

One year since the death of Jacoby Hennings

Woodhaven Stamping worker describes brutal atmosphere under UAW-Ford regime

“Temporary part-timers are treated like slaves”

By Jerry White
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Saturday, October 20, marked one year since the tragic death of Jacoby Hennings, a 21-year-old temporary part-time (TPT) worker at Ford's Woodhaven Stamping Plant, just south of Detroit who police say killed himself after an unexplained dispute with United Auto Workers officials.

Hundreds of family members and friends, including many autoworkers, gathered at the Hennings home in the eastern Detroit suburb of Harper Woods on Saturday to remember “Coby,” as he is affectionately known, and express their solidarity with his parents, Shemeeka and Bernard Hennings Jr., and Jacoby's younger brother Jarrod.

Despite the efforts by Ford management, the UAW, news media and the Woodhaven Police Department to sweep the young worker's death under the rug, the Hennings family and autoworkers throughout the metropolitan area still want to know the truth about the death of this young worker.

Why would a young man who was very popular and described by friends and family as optimistic take his own life? What were the conditions inside the factory and the pressures exerted on workers that could have contributed to this tragedy?

As the WSWS has detailed in other articles, the UAW has refused to say why Jacoby, who had only worked at the plant for eight months, went to the union office for help, what his concerns or grievances were, and how Local 387 officials responded. Over the course of a year, neither the local union nor the UAW International has bothered to contact Jacoby's parents, who are both long-time Chrysler workers and UAW members.

Instead, on the day of the tragedy, the UAW sought to place the onus on the young worker himself. Local 387 officials Chris Pfaff and Arnold Miller told police Jacoby “appeared under the influence of drugs or alcohol.” This slander was exposed as a lie by the Wayne County Medical Examiner's autopsy report, obtained by the WSWS, which found nothing in Jacoby's system except for caffeine.

Workers at the Woodhaven Stamping Plant are beginning to break the silence. A veteran worker at the plant recently contacted the WSWS and urged other workers to speak out.

“I never bought the official story [about Jacoby],” said the worker who used the pseudonym Mike to protect himself from retribution by the company and the UAW. “The union officials probably told him to shut up and be happy you have a job. The TPTs have no rights, they are treated like slaves. They get no vacations and can be fired for missing a day of work.”

Under the terms of the 2015 UAW contract, which greatly expanded the use of temporary part-time workers, the UAW agreed to a clause that says, “The company may discharge or terminate the employment of

Temporary Employee at any time.”

“They would bring in kids like Jacoby 50-100 at a time,” Mike said. “But they worked under a different set of rules. They didn't know anybody or anything about the plant, so they worked as fast as they could to keep up with the speeding robots. Management and the union wanted to keep these new workers segregated from the legacy workers because we would school them about not working so fast and doing the job safely.

“They drew a line in the sand between legacy workers and the second-tier and TPT workers that could never be crossed. As a legacy worker, you didn't want to be on the other side where they worked you to death and abused you.”

The legacy workers, Mike said, were mostly sympathetic to the second-tier and TPT workers. “But management and the union pit us against each other. The veterans knew the operations were moving too fast and that it was dangerous, but when we tried to slow down management would write us up. They would say to us, ‘The TPTs are running the parts this fast.’ This is the new standard, and if we didn't keep up, they said, they had plenty of TPTs to do your job. Management and the union were whipsawing us against each other. They pushed legacy workers to take buyouts or voluntary retirements, which were really forced retirements.

“Whatever chance we could the legacy workers would tell the new workers not to work so fast. We told them they would get hurt. These guys were afraid to go to medical because they thought they would get written up or fired. If they got cut on their hands, they would just wrap it up and keep going, and waited until they got home to take care of it.

“The TPTs did not feel represented by the union,” Mike said. “They pay dues, but the UAW won't do anything for them. If they filed a grievance, the union would say, ‘you don't have a legitimate grievance.’”

African-American workers also faced racial discrimination in the plant, the worker said. “They would put the black workers on lines that no one else would do. The north area in the press room was called the ‘ghetto.’ There were new white workers there too, but they kept these workers in a segregated group and abused them. If they tried this with the legacy workers we would have said, ‘Bring the ergonomics teams down here. Do a time study on this. It's too fast. Put someone else on the line.’ But they kept us away from them and these new kids didn't know any better and did the work.

“I remember the company marching all of these part-timers into the press room. They were not allowed to bring their lunches. They were not allowed to drink a soda. It was like night and day from when I was hired

in. The union is supposed to be the bridge between you and management, but they have become a crater. If you have the company and the union against you, you're toast. It makes me sick to say that I work for Ford."

In the 2015 UAW-Ford contract, the UAW agreed to a special "competitive cost structure" at Woodhaven in return for a promise of a \$300 million investment for new hot metal presses. A joint letter signed by then-UAW-Ford Vice President Jimmy Settles said that both parties understood the "expeditious transformation to an In-Progression non-skilled workforce is desirable and will require various joint efforts." Legacy workers at Woodhaven and other plants like Rawsonville and Sterling Axle were defined as 'surplus' and the company and the union agreed to work together to get them out of these plants through transfers or retirements.

