

Quality inspector sues GM, Toyota over retaliation in Fremont plant

Michael Taylor, Chronicle Staff Writer

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The world's two largest automakers - Toyota and General Motors - were sued in Alameda County Superior Court Tuesday by a quality control inspector who said plant managers retaliated against her when she reported numerous defects on thousands of vehicles produced by the joint Toyota/GM factory in Fremont.

In a so-called whistle-blower lawsuit, Katy Cameron, 54, said she reported to her bosses at the New United Motor Manufacturing Inc. facility that cars were rolling off the assembly line with "defective seat belts," "water leaks throughout the vehicles," "mirrors falling off," "steering wheel alignment defects" and "missing radiator caps," among other problems.

Cameron's job, which she has been doing since 1991, was to detect "serious defects" in the cars before they were shipped to dealers, but eight years ago, the suit said, the Nummi managers started changing her defect reports "in order to lower the daily Defect Per Vehicle."

Two years ago, Cameron said in the lawsuit filed by San Francisco attorney Kelly Armstrong, "the report alterations became more substantial, and Nummi management routinely deleted or downgraded significant and serious defects" from her reports.

Cameron, who said she has worked at the plant for 23 years, is now on medical leave, she said in an interview, because of the "emotional distress" allegedly caused her by her experiences at the auto plant.

Cameron and Armstrong said it was not known if any of the allegedly defective vehicles caused death or injury to any customers.

Nummi, which also was named in the suit, was created in the early 1980s as a joint venture between GM and Toyota to make small cars. In 2006, a "banner year at Nummi," according to Nummi News, an internal newspaper, the factory produced nearly 429,000 vehicles - Toyota Tacoma pickup trucks, as well as Toyota Corolla and Pontiac Vibe cars.

In response to the lawsuit, spokesman Lance Tomasu said in an e-mailed statement, "Nummi cannot comment on pending claims. However, quality is a high priority. Over the years our team members have worked hard to assure a long tradition of outstanding quality, earning numerous plant and product awards. The success of our vehicles in the marketplace is a strong indication that our customers appreciate the quality of Nummi-built cars and trucks. Nevertheless, we will investigate these claims thoroughly."

On the Nummi Web site (www.nummi.com), the joint venture explains its manufacturing process this way:

"One of Nummi's basic concepts is that quality should be ensured in the production process itself. This concept, known as *jidoka*, means not allowing problems to pass from one work station to the next.

Jidoka can refer to equipment automatically stopping under abnormal conditions, such as when a machine breaks or problems arise. *Jidoka* is also used when a team member encounters a problem in his or her work station. Team members are responsible for correcting the problem by pulling (on a) cord, which can stop the line."

Cameron said that from 2005 through 2007, she was finding an average of nine to 15 defects per car. Knowing that her managers were altering her reports, she charged, Cameron "began retaining her original reports, which were done in pencil, and turning in photocopies to Nummi management to make it more difficult for them to erase the numerous defects she reported."

She said in the suit that one manager "threatened to fire her when she complained to him" about the defective vehicle reports and that although she "complained repeatedly" to management about the "unlawful altering of audit reports" and the "retaliation and harassment" she was suffering, "they feigned ignorance of the harassment ... and did nothing to investigate her complaints or prevent future harassment."