

Five Killed, Eight Wounded at Miss. Factory

Gunman Targets Co-Workers Before Committing Suicide

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A Mississippi factory employee who had allegedly threatened black co-workers shot and killed five people yesterday at the aircraft parts plant where he worked, wounding eight others before committing suicide, authorities said.

Workers ran for the exits as the gunman, identified as Doug Williams, walked through the Lockheed Martin plant firing a 12-gauge shotgun at them shortly before 10 a.m., Lauderdale County Sheriff Billy Sollie said. Williams had stepped away from a workplace ethics training session only minutes before. He returned with a semiautomatic rifle, which he did not fire, and the shotgun that he turned on employees at their work stations, authorities said.

The death toll at the military aircraft parts plant outside Meridian, Miss., was the largest in a U.S. workplace rampage since late 2000, and it chilled this city of 40,000, which bills itself as the safest in the state.

"This isn't supposed to happen in Meridian, Mississippi," said Mayor John Robert Smith, 54, a lifelong resident of the city, which lies 93 miles east of Jackson in central Mississippi, near the Alabama border. "Nothing like this has ever happened near our hometown, nor did we expect anything like this to happen."

Investigators said that the motive for the shootings has not been determined and that there is no clear indication that race was a factor. Four of the slain workers were black. Williams and another worker were white.

A cousin of slain worker Lanette McCall -- a 15-year plant employee with two children and two grandchildren -- said yesterday she had complained to supervisors that Williams had threatened to kill black employees and had regularly used racial epithets.

McCall, who was black, "was constantly concerned; she's been worried about this for a year," said her cousin, who asked not to be identified.

McCall's husband, Bruce, told the Associated Press that "she said [Williams] made a threat against black people."

A former plant employee also told reporters that the gunman had a reputation for racism and had threatened to kill people before. "When I first heard about it, he was the first thing that came to my mind," Jim Payton told the Associated Press. Williams had talked about wanting to kill people, saying: "I'm capable of doing it," said Payton, who worked with Williams for about a year before retiring.

The notion that race might have played a role in the killings saddened Jackie Burns, sister-in-law of Sam Cockrell, a black worker who died in the plant where he had worked for 22 years.

"We're supposed to be above things like that now; I know Sam was," she said. "We're praying for strength to hold us together. We're a close-knit family, a close-knit community."

No information about the gunman's work history was immediately available. A Lockheed Martin spokeswoman said the company has a zero-tolerance policy toward racial harassment.

Williams worked as a parts assembler at the plant. Sheriff's deputies found two pistols, a rifle with a scope and "a large quantity" of ammunition inside his vehicle in the company parking lot.

As news of the shooting spread, a tearful, deeply shaken crowd gathered across the street from the plant, which makes parts for the C-130J Hercules and F-22 Raptor aircraft. Clergy from throughout the region drove to the scene, Smith said.

"All you can see is saddened eyes," he said.

Betty Ward, a Meridian bar owner, drove into the industrial park where the plant is located as soon as the news broke. She feared the worst for her nephew, J.D. Dearman, 33, who was on the job when the loud report of shots rang inside the plant.

After anxious moments that seemed like days, Ward said she saw Dearman walk out, rattled but safe, thanks to a heart-revving escape over the hill behind the plant.

Dearman had taken work breaks with Williams, Ward said, and was shocked that he could have turned violent. Ward knew the gunman, too, having seen him often at the Poisson Country Store, where they both shopped.

"I always thought he was pleasant," Ward said. "He always said hi."

At Ward's bar, Betty's Rendezvous, she and her customers settled in to wait for the dead to be identified, certain there would be friends and acquaintances to visit in the hospital, or to bury, in this place where everyone seems to know everyone.

Meridian is a pre-Civil War railroad boomtown that is now Mississippi's sixth-largest city. It is in mostly rural Lauderdale County, which logged three killings last year -- two at a state prison. It took only a few awful minutes yesterday to nearly double the county's homicide rate.

"You cannot know the human mind or heart," Smith said, "and the destruction it can cause."

Staff researchers Alice Crites and Madonna Lebling contributed to this report.

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