"They want Woodhaven to be nothing but tier-two and tier-three and to push us legacy workers out," Mike said. "All the work on the new equipment is going to be done by lower-paid workers while the guys with 22-25 years seniority are only allowed to work the junk lines. All the equipment from A to Z is going to be new and no legacy workers will be allowed in the mix. It's like keeping a bad ingredient out of a recipe. That's what causes the animosity and friction between the legacy and new workers," he said. "The atmosphere in the plant is terrible."

He continued, "And just like we were kept out of their area, no TPTs are allowed in the legacy area. What kind of contract is that? They only want lower cost workers on the new line and they want to prevent older workers from talking to the younger workers.

"We have set break times; but the TPTs never stop and only get breaks when they are relieved. Instead of six TPTs getting together and saying, 'What are they doing to us?' and having 10-15 legacy workers saying, 'That's crazy, don't do it,' they made sure the workers never got together. That way they kept the older workers from schooling them about what was right and wrong.

"When I came into the plant twenty years ago, I was taken under the wing of the older workers who were there before me. They would tell us to slow down on the line and warn us that we would get hurt if we let management speed up us. 'Don't become a hero,' they would say, 'or you'll become a zero.' Thirty years on the line will chew up your body, they would tell us, so slow down.

"The union tells the TPTs they have to do what the company tells them. 'Do your job, the plant always has the right to tell you what to do,' they say. If workers complain about conditions, the union committeeman says 'They can do it. It's not in the contract that they can't.' Then there is the famous, 'I'll get back to you' and they never come back. The committeemen and upper level UAW officials are not in the same boat as the workers. The local is famous for getting officers promoted to Region 1A and Solidarity House.

Mike then reviewed the changes he has seen since the mid-1990s when he was first hired in at Woodhaven Stamping. At that time 2,600 workers were still employed at the factory, which stamps body sides, front panels, tailgates and other parts for Ford's top-selling pickup trucks, the Mustang and other models. Today there are around 400 workers left and half of them are TPTs.

"Back then it took nine months to get to full pay. We started at around \$12.25 and nine months later we were getting top pay of \$19.40 an hour. We got the same vacation time after a year and the same number of paid personal holidays. You could miss up to 10 days without an excuse and it would not be problem." In the last two decades, he said, "they changed all of that."

Starting in the 2000s, Mike said, management and the union started a push to get older workers to take "voluntary" retirements and buyouts. Between 2006 and 2008, Ford eliminated 50,000 hourly workers across the company in this manner. The workers who replaced the retirees, however, were not simply doing the same job but also the jobs of one or

more other workers. "We called it Retiree Syndrome," Mike said.

"In some cases, these used to be easier jobs, like material handling, where guys could work off the assembly line as they got close to retirement. But instead of a new hi-lo driver servicing just one assembly line, now the worker replacing a retiree had to do two, three or more lines. The hi-los were speeding around so much there was an increase in injuries. People were hit by forks or completely run over, like one worker who almost died."

"Fewer workers had to keep up with higher output. They were speeding up the lines and a supervisor would issue you a notice if it took 20 seconds to get out a part when they said you were supposed to get out in 13 seconds. From 200 parts an hour, you were up to 300 or 400 an hour.

"Workers would continuously write grievances about hi-los having to work on three lines and working the drivers to death. The union and management would say it could be done safely. We would say, 'Ok, get on the hi-lo and show us how it's done,' but they never would. Management and the union didn't care, they just wanted to reduce head count.

"Injuries went sky high between 2004 and 2008. Workers got back sprains, carpal tunnel syndrome in their hands and wrists, and they got hit by speeding hi-los. Management and the union would say these injuries were the workers' fault. After coming back from a week or two on injury, they would get a week off for not doing the job right.

Between 2004 and 2008 there were three workers killed in the plant. On June 22, 2004, millwright Gerald Storey, who had 36 years in the plant, was killed near Bay #1 and Press Line #1. He was grabbing die set cables that were tangled up on a 50-ton overhead crane when the cables suddenly released, decapitating the 62-year-old worker in the air.

On July 23, 2008, Fred Todd, a 39-year-old die setter with 19 years seniority, was killed when the transfer bolster—used to move a stamping die—he was working on unexpectedly moved toward the second, stationary bolster, trapping Todd and crushing him to death.

Another worker, a millwright with less than four years seniority, was killed during this period, Mike said, when he hit his head falling off breakroom No. 4 in the plant.

"It used to be mandatory that no die-setters should work by themselves. But they eliminated the die setter position and that rule. If Fred had been working with a co-worker, he might still be alive today—everybody knows that."

In 2015, the UAW contract expanded the number of TPTs and allowed them to work any day of the week. "They called them part-time temporary, but they were working 40 hours a week, Monday through Friday, and weekends too with no overtime," Mike said.

"I heard that Jacoby shut down the line because he said it was unsafe. He went to the union for help and they wouldn't respond. He probably went to labor relations and didn't get the response he needed either. Do I think that things went down the way the UAW, the police and the media reported it? No. I wouldn't trust anything the UAW reps say. All of their stories were identical. They said he looked like he was under the influence of drugs or alcohol. But the Medical Examiner did not find anything in his system but caffeine.

"I want to express my sympathy to the Hennings family for their loss and my solidarity in their fight to get to the truth and get justice. If we don't pay attention to what is happening to these second-, third- and fourth-tier workers, something like this will happen again. I would encourage current legacy workers at Woodhaven plant to come forward and provide information to shed more light on what happened to Jacoby."

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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