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Foreword to *The Killing of Karen Silkwood*

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Foreword to *The Killing of Karen Silkwood*

Abstract
[Excerpt] *The Killing of Karen Silkwood,* therefore, is both a cautionary and inspirational tale. It reminds us of what we are up against and what it takes to win. But most of all it reminds us why each of us must stand with the whistle-blowers and the ordinary heroes that are among us, in the workplace, in government, and in our communities, and, if given the opportunity, become ordinary heroes ourselves. The risks are great, but the costs of not standing up and not speaking out are even greater.

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Foreword

Americans have always loved the idea of ordinary people stumbling into heroism. We treasure our unlikely heroes, whether Rosa Parks or "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." They provide us comfort both in the construction of our own honor — there, but for the opportunity, go we as well — and the sense that even the most powerful and corrupt institutions and individuals can be brought down by one ordinary person doing the right thing.

Karen Silkwood was one of those ordinary people who never intended to be a hero, much less a martyr. At the time of her death on November 13, 1974, few could have imagined that her seemingly small acts of heroism would become the stuff of Hollywood films and propel her to the list of *Life Magazine*'s top fifty baby boomers. She was just twenty-eight years old, a laboratory analyst at Kerr-McGee's plutonium plant in Crescent, Oklahoma. Her first two years at Kerr-McGee had been relatively uneventful. She had been neither particularly involved in her union nor seriously concerned about the hazards of working with plutonium. But all that changed in the summer of 1974. In four short months she was elected to the union bargaining committee, spoke before the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) about plutonium contamination incidents in the plant, uncovered evidence of doctored quality-assurance records for defective fuel rods, and was contaminated by potentially lethal levels of plutonium. Then, on her way to deliver her documentation of fuel rod tampering to a reporter from the *New York Times* and a representative from her union, the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers (OCAW), she was killed when her car was forced off the road.

The contamination incident and her death occurred less than two months after Karen Silkwood made her presentation to the AEC. She had little time to think through the risky and principled actions she took, or to assess the extremely powerful forces she was taking on. But she took the risks just the same.

There are many thousands like Karen who risk their jobs, health, reputation, families, or career because they see something wrong in the government or their workplace and feel they have no choice but to try to make it right. What is different about Karen Silkwood is that her actions cost her her life, and, in the process, managed to shake up the nuclear industry, national security, and the U.S. labor and environmental movements.

Yet, because of the circumstances of her death and the power of the institutions she challenged, Karen Silkwood is one of those heroes whose story and cause are not easily embraced by the American psyche. We may revel in stories of ordinary heroes in the telling but are much less comfortable with them as they unfold. This is particularly true of stories like Silkwood's where there are still so many questions and mysteries left unresolved. We like our heroes after they have won and their giant of an opponent has been vanquished. But when they are in the middle of taking a stand or blowing the whistle and the outcome of their actions remains uncertain, we shun them lest they drag us in and resent them for calling into question our own integrity.

Thus today's whistle-blower is ostracized while yesterday's is celebrated, but only if safely victorious and only long after he or she has suffered the indignities of a shattered career, broken friendships, and reputation ruined by rumor and innuendo. We are also more comfortable if neither our heroes nor their causes are too complicated or too threatening to established structures and norms. After memories have faded and those involved are no longer staring us in the face, it is much easier in the telling of the story to narrow the question and soften the reality.

In part, it is Karen Silkwood's humanity that makes her a complicated and uncomfortable hero. The FBI, Kerr-McGee, and the AEC launched a smear campaign to convince the public and the jury that she was a sexually promiscuous, hard-living, drug-popping, country hick. This was an image that was to be perpetuated in the mass media, from *People* magazine to the *Silkwood*

film. But in reality she defied such stereotypes. She had grown up in a fairly comfortable, unassuming middle-class family in Nederland, Texas. She baby-sat at her church nursery, got straight A's all through high school, and in 1964 went off to Lamar College on a full scholarship to study medical technology. Within a year of going to college she dropped out to get married. After three kids, bankruptcy, and her husband's long-term extra-marital affair, Karen determined that the only way she could get out from under her marriage was to leave her family behind. She was smart, feisty, and without question deeply troubled both by her personal life and the terrifying hazards she was uncovering at Kerr-McGee.

Most of all what makes Karen Silkwood so complicated is her rapid evolution from honor student to young mother to a committed union activist taking on the nuclear industry. She confronted the ultimate convergence of corporate power, national security, and international intrigue — twentieth-century capitalism's darkest side. To make matters worse, after years of litigation, there has yet to be any clear resolution of her charges against Kerr-McGee or the nagging questions about how and why she was killed. Today, just celebrating Silkwood's short life and heroism and condemning the powerful forces and institutions that contributed to her death and the subsequent cover-up are acts of ethical resistance that have small risks of their own.

With opponents like the nuclear industry, the FBI, and the AEC, it is not surprising that multiple forces continue to ensure that Karen's story never comes to light. In fact, if it had not been for the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island, a handful of dogged and courageous labor, environmental, social justice, and feminist activists, and freelance writer Richard Rashke, the story of *The Killing of Karen Silkwood* might never have been told.

