

Death of Plutonium Worker Questioned by Union Official

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 18—high-ranking union official said today that the death last week of a woman who had raised critical safety questions about one of the two commercial plutonium factories in the United States might not have been an accident.

The official sent telegrams calling on the Justice Department and the Atomic Energy Commission to begin an immediate investigation into the death of Karen G. Silkwood, who died last Wednesday when her car crashed into a culvert a few miles south of Crescent, Okla.

The crash was described as an accident by the Oklahoma Highway Patrol. State officials are making a routine investigation into whether alcohol or drugs were a factor in the crash. Neither the Justice Department nor the A.E.C. nor Oklahoma officials had any immediate comment tonight on the union official's telegram.

In his telegram to Attorney General William B. Saxbe, Anthony Mazzocchi, Washington representative of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, said an investigator hired by the union had found evidence "to suggest that Miss Silkwood's car was hit from behind by another vehicle, causing her to leave the road and hit the concrete culvert." He said he was not accusing any specific person of a crime.

Union Has Car

Mr. Mazzocchi told the Attorney General that the union had the car, its investigative report of the crash and other data in its possession and would make them available to both the Justice Department and the A.E.C.

He said that the union had decided to make the evidence available to the Justice Department and the A.E.C. rather than state officials because "the problems were of such great seriousness that they require the Federal presence."

Miss Silkwood, who worked in the Cimarron facility of the Kerr-McGee Corporation near Crescent, was on her way to meeting with an official of the union and a reporter for The New York Times to discuss safety conditions at the plant. Two weeks ago, she was exposed to a large amount of radiation in an accident at the plant that the A.E.C. is still investigating.

At a meeting with the commission in Washington on Sept. 27, Miss Silkwood and two of her colleagues from the Cimarron plant charged that officials there had endangered the lives of the workers.

At approximately the same time, the three technicians provided the union with additional allegations that the facility was manufacturing some faulty fuel rods and that inspection documents required for these rods had been falsified.

The union tape-recorded these allegations at the time they were made. Recent conversations with other technicians, who asked that their names not be made public, produced additional charges that inspection records had been falsified.

Responsible to A.E.C.

Informed of the statement of the union, D. A. McGee, board chairman and chief executive officer of Kerr-McGee, said that because Miss Silkwood's death was still under investigation, it would not be appropriate to comment on it.

"Regarding allegations of falsification of records," he added, "we are fully responsible to the A.E.C. and other regulatory agencies for both quality control and safety and our records are continuously audited."

The Cimarron facility, protected by a tall chain-link fence on a low hill four miles south of Crescent, manufac-

tures plutonium fuel rods that will be used in an experimental, liquid metal, fast breeder reactor being constructed for the A.E.C. near Richland, Wash.

The experimental reactor, which is being built under a \$420-million contract, is scheduled to be completed in 1977 and to be in operation in 1978. It is intended to test a new generation of reactors that the Atomic Energy Commission hopes will provide the United States with increasing amounts of electric power.

There are varying estimates about the potential danger should the allegations of the workers about faulty fuel rods be true. Dr. Ralph Lapp, for many years a leading atomic power expert, said that, as a hypothetical situation, he did not believe faulty rods were much of a problem.

"Should any problem cause a leak it would be spotted and the rod would be removed," he explained.

Dr. Henry Kendall, a leading nuclear critic and physics professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, disagreed.

"These failures could start off an accident which would result in the release of huge amounts of radioactivity," he said.

The day after Miss Silkwood's white 1973 Honda smashed into the culvert on the left side of the straight road, the Oklahoma Highway Patrol issued a report describing the accident but not offering any explanation for it. The accident, which occurred about 7:30 P.M., was investigated by State Trooper Rick Fagan. Miss Silkwood was buried yesterday in Kilgore, Tex.

Because of the incident in the factory where she was exposed to a large amount of radiation, the A.E.C. is conducting a special autopsy on her organs.

In his telegram to Mr. Saxbe, Mr. Mazzocchi said that Miss Silkwood, at the time of her death, "was on her way to meet Mr. Steven Wodka, legislative assistant to the O.C.A.W., and David Burnham, a reporter for The New York Times, who were waiting for her in the Holiday Inn N.W. in Oklahoma City, Okla."

"Miss Silkwood," Mr. Mazzocchi continued, "was bringing information concerning the alleged falsification of records concerning quality of nuclear fuel elements being manufactured at the Cimarron facility."

He said: "We are in possession at this time of sufficient evidence that we believe would lend credibility to Miss Silkwood's allegations."

Mr. Mazzocchi said that or being informed of Miss Silkwood's death, he obtained the permission of A. F. Grospron, president of the union, to hire a private investigator who had expertise in examining car crashes to determine the cause of her death.

"The investigator hired is Mr. A. O. Pipkin Jr. of Accident Reconstruction Lab of Dallas, Tex," he said. "He conducted his investigation on Saturday, Nov. 16, 1974. I spoke with him this morning and he has told me there is evidence to suggest that Miss Silkwood's car was hit from behind by another vehicle, causing her car to leave the road and hit the concrete culvert."

2,000 Accidents

In a telephone conversation, Mr. Pipkin said he based his conclusion about the probable cause of the accident on a small fresh dent on the left rear bumper of Miss Silkwood's car and the configuration of the skid marks on the grassy left bank of the highway just before she dipped into the stream bed and struck the culvert.

Mr. Pipkin did highway investigations for the Albuquerque, N. M., Police Department between 1951 and 1955 before establishing his own firm. He has investigated more than 2,000 accidents and testified in more than 300 court trials frequently for insurance companies.

He said that because of the dents and skid marks, "it was highly probable that the car was acted upon by an external force, that the crash was the result of Miss Silkwood's car being struck by another vehicle."

"I recognize the full gravity of my suspicions and urge your immediate attention to this matter," Mr. Mazzocchi concluded.

In response to a question, he said: "I am not accusing any particular person with murder. Based on an independent investigation, however, it is apparent that someone forced Karen Silkwood from the road, thereby causing her death. I'll leave it to the Federal authorities to determine who and why."

Miss Silkwood had been a leader in a recent battle to have



Karen G. Silkwood, who died in a car crash last week in Oklahoma.

Local No. 5-283 of the O.C.A.W. continue representing workers in the plant. The union won the battle by a vote of 80 to 61 on Oct. 16.

In her meeting with the A.E.C. on Sept. 27, according to the commission's summary of the session, Miss Silkwood and her companions charged that the facility had failed to educate and train workers properly in the handling of plutonium, long regarded as an extremely toxic substance. They also charged that the company had failed to keep exposures of plutonium as low as possible, to adequately monitor workers' exposure and take the required hygienic precautions.

One specific allegation they made was that the company had gradually reduced training from five days to two four-hour sessions during the last two years.