

Child labor used in Hyundai-owned metal stamping plant in Alabama

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Children as young as 12 have been working illegally at a Hyundai-owned plant in the state, according to a recently published report by Reuters. Workers at the factory have known about the child workers for years; a recent missing child case originating in Enterprise, Alabama has forced the state to acknowledge the plant's hiring practices. Alabama's Attorney General has not yet issued a comment.

Pedro Tzi, a Guatemalan migrant living in Enterprise, reported in February that his teenage daughter was missing. In the ensuing investigation, it was revealed that the girl and her brothers, ages 12 and 15, had been working in nearby SMART, LLC, a subsidiary of Hyundai, for years. None of them attended school during this period. Tzi reported his daughter's age as 12 initially. In statements to Reuters, he said that she was almost 14.

The plant makes parts for Hyundai's Elantra, Sonata and Santa Fe models. Together, these vehicles represent almost 37 percent of the automaker's sales in the US.

Tzi's daughter was found in Atlanta, Georgia, traveling with a 20-year-old who also worked at SMART. The worker was charged with kidnapping, arrested, and swiftly deported. The teenager claims she left willingly, telling police that she and her companion had hoped to find better working conditions in Atlanta.

Having no jurisdiction over labor laws, the Enterprise Police Department reported the infractions to the State Attorney General's office. In response to the publication of the Reuters article, the Alabama Department of Labor announced on Friday that they would be launching a thorough investigation of the plant to ensure compliance with labor laws.

Around a dozen current and former employees of SMART spoke to Reuters, most of them on condition of anonymity, about the use of underage workers at the

plant.

One worker reported that he knew that about 50 child workers were at the plant. Another former employee reported that she worked with around 12 minors on her shift.

Tabatha Moultry was one of the few workers to speak openly to Reuters. She worked at the SMART plant for years, leaving in 2019. She told Reuters that the plant turned to hiring migrant workers to remedy high turnover and increasing demands on production. Moultry recounted working with a migrant girl who "looked 11 or 12 years old" and who came to work with her mother every day.

When Moultry pressed the girl about her age, she admitted she was 13.

"She was way too young to be working in that plant, or any plant," Moultry told Reuters.

SMART has said that it does not employ minors. Workers say that dozens of child workers were dismissed from the plant in anticipation of scrutiny following the Tzi girl's missing persons case.

Minors under the age of 18 are prohibited by both Alabama and federal law from working in metal stamping and pressing operations like SMART. Metal stamping is regarded by many occupational health experts as one of the most dangerous jobs in the manufacturing sector. The hazards in such facilities are manifold and severe: Amputations, lacerations, falls, and electrocution are but a few.

SMART's Luverne facility has accumulated \$48,515 in penalties from Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) since 2013. OSHA citations enumerate crushing and amputation risks at the facility.

According to its website, SMART, LLC is capable of producing parts for over 400,000 vehicles annually. Between its high turnover rates and increasing

production demands, the plant relies heavily upon labor from Mexico and Central America, and it frequently contracts with labor recruiters who procure visas for these workers. In late 2020, SMART General Manager Gary Sport penned a letter to U.S. consular officials in Mexico seeking a visa for a Mexican worker, saying that the plant was “severely lacking in labor” and that Hyundai “will not tolerate such shortcomings.”

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This year, a class-action lawsuit was filed against SMART and several of the staffing agencies on behalf of 40 Mexican workers. The lawsuit alleges that SMART used staffing agencies to hire workers as engineers. Once in the US, they were placed in manual labor jobs instead.

SMART has called these allegations “baseless.” Its relationship with unethical staffing companies is well-known to workers, though. Workers speaking to Reuters claim that the minors at the plant were hired through staffing agencies.

Hyundai is one of several automakers who have opened plants in Alabama in the past 20 years. The state’s tax incentives, lax regulation, and depressed salaries make the state an attractive location for companies seeking a cheap labor force.

The pandemic has led to historic turnover and to supply chain issues for these companies. Hyundai has responded to these pressures by deciding to expand its operations in the United States and says it plans to invest over \$5 billion.

This will translate to more aggressive hiring strategies. SMART’s child labor practices are nothing but an embarrassment; in the future, the company and its recruitment agencies will proceed, not with a plan to hire ethically, but to cover their tracks more thoroughly.

The automotive industry is not the only sector turning to illegal hiring practices since the pandemic. In Enterprise, the city where Pedro Tzi lives with his children, a 16-year-old Guatemalan migrant was illegally hired to work in a poultry plant. Amelia Domingo had fled Guatemala alone, like many Central American children have done in recent years.

Unaccompanied minor immigrants like Amelia will be especially vulnerable to unethical hiring practices as supply chain issues continue, labor researchers say.



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