What is certain is that twenty-five years after her death and eighteen years after Rashke's book was first released, his story of Karen's Silkwood's life, death, heroism, and aftermath, merits reading more than ever before. At its center is a chronicle of the failure of government regulation to either police or punish one of the nation's most egregious violators of health and safety and environmental legislation. Reading this book through the prism of the 1990s, we become less conscious of how far we have come than of how much we seem to have lost. Instead of being able to

celebrate reining in corporate excess and abuse, we find ourselves simultaneously blinded by the false promise of "getting big government off our backs," and struggling with the harsh consequences of the deregulation of everything from international trade to nursing homes.

When the Silkwood story first came to light many recoiled in disbelief at just how far the military-industrial complex was willing to go in arrogant defiance of all the norms and values of a democratic society. Yet, somehow in the 1970s, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and Watergate, there was a sense of hope and empowerment mixed in with all the disillusionment. From the Freedom of Information Act to "Nader's raiders" to OSHA, it appeared that ordinary citizens could finally hold powerful individuals and institutions accountable and constrain their most outrageous behavior. Few would have believed that three decades later we would have less government regulation rather than more and that the remaining government agencies would be hamstrung by understaffing and restraining legislation. Today, we are more dependent than ever on those few brave whistle-blowers, those ordinary heroes, to risk everything on our behalf, while we wait at a safe distance.

Today's heroes take on business and government at a time when capital has never been more globally connected and more effective in advancing its interests at the expense of workers and communities. With ever-expanding free trade legislation placing multinational investment interests above national sovereignty, the citizens of every nation are vulnerable to the dismantling or outright disregard of workplace, environmental, and consumer protection legislation. Multinational corporations have even more sophisticated leverage against those who dare to challenge them. The very real threat of capital mobility raises the specter of economic devastation for entire communities in retaliation for harboring, tolerating, or, worse yet, heeding any organized or even individual resistance.

The Killing of Karen Silkwood, however, is more than just a gripping but terrifying lesson in human and social costs of unfettered corporate power. It is also a story about the promise and possibility of ethical resistance and collective action. What drove Karen Silkwood was her concern for the young men and women

working alongside her at Kerr-McGee. She stood up for them and for herself because she was smart enough to understand exactly how dangerous working at the plant had become and principled enough to believe that she had to do something about it. She also knew that the last, best hope that she and her fellow workers had of improving working conditions in the plant was through the survival and strengthening of their union. And so, in the last weeks of her life, she spent every spare moment fighting the decertification campaign that was threatening to wipe out the union at Kerr-McGee.

Unfortunately, the worker safety and union issues at the core of Rashke's book have gotten lost in the subsequent Hollywood and media versions of Silkwood's story. This is nothing new. Nearly a century ago Upton Sinclair set out to awaken America's consciousness to the plight of workers in the meatpacking industry only to have his novel, *The Jungle,* launch a national campaign for safe meat, rather than for a safe workplace. Similarly, the Silkwood story became *The China Syndrome,* a call for action against nuclear power, absent any condemnation or even recognition of the intolerable hazards workers face in the nuclear industry. Yet, these workplace safety and justice issues are the heart of everything Karen Silkwood was fighting for and one more reason why Rashke's book makes such compelling and important reading today.

For only now, as the twentieth century comes to an end, are American unions crafting strategies and developing the capacity to take on new multinational corporate and investment structures through international, multi-union, and community-based leverage campaigns. It is these campaigns and victories — the Steelworkers at Ravenswood, Bridgestone/Firestone, and Continental Tire; the Teamsters at UPS; the Mineworkers at Pittston Coal; the Communications Workers at Ameritech; and Silkwood's own union, the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers (now the Paper, Allied, and Chemical Employees) at BASF and Crown Petroleum — that portend the reawakening of a more progressive, aggressive, and inclusive labor movement in the United States and abroad. And, just like at Kerr-McGee, worker health and safety is central to almost every one of these campaigns.

The Killing of Karen Silkwood powerfully reminds us that

none of these triumphs could have occurred without the courage, persistence, and heroism of individual rank-and-file workers who made the decision to take on powerful multinational corporations and their government allies. Yet whether fighting to hold on to retiree health care at Pittston Coal or full-time safe jobs at UPS, even the most sophisticated union campaigns crash to the ground if rank-and-file workers are unable to stand-up in their workplace and in their communities. What is required of these workers, no less than Karen Silkwood, is an incredible leap of faith, the understanding that the cause they fight for is worth the risks, no matter how terrible.

Nowhere is this more true than in the union organizing process. Each year hundreds of thousands of unorganized workers in hotels, hospitals, colleges, and factories endeavor to organize a union in their workplace. Like Karen Silkwood they are looking for a safe and just workplace and a voice in their working conditions. However, in order to unionize, most workers face employer opposition so fierce that even those most committed to organizing lose faith along the way. Still, despite the discharges, threats of plant closure, bribes, surveillance, intimidation, and misinformation that are part and parcel of nearly every private sector anti-union campaign, several hundred thousand new workers organize each year. They, no less than Silkwood, are the unsung heroes of our time. For absent government regulation and community controls, they represent our first line of defense against unfettered corporate power.

The Killing of Karen Silkwood, therefore, is both a cautionary and inspirational tale. It reminds us of what we are up against and what it takes to win. But most of all it reminds us why each of us must stand with the whistle-blowers and the ordinary heroes that are among us, in the workplace, in government, and in our communities, and, if given the opportunity, become ordinary heroes ourselves. The risks are great, but the costs of not standing up and not speaking out are even greater.

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