

Save the Water Campaign

Nancy Price

The United Nations International Year of Freshwater was marked by WILPF with the Fall 2003 issue of *Peace & Freedom* titled *Hydropolitics: The Future of Water — Who Has It? Who Doesn't? Who Controls It? How Do We Use It?* These questions apply to how we get water for personal and household use. They also deal with who is controlling and profiting from mining our freshwater for bottling or bulk transport.

There is no disputing that women and their families worldwide must have safe and affordable water for personal and household use, or for garden and farm plots. The burden on women who must fetch water, often at great distances, just adds to their daily round of chores. Women do laundry in dirty streams and their children play in foul water pools. When the cost of water goes up with privatization, or bottled and bulk water is necessary because the water is unsafe or service inadequate, it is the women who are forced to make the most difficult choices for their children and extended families — whether to pay for water, school books, clothes, seeds for growing food, or medicine.

We know the facts: that water scarcity because of drought, over-use and contamination from many different sources is increasing; that more than a billion people worldwide lack clean and affordable water, and 2.4 billion lack sanitation services. More shocking is the fact that preventable water-borne diseases kill one child every eight seconds.

While the lack of sanitation services contributes to serious and life-threatening diseases, the contamination of watersheds and water sources by industrial and agricultural chemicals and heavy metals is increasing exponentially in the developing countries where environmental standards are low to non-existent, and with little enforcement. In the U.S. we have our own chemical alleys and Superfund sites. Additionally, toxic pollution from military installations and as a direct outcome of combat, especially of depleted uranium (DU), is causing great harm to exposed populations. We can see this in Iraq and Palestine, where there are increased genetic disorders and birth defects, cancers, leukemia, and other serious diseases in both the local people as well as the troops deployed there.

THE OIL OF THE 21ST CENTURY?

A number of years ago, the multinational corporations were uninterested in the water utility market and had not

yet launched their most aggressive campaigns for bottled water. More recently, however, believing that water IS the oil of the 21st Century, they are, as we know, aggressively trying to cash in, claiming that privatization is the only solution to efficient and cost-effective water delivery. The corporations claim that they can be more reliable and accountable than government.

The almost universal experience worldwide has been just the opposite. No matter the privatization arrangement and financing, often by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund forcing Third World countries to open their public sector up, when the private sector is brought in, rates go up, water quality and service go down, and accountability to the public is almost impossible to enforce. Hundreds and millions of dollars of government funds — that is, tax-payer dollars and other revenue sources — have been squandered on schemes that have often been plagued with problems from the outset. When the system needs fixing the corporations come back for more, claiming they underestimated the costs, or communities fed up with the situation spend millions buying out the contract or taking the system public again. Increasingly the foreign multinationals — the French companies Suez and Veolia (formerly Vivendi) and the German RWE that dominate the market — have found it tough going in some countries. Suez for example, was forced out of Argentina this year. Now they have turned their sights on the U.S., where 85 percent of our water services are still public.

While the case of Cochabamba, Bolivia, featured in the movie “Thirst,” was one of the first and most-publicized citizen rebellions, such resistance has happened again and again in “developing” as well as in First World communities alike. The answer then to “Who Controls the Water?” is a resounding “We, the People,” as more and more communities seek to restore public control and oversight.

As Virginia Rasmussen remarked in the Congress workshop on Water, Women and War, we have a right to know the facts and be informed and, in a democracy, we have the right to dissent and to say NO to privatization schemes and the taking of our water commons for bottling and bulk transport. Yet, this is not sufficient. We must use our knowledge and exercise our right to dissent, take the next step and to assert our rights as citizens over the illegitimate rights of corporations to govern our water.

H2O — MAKING THE CONNECTION

The Save the Water Campaign connects all three of the U.S. Section's themes of peace; racial, social and economic justice, and radical democracy.

Peace: As we know from history and current events,

local and global conflict over the control and cost of water may lead to conflict between communities and regions, and even nation states. Water more than any other element of the natural commons is an absolute necessity for all life and the environment without which peace and our very survival is uncertain. Pollution of land, air and water from military installations and war-

Basic Resources:

Public Citizen: Reports, fact sheets and other materials by the Water for All Campaign at:

www.citizen.org/cmep/Water/. See in particular the new report, "Waves of Regret: what some cities have learned and other cities should know about the water privatization fiascos in the United States" (June 2005) www.citizen.org/documents/waves.pdf.

Polaris Institute, *Inside the Bottle: An Expose of the Bottled Water Industry*, by Tony Clarke. (January 2005), www.polarisinstitute.org; website has other materials as well.

Sierra Club Corporate Water Privatization Task Force at: <http://www.sierraclub.org/cac/water> and the Bottled Water Campaign and brochure at www.sierraclub.org/cac/water/bottled_water/

Water Allies Network, www.waterallies.org.

"Myths About Water Privatization," Vandana Shiva, in *Peace & Freedom* (Fall 2003), Vol. 63, No. 2, pp. 6-7.

fare causes irreparable harm to people and the environment for now and for generations.

Racial, Social and Economic Justice: The availability, cost and distribution of water is more and more becoming an issue of class, and therefore, race in the U.S. and elsewhere. It is an example of social and economic injustice when the cost of water increases several fold and is then sold back to the community — either through the tap or in bottles at great profit. It is an example of racial injustice when poor rural farm-workers, in California's Central Valley for example, have water contaminated with arsenic and have to buy water at great expense, or when rural communities in Texas are forced to accept pre-paid water meters (similar to those in parts of South Africa) before they can turn on the tap.

