

Tesla's Alleged Saboteur Is Doubling Down

Ryan Felton

A former Tesla technician accused by the automaker of stealing reams of confidential data and leaking it to outside sources now has an attorney, and he's doubling down on his allegation that Tesla made misstatements to investors about placing punctured batteries into Model 3s that were shipped to customers.

Tesla Leaker Is 'Looking Forward To The Lawsuit' Over Alleged Stolen Documents
Former Tesla technician Martin Tripp told Jalopnik on Thursday that he's lawyering up and plans to...

Meissner Associates, a law firm with a history of representing whistleblowers to the Securities and Exchange Commission, confirmed on Tuesday that it's representing the former Gigafactory technician, Martin Tripp.

In an official SEC Whistleblower Tip filed last Friday, Tripp alleges a series of claims that he has made since being connected to the leak of information. In particular, he claims, that Tesla place batteries "containing dangerous puncture holes in vehicles" and overstated to investors the number of Model 3 vehicles produced by as much as 44 percent. He also claims that Tesla "systematically reused parts already deemed scrap/waste in vehicles without regard to safety," the statement said.

An SEC tip is an formal whistleblower complaint that could lead to Tripp becoming eligible for a financial award, if securities laws violations are confirmed by the agency.

Tesla, which didn't immediately respond to a request for comment, has previously denied Tripp's claims, saying no batteries with punctured holes made it into cars delivered to customers, that Tripp overstated the amount of scrap generated by the company, and asserts the Model 3 production numbers are accurate. The SEC declined to comment.

In an interview, attorney Stuart Meissner told Jalopnik that Tripp "was put in contact with me" after Tesla sued him last month for allegedly hacking the company's computer systems, as well as stealing valuable secrets.

Meissner said he decided to take the former technician on as a client after speaking with him at length.

"I don't just take on every case," he said.

The situation presents a number of unusual circumstances, particularly that Tripp's identity has already been publicized.

"I've never had that know before," Meissner said. "Most people typically go out of the way to be anonymous. Unfortunately, he didn't have the opportunity."

Tesla, Meissner said, “obviously tracked him down and, in my view, tarred and feathered him in the public. So he was forced into the situation.”

Meissner won't be representing Tripp in the civil case Tesla filed against him in Nevada. But Tripp's continuing to interview prospective attorneys to represent him, Meissner said. Tesla is seeking at least \$1 million in damages in the case.

Meissner said he felt compelled by Tripp's case because of Tesla's “highly unusual PR campaign” levied after the lawsuit was filed. Tesla claimed it received a phone call from one of Tripp's friends after he was fired, alleging Tripp planned to return to the Gigafactory and “shoot the place up.” Tripp denied the claim and police found no credible threat.

“I basically think is an effort to send a warning shot to Tesla employees that your life can and will be ruined if you speak up about things that you see that are wrong,” Meissner told Jalopnik. “I find that offensive, and any time I see that I look forward to representing the client.”

Meissner previously represented an anonymous whistleblower who won \$22 million in a 2016 case against Monsanto.

That Tripp retained a high-profile attorney known to defend whistleblowers could set up Tesla with a lengthy legal battle it may not have anticipated. After filing a lawsuit against Tripp last month, the technician and CEO Elon Musk had a heated, headline-grabbing email exchange, and Tripp told Jalopnik he plans to file a counter-suit against the automaker for significantly higher damages than what Tesla is seeking.

“It's going to be for a lot more than what they're asking from me,” he told Jalopnik. “A lot more.”