

Karen Silkwood (1946 – 74)

OCAW member and atomic worker Karen Silkwood was a union martyr. She died trying to protect the health, safety and security of her fellow workers and the community at large. She died nearly 40 years ago on Nov. 13, 1974, while en route to a meeting with OCAW health and safety staffer Steve Wodka and *New York Times* investigative reporter David Burnham. She was bringing them documents proving that her company, Kerr-McGee Nuclear Corp., had falsified quality control records of nuclear fuel rods.

On the way to the meeting, Silkwood's car allegedly was run off the road. The documents she had with her were not found in her vehicle. "An independent investigator provided convincing evidence that Silkwood's car was struck from the rear and driven off the road, causing her death," said Tony Mazzocchi, who was OCAW's legislative director at the time.

Active in the national fight for worker health and safety, Mazzocchi met with Silkwood and two other committee members of OCAW Local 5-283 on Sept. 26, 1974 at the international union's legislative office in Washington, D.C. Silkwood and her colleagues described their employer, Kerr McGee's, attempt to decertify the union, and talked about the serious health and safety problems at the Cimarron, Okla., plant. OCAW members at this facility worked with plutonium – plutonium can cause cancer if ingested in quantities as small as one-millionth of an ounce – in the fabrication of nuclear fuel rods.

Silkwood, who was the first woman ever elected to the local's three-person bargaining committee, was assigned to health and safety matters. An employee at the company for two years, she was concerned about working conditions at the plant.

"When I explained the connection between plutonium exposure and cancer, it took Karen by surprise," Mazzocchi said, recalling the September 1974 meeting. "She was angered at how Kerr-McGee was taking workers' lives into its own hands. She herself had been in a contaminated room without a respirator just two months before."

It was during this fateful meeting that Silkwood revealed the company was altering the inspection records of plutonium fuel rods. If true, such activity would have vast implications, not only for the health of the workers in the plant, but the public at large. These rods were for nuclear reactors.

After Silkwood's death, there was a federal investigation of the Kerr-McGee plant and widely-reported allegations of missing plutonium. Her family later won a multi-million dollar judgment

against the company. “Karen Silkwood risked her life because she cared about her fellow workers. Because of what she did the companies were forced to make many changes that protect workers’ lives and health to this day,” said former OCAW President Bob Wages.

Karen Silkwood probably is the most famous workplace whistleblower of all time. Today, her name evokes the importance of health and safety on the job.