

Amid cover-up of whistleblower John Barnett's "suicide," new Boeing whistleblower exposes safety violations in manufacture of 787 Dreamliner

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The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) confirmed Tuesday that it is investigating assertions by a Boeing whistleblower that components of the 787 Dreamliner are improperly put together and “could break apart mid-flight after thousands of trips,” according to a report in the *New York Times*.

Engineer Sam Salehpour, who has worked for Boeing for more than a decade, including working on the Dreamliner, gave details of his claims to the *Times* in a series of interviews and in documents he sent to the FAA. While an FAA representative acknowledged its investigation into the complaints, it would not comment to the *Times* on specifics.

Salehpour said that changes in how the sections of the 787 Dreamliner fuselage, which come from different suppliers, are “fitted and fastened together” on the assembly line have compromised the integrity of the aircraft. He charged that shortcuts being taken by Boeing “resulted in excessive force being applied to narrow unwanted gaps in the assembly connecting pieces of the Dreamliner’s fuselage,” the *Times* wrote.

The engineer said the force used led to the deformation of the composite material out of which the jetliner components are made. This deformation, he said, “could increase the effects of fatigue and lead to premature failure of the composite.”

The Boeing 787 Dreamliner is a wide-body jet that can carry between 210 and 330 passengers, depending on the configuration. It is the first plane with an airframe made primarily of composite materials, which are lighter than metal and make the Dreamliner more fuel-efficient than other jets.

At the same time, composites, made by combining materials, such as carbon and glass fiber, are comparatively newer materials. Less is known about how they hold up under the long-term stresses of flight. Engineers call those

stresses “fatigue,” which can compromise safety if it causes the material to fail.

The new whistleblower complaints at Boeing have emerged just one month after former quality manager John Barnett, who also worked on the 787 Dreamliner at the company’s manufacturing facility in North Charleston, South Carolina, was found dead in his car from a purported self-inflicted gunshot wound.

Barnett was scheduled to continue giving deposition testimony in a civil suit he filed against Boeing for retaliating against him after he spoke out against practices that undermined airline safety. Although his death in the parking lot of a Holiday Inn was ruled a suicide by the county coroner, Charleston law enforcement is still investigating it.

According to a local news report at the time, police said Barnett had a silver handgun in his right hand with his finger still on the trigger when he was found by a hotel employee. The police said there was a white piece of paper “resembling a note” on the passenger seat of his car but did not specify the contents of the note.

Barnett’s attorneys have questioned the suicide narrative and maintained that, prior to his death, John was happy to be finally telling his side of the story after seven years of court delays.

In its report on Tuesday, the *New York Times* mentioned John Barnett only in passing, calling him a “prominent whistle-blower who raised concerns about manufacturing practices” at Boeing, adding that he was found dead last month with “what appeared to be a self-inflicted gunshot wound.”

Like Barnett, Salehpour told the *Times* he had been repeatedly retaliated against for bringing up his concerns about the shortcut methods employed by Boeing on Dreamliner jets. The engineer’s attorney, Debra S. Katz,

said that when Salehpour approached his supervisors with his concerns or tried to bring them up at safety meetings, he was silenced and transferred to another product line, the 777.

Responding to the revelation of a new FAA probe, Boeing representative Paul Lewis said there was “no impact on durability or safe longevity of the airframe.” Lewis also claimed that Boeing had extensively tested the Dreamliner, and that the concerns raised by Salehpour were determined to be “not an immediate safety of flight issue.”

In another official Boeing statement, the company said it was “fully confident in the 787 Dreamliner,” adding that “these claims about the structural integrity of the 787 are inaccurate and do not represent the comprehensive work Boeing has done to ensure the quality and long-term safety of the aircraft.”

Given the string of recent, in some cases near-fatal, equipment failures, as well as the nose-dive crashes of 737 Max 8 planes in Indonesia in 2018 and Ethiopia in 2019 that killed a total of 346 people, these reassurances from Boeing are not credible.

As recently as 2021, Boeing acknowledged that some Dreamliner planes had shims—the thin piece of material used to fill gaps in manufacturing—that were not the proper size, and some aircraft had areas that did not meet skin-flatness specifications.

Just last Sunday, a Southwest Airlines flight had to return to its departure point in Denver when an engine cover on a 737 fell off during takeoff and struck the wing flap. Flight 3695 was on its way to Houston when, at around 8:15 a.m., the crew reported the engine cowling had fallen off. The FAA said it would investigate the incident, in which the plane, with 135 passengers and five crew members on board, had to be towed back to the gate after its emergency landing.

The Southwest Airlines engine cowling failure occurred three months after a door plug on a Boeing 737 MAX 9 plane flown by Alaska Airlines blew out shortly after takeoff, at 15,000 feet. Although no one was killed or seriously injured, the preliminary findings of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigation showed that Boeing failed to replace four critical bolts holding the door plug into place before the plane was delivered to Southwest.

Behind these failures are a series of interconnected processes, including shortcuts, lack of quality inspection, failure to follow FAA procedures and outsourcing of subcomponent assembly. The culture of unsafe practices is driven by corporate requirements that products be rushed to market and costs reduced to drive up Boeing’s profitability and improve its stock market performance.

According to a report in the *Wall Street Journal* on Monday, Boeing is facing an enormous financial crisis

stemming in part from its accidents and product failures, and more broadly from changes in the airline industry. Boeing has not made a profit since 2018. It lost \$2.24 billion in 2023 and \$5.05 billion in 2022.

The largest US aircraft manufacturer had \$52.31 billion in debt last year, which is double the debt in 2019, and \$12.69 billion in cash and cash equivalents last year, which is down from \$14.61 billion in 2022.

Meanwhile, Boeing’s credit rating was downgraded by Moody’s on March 26 to Baa2, which is two notches above junk status. Since January, when the door plug blowout occurred, Boeing’s stock value has fallen from \$249 per share to \$175 per share, a decline of 30 percent.

This has not prevented the company’s top executives from awarding themselves multi-million-dollar pay packages. CEO David Calhoun, who recently announced that he will step down at the end of this year, had a total compensation of \$32.8 million in 2023, up from \$22.6 million in 2022.

Boeing is not only the second largest producer of commercial aircraft in the world, behind Europe-based Airbus, it is the world’s largest aerospace company, producing military aircraft and space systems which are critical to the US war machine.

These are the factors behind the systematic cover-up of the corporation’s criminal negligence by the government, both political parties, the regulatory agencies, the courts and the corporate-controlled media. Not a single Boeing executive has been held criminally liable for unsafe practices that led to the deaths of hundreds in the two crashes of 2018 and 2019 and the recent string of near-disasters. The virtual silence on the highly suspicious death of John Barnett is the most sinister aspect of the cover-up.



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