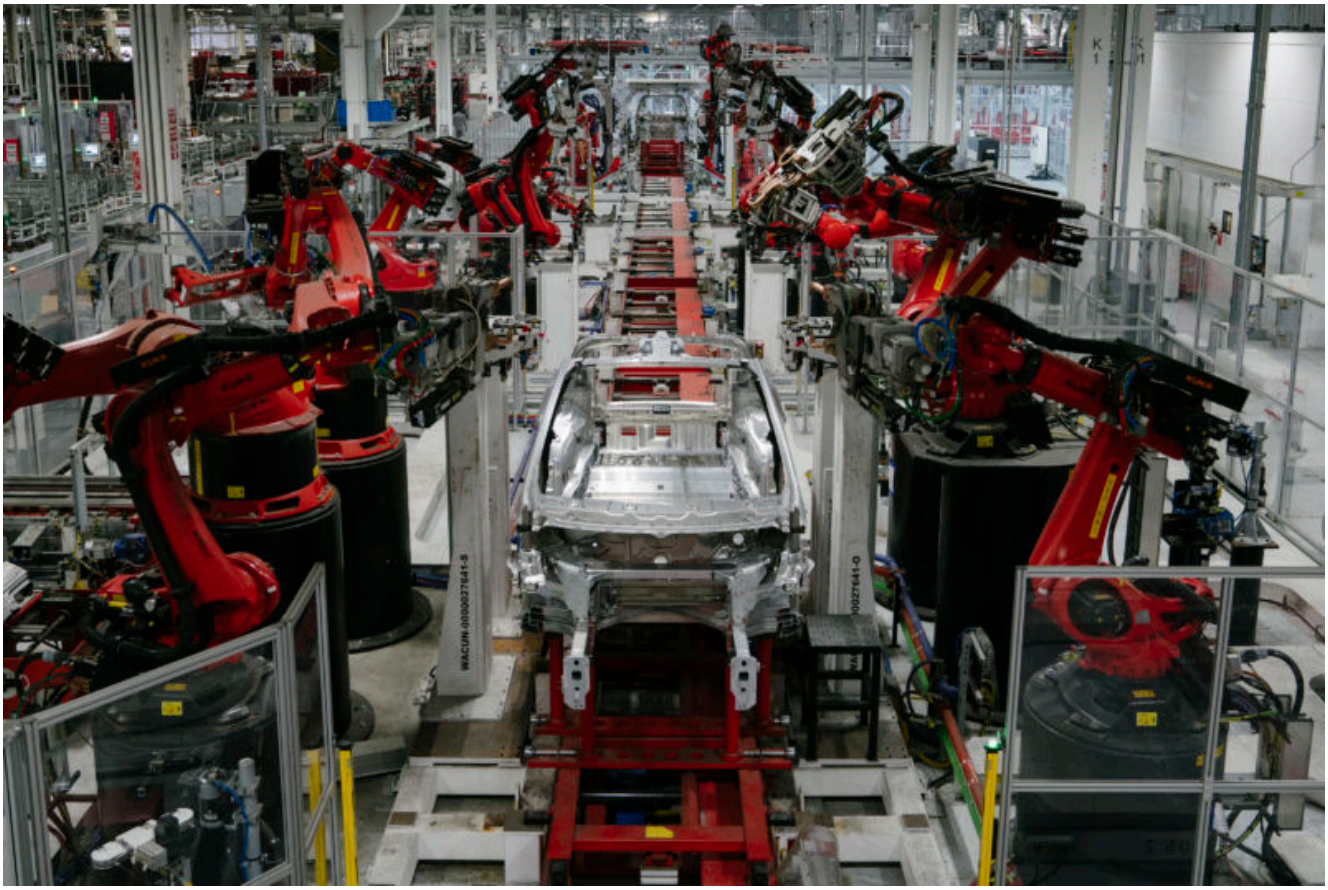
Tesla accuses engineer of plotting secret project, she denies it and sues



Enlarge / Tesla’s Fremont factory in July 2018.
Mason Trinca for The Washington Post via Getty Images

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An ex-Tesla engineer has sued her former employer, accusing the company of defamation.

The lawsuit (and pages of exhibits) were filed Wednesday by Cristina Balan in federal court in Seattle. Balan says she was forced out of Tesla in 2014 and has been tangling with the

company for years, both in arbitration and in the press.

According to Balan's lawsuit, the alleged defamatory statements include that she spent company money without approval, booked an unapproved trip to New York, produced a secret project for windshields for her own benefit, and conducted illegal audio recordings of coworkers.

Balan maintains that all of those assertions are false.

Unusually, the case was filed *pro se*—Balan does not have a lawyer and is representing herself. Traditionally it is very difficult for a plaintiff without any legal training to prevail against a large corporation with high-powered attorneys.

"I don't trust lawyers anymore after what happened with me in the arbitration with Tesla," she told Ars, adding that her arbitration proceedings were nearing completion.

Balan, who is originally from Romania but now lives in Washington state, suggested that she was not happy with the outcome of her arbitration—a private quasi-legal procedure that she brought over her alleged undeserved dismissal.

"Arbitration is over but not [closed] as I'm getting ready to file a motion for what I lost," she continued. "I won the misclassification and I lost the wrongful termination."

The new lawsuit revolves around a September 2017 story published on the Huffington Post, which has since been removed without explanation but is available on the Internet Archive.

In the story, writer Paul Alexander described Balan's ongoing dispute with Tesla, linking to her blog post in which she outlines her claim that she was pushed out of the company after reaching out to CEO Elon Musk directly with concerns about suppliers.

Alexander's post was appended days later with a lengthy

response from Tesla itself, describing Balan's theories as "patently false, and frankly, completely nonsensical."

As Tesla continued:

> *While at the company, Ms. Balan made a number of inaccurate claims about our selection of particular suppliers and supposed quality issues, all of which were investigated extensively and found to be entirely without merit. For example, Ms. Balan was unhappy with a particular supplier that was selected by an internal group of subject matter experts who extensively studied the issue. She took it upon herself to find an alternative supplier that had no prior relevant experience and that had failed a mandatory site inspection, and was upset when that supplier was not chosen.*
>
> …
>
> *Rather than working on her assignments, Ms. Balan spent company time working on a "secret project" without her manager's approval and booked an unapproved trip to New York at Tesla's expense to visit a potential supplier for her own personally-created project. She also illegally recorded internal conversations within Tesla without anyone's permission, which is clearly criminal conduct.*

Tesla and Musk have a history of making pointed and direct public statements about individuals they disagree with, notably Martin Tripp, a former technician at the Nevada Gigafactory. (*Tesla v. Tripp* and Tripp's defamation countersuit are still pending in federal court in Nevada.)

Tesla did not immediately respond to Ars' request for comment.

UPDATE 5:27pm ET: Balan texted Ars to say that she asked Tesla "multiple times" to remove the defamatory comments, "but they didn't want to!"

She added that the article stayed up until late December 2018,

when a friend of hers contacted the Huffington Post’s lawyers to complain, and pointed out possible liability over the alleged false statements. Balan concluded that Tesla had “intentionally” left the comment “to hurt me.”

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