

Michigan Supreme Court Expands Employer Exposure to Public Policy Retaliation Claims

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In Michigan, various state employment laws prohibit employers from retaliating against employees. But can an employee pursue a public policy retaliation claim against the employer in addition to a statutory retaliation claim?

On July 22, 2024, the Michigan Supreme Court ruled that anti-retaliation provisions in two important workplace safety laws—the federal Occupational Safety and Health Act (“OSHA”) and Michigan’s Occupational Safety and Health Act (“MIOSHA”)—do not preclude a plaintiff from also asserting a violation of public policy in court. [Stegall v. Resource Technology Corp](#) (Case No. 165450, decided July 22, 2024).

Cleveland Stegall, an IT specialist working at FCA through the staffing agency Resource Technology, complained internally about asbestos insulation issues at the assembly plant and threatened to file complaints with the government. He was subsequently terminated. Stegall sued both entities for wrongful discharge under OSHA and MIOSHA’s anti-retaliation provisions, as well as termination in violation of public policy.

At-will employees generally may be terminated for any reason (or no reason at all). But one exception to this rule is that certain terminations violate public policy and therefore create an actionable legal claim. This includes firings for “failure or refusal to violate a law” or exercising a right conferred by the Michigan Legislature.

Both the trial court and the Court of Appeals dismissed Stegall’s public policy claim because they concluded that the OSHA and MIOSHA laws already forbid retaliation. The Michigan Supreme Court reversed. It reasoned that the remedies under OSHA and MIOSHA are insufficient, pointing to the truncated 30-day period to file a complaint with the relevant government agency, the discretion granted to the respective investigating agency, and the employee’s lack of control over what occurs after a complaint has been filed. See [29 U.S.C. §660\(c\)\(2\)](#) and [MCL 408.1065\(2\)](#).

What does this case mean for employers? The Michigan Supreme Court's decision provides another avenue for employees to pursue retaliation claims, particularly where the employee raises workplace safety concerns. It is unclear, however, whether courts will extend this ruling and allow employees to pursue public policy wrongful discharge claims if the employee is also seeking relief under another anti-retaliation statute.

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