

Another Boeing whistleblower dies, the second in two months

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Joshua Dean, a whistleblower at Boeing supplier Spirit AeroSystems, was reported dead after a brief illness on Wednesday. Dean, a former quality auditor at Spirit, had given a deposition against Spirit, alleging “serious and gross misconduct by senior quality management of the 737 production line.”

The 45-year-old’s death came suddenly—the *Seattle Times* reported that he began having trouble breathing two weeks ago and was hospitalized and intubated. He reportedly developed pneumonia and a bacterial infection of MRSA. He was ultimately put on machines to circulate and oxygenate his blood in the face of heart and lung failure before he died.

Dean’s claims against Spirit first emerged after the midair blowout of a 737 MAX 9 jet, Alaska Flight 1282, in January, which injured dozens. An ongoing federal investigation has provided evidence that production issues for the MAX 9, in this case missing bolts on a door plug, are the immediate reason for the disaster.

Since then, Boeing planes have suffered numerous incidents, from panels falling off to sudden drops in altitude while in flight. Each individually is a major issue and taken together speak to the underlying drive for profits at the expense of quality and safety that dominates the company.

Dean worked for Spirit from 2019-2020, and then from May 2021 to April 2023. He was laid off in the interim as a result of pandemic-related job cuts, despite Spirit getting \$75.5 million in bailout money from the federal government.

During his second tenure, Dean uncovered improperly drilled holes in the aft pressure bulkhead of the 737 MAX jetliners being produced by Spirit. He informed management of the issue, which did nothing to correct the problem.

Instead, Spirit focused on a different error involving flawed fittings between the vertical tail fin and the fuselage, which Dean missed, and used it as an excuse to fire him in April 2023.

When Dean was interviewed about his firing by NPR in February, he told the outlet that he felt he was fired to send a message to other potential whistleblowers. “If you are too loud, we will silence you.”

It was only in August that Spirit was forced to acknowledge the problem Dean first raised, noting that it was a flaw in the MAX aircraft going back as far as 2019.

It should be noted that around that time, in October 2018 and March 2019, two Boeing 737 MAX 8 aircraft crashed, caused in part by flawed and undocumented software, which resulted in the deaths of a total of 346 passengers and crew for both planes. While subsequent reports on the crashes did not make much note of deficiencies in the body of the aircraft, the fact that they existed speaks to the generally unsafe production practices surrounding the 737 MAX project as a whole.

Dean’s death comes less than two months after the purported suicide of another Boeing whistleblower, John “Mitch” Barnett. Barnett, who had been fired from Boeing in 2017, was giving a deposition in a lawsuit for Boeing’s retaliation against him for warning about a different set of quality issues, these at Boeing’s 787 plant in Charleston, South Carolina.

On what was scheduled to be his third consecutive day of providing information about his case, Barnett was found in his rental car in his hotel’s parking lot with an apparent “self-inflicted gunshot wound,” according to the Charleston County Coroner’s Office.

Both whistleblowers were represented by the same law firm in South Carolina. In the wake of Dean’s death, Brian Knowles, one of the firm’s lawyers,

stated, “Whistleblowers are needed. They bring to light wrongdoing and corruption in the interests of society. It takes a lot of courage to stand up.”

The most significant aspect of both deaths, however, is the lack of any significant corporate media attention on either.

If two whistleblowers at the same major company or industry, using the same law firm to file lawsuits, died within two months of each other in Russia, Iran or China, the US media would have immediately asserted a conspiracy was afoot to silence dissent. It’s also more than likely the Biden administration itself would get involved, possibly claiming that Russian president Vladimir Putin, Iran’s Ayatollah Khamenei or Chinese president Xi Jinping were directly involved.

The silence is especially telling given the timing of both deaths and how suspect each has been. In the aftermath of Barnett’s death, a family friend told an ABC affiliate that Barnett had warned her, “If anything happens to me, it’s not suicide.” Vicky Stokes, Barnett’s mother, when asked if she blamed Boeing for her son’s death, responded, “I do.”

Regarding Dean’s death, the symptoms and speed at which he died could very well indicate he was poisoned.

There should be no doubt elements within Boeing or Spirit are capable of such acts. Spirit is Boeing’s main supplier, a spin-off of the aerospace giant created two decades ago to cut costs. Since then, both have proven to be key components in the operation of American imperialism, including the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Boeing produces Apache helicopters and F-15 fighter jets, both of which have been used by the Israeli military as it has laid waste to the enclave and killed more than 34,568 Palestinians since last October.

Boeing and Spirit are also emblematic of the revolving door between US defense companies and the US military. Spirit’s current CEO is Patrick Shanahan, who worked for Boeing from 1986 to 2016, when he became a senior vice president. He left in 2017 to become Deputy Secretary of Defense for ex-President Donald Trump, and was elevated to Acting Secretary of Defense in 2019.

He then left the government for the private sector and served on the boards of directors for various companies before being appointed interim President and CEO of Spirit in October 2023. Shanahan’s net worth is

currently estimated at \$6.9 million.

Dean’s exposures, as well of those of Barnett and the numerous other whistleblowers who have come forward in recent months, must be taken as serious warnings. Boeing’s focus is above all on profits for its executives and shareholders, and to continue its support of the US government’s wars abroad. The safety of the flying public is at best a tertiary concern.



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