Radical Democracy: Radical means "at the root" and democracy means "rule by the people." Thus radical democracy is not a kind of government; it is the goal of government when people assume they have the values,

beliefs and skills to govern themselves. Then they can create processes and institutions to meet their societal goals. Radical democracy can only come into being through widespread individual awakening that embraces commitment to community, inclusion, mutuality and cooperation; it cannot be imagined and imposed on people by force of law (adapted from Molly Morgan, "Save the Water Curriculum Study Guide.")

It is exciting to realize how many opportunities there are to bring the work on water into the new Middle East campaign and that of the continuing issue committees. You don't have to give up work to which you are already committed, only, perhaps, broaden the scope of analysis and potential choices for action. While there have been many successes worldwide in turning back privatization schemes, only long-term collaborative work for systemic change will secure our rights over the rights of corporations who seek to profit from the "oil of the 21st Century."

STANDING UP TO THE WATER BARONS

In the U.S. alone, it is estimated that \$500 billion is needed over the next 20 years to upgrade and build new water and wastewater systems to meet both the new quality standards and population growth. Importantly, a June 2005 poll showed clearly that 86 percent of the U.S. population supports legislation to create a trust fund for safe and clean water infrastructure. Big business, however, would like Congress to make sure that federal funds are available to cities only if they are open to public-private partnerships. We must not let this pass. And we must rebuff any attempts to lower anti-pollution and water quality standards. The potential harmful interactions of different toxins and heavy metals in our bodies must be better understood.

It may be more difficult to quench the popularity of bottled water. It is a victory of the advertising professionals that bottled water has become the multi-billion dollar business it is today. Advertising has thrown into suspicion the safety of tap water, yet, taste tests demonstrate that few people can tell the difference between tap and bottled water. One reason, perhaps, that such taste tests often fail is that Coca-Cola's Dasani and Pepsi Cola's Aquafina are tap water with a little fixing. Only Nestle, with its many brands, and some other companies have so-called "pure" fresh spring water. Even these can be suspect, as some brands of bottled water have been found to be contaminated in the past.

What is truly amazing is that people who do not need to drink bottled water for health reasons or for emergency situations are willing to pay often 1,000 times more for bottled water than for tap water (a price comparison will be posted on the WILPF website).

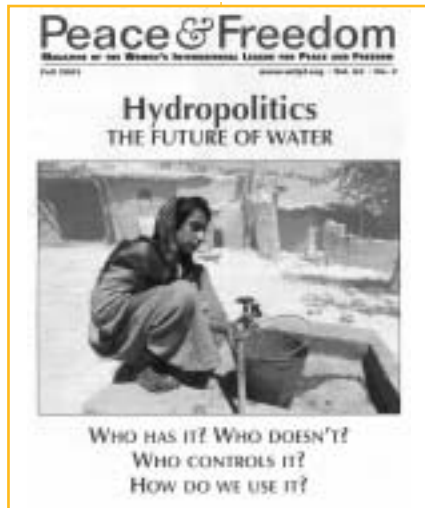
Nevertheless, advertising has convinced many that it is the drink to take with you any time, any place. It is a vicious cycle, for the production of the plastic for the bottles is highly toxic to the environment. Yet we drink bottled water and throw away the bottle—only to need more manufactured.

Of the greatest concern is that once bottled water becomes a commodity (and as such is subject to free trade regulations) it could be much harder to prevent more bottling plants and increased mining of water.

The good news is that more and more communities — from southwestern Maine to northern California are challenging the right of the bottled water giants to mine and profit from our water commons. Remember, ripples make waves.

Suggestions for Action

- Form a water study group based on the new *Save the Water: A Curriculum Study Guide*, an eight-part guide by the Water Women of the Cape Cod WILPF Branch. Invite community allies to join with you. You can ask the questions and get the answers: Who owns or manages your water services? How can you protect your watershed? Who makes decisions about water in your community or region?
- Arrange for speakers on such topics as: rights-based organizing to enact the Precautionary Principle to prevent pollution of the environment and water resources, and laws for watershed and groundwater protection. Learn how free trade agreements can lead to privatization of water services and water resources. Learn about the impact of globalization on local democracy.
- Arrange for a presentation of the “Tapestry of the Commons — Reclaiming Our Common Wealth,” a new project by Jan Edwards that was unveiled at the WILPF



Congress and will be available at the Alliance for Democracy website, www.thealliancefordemocracy.org.

- Arrange to show movies, such as “Thirst,” or “In The Light of Reverence.” Organize a film festival.
- Plan a water forum. We’ll be delighted to assist you.
- Launch a “No on Bottled Water” Campaign in your community. Learn about “exclusionary contracts” signed by your school district with Coca-Cola, Pepsi, or Nestle brand bottled waters. Learn the serious health consequences of plastics production for bottles and why we must stop the contamination of our bodies.

sequences of plastics production for bottles and why we must stop the contamination of our bodies.

- Buy a WILPF Water Campaign T-shirt. Display and sell T-shirts and curriculum study guides at events.
- Would you like to contribute to the educational materials we are developing? We are working with WILPF Issue Committees and the Women Challenge U.S. Policy: Building Peace on Justice in the Middle East Campaign to create joint activities and research.

Nancy Price is on the leadership team of Save the Water. She is Western Coordinator of the Defending Water for Life Project of the Alliance for Democracy and National Co Chair. She also helped found the Water Allies Network and is on the Friends of the River (CA) Board.

For extra copies of the *Peace & Freedom* issue (see above) on *Hydropolitics* (\$2) or to order the WILPF Water Campaign T-shirt (\$20; 100% Organic, all cotton) and *Save the Water: A Curriculum Study Guide* (\$15), please contact: Kate Zaidan at kzaidan@wilpf.org or (215) 563-7110.

We welcome your participation to help launch and build a successful campaign. Please contact someone near you. Thanks!

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