathy and solidarity. “People have been saying they are willing to help in any kind of way to honor Coby’s life and find out what really happened,” Shemeeka told the WSWs.

Callers were particularly angry about the way Ford and UAW officials, along with the media, tried to denigrate Jacoby by claiming he was drunk or on drugs. These lies were never retracted after the Medical Examiner’s report showed the young man had nothing

in his system except caffeine.

She said, “I’ve been getting calls from workers saying my son works at Chrysler or my daughter is at GM. The callers don’t know each other, but everybody’s in the same boat. People want to know the truth and why the UAW did not stand up for us. They treat the TPTs like they’re nothing, and I don’t want this to happen to anybody else’s kids.”

At Ford’s Dearborn Assembly Plant, hundreds of workers took copies of the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, with many recalling the report of Jacoby’s alleged suicide at the Woodhaven Plant. “I remember this happening, and then nothing was ever said again,” one worker told the WSWs, adding that he agreed with the parents’ demand to find out what really happened.

The newsletter was eagerly read by hundreds of workers at Fiat Chrysler’s Warren Stamping plant in suburban Detroit, where Shemeeka Hennings has worked since the mid-1990s. Workers at the factory donated more than \$5,000 from plant gate collections to the Hennings family.

“From what I understand, he could have been under a lot of pressure,” said one stamping worker with 20 years. “The UAW is not going to make any comments if they were in the wrong. This needs to be looked into if his parents are going to get any closure.”

“Why would someone go all that way, into the plant, to commit suicide?” a younger worker who knows Shemeeka commented. “There’s a lot of harassment of workers that goes on here with the union,” her co-worker added. “The UAW is supposed to be representing us, but they work with the company.”

Another worker, who has been at Chrysler for 17 years, also questioned the official story. “I heard he

was working at two plants. Seems like the effort he put in—to work two jobs, to help out at home—it doesn't seem like he would take his own life.”

“I told people bringing in more TPTs in the last contract was a bad idea,” a worker with 18 years said. “They just exploit the hell out of them, and they can get rid of them any time. The company gave the union kickbacks to let this whole thing go.

“Then they also expect more from all production workers,” he added. “Now we work longer, 10-hour days. They wonder why people get hurt. It's because they're tired and tired people make mistakes.”

His co-worker added, “Last week, one kid was tarring the roof, he got tar all down the back of his neck and fell through the roof. He burned his hand and the back of his neck. They still wanted him to keep working.

“We still have asbestos everywhere,” she added. “It shreds, and then they put the fans in front of the asbestos. One guy in the basement painted over the asbestos, as a warning that it would give you cancer. They painted over it, but one of the guys hit it, so all the electricians were down there for like eight hours, breathing it in.

“When you think about how many people died just to get us this union. They'd roll over in their graves if they saw half the stuff that's going on now. If you call the union, even if something is unsafe, they don't come.”

A Fiat Chrysler worker from the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant also spoke with the *Autoworker Newsletter*. “They need some answers,” she said, referring to the Hennings family. “No telling what took place. Just because they say he committed suicide doesn't mean that's what happened.

“A lot of young people don't know how to deal with work issues and pressure. There is a lot of bullying at our plant. You don't know what someone may have said to him. The UAW was probably bullying him too. If the union had something to do with it, they would never tell the truth about it.”

Commenting on the bribery allegations against top UAW officials, including former UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell, she said, “They dismantled our contract, and the UAW went along with it. Jewell had his hands in it too. He was at all the union meetings, pushing for the contracts, knowing that they took all

this money. All of them are implicated, including his secretary.”

She referred to the expanded use of TPTs, which the UAW pushed through in 2015 after FCA workers rejected the first sell out agreement. “Under the old contract, part-timers could only work Monday, Friday and Saturdays. Now they have them working six days a week and still get no profit sharing. Giving them no benefits saves the company a lot of money.”

A young worker at Fiat Chrysler's Jefferson North Assembly Plant said, “It's good to see all the support the family is receiving. It's coming for rank-and-file workers, not from the UAW because the union doesn't care. I'm inclined to believe there was a whole lot more that really happened. Jacoby wanted to work full-time, and he was treated like crap.

“The workers are getting younger and younger, and they don't really understand that the union doesn't give a damn about them. They take dues from the TPTs and tell them to keep their mouths shut and be happy they have a job. I can relate to what Jacoby's mom said about race not making a difference. It doesn't matter if the UAW officials are black or white, the union was bought off at our expense.

“The workers at our plant are saying the TPTs should get the \$2,000 bonus from the company's tax cuts just like everybody else. This was not a bonus the union negotiated, like profit sharing where they excluded the TPTs. The TPTs do the same work, and by right everybody should get the tax bonus.

“The truth about Jacoby needs to come out,” she added. “The company and the union are so quick to lie, deny and hide. We're all facing the same plight. We need to know the truth. There could be so many more Jacoby Hennings out there.”

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