
OUR SISTER WATER'S BATTLE (2)



I was recently asked to give a talk on this subject to the Daughters of Isabella, on the occasion of the *International Year of Fresh Water*. The following are excerpts from this talk.

LET US PROTECT ALL OF CREATION

We must not isolate water from the rest of creation. It is all of creation that must be protected and preserved, since they are all inter-connected. That is how clear-cutting our forests affects our bodies of water. I have seen in different parts of Edmundston what looked like rivers running down the slopes because their natural boundaries had disappeared.. We usually say that these are “acts of God,” but in this case it was really an “act of the developer” who cut down too many trees and did away with too many natural barriers. I have heard that in several villages people had been warned against drinking water because manure had been spread too close to fresh water supplies. For weeks on end people had to boil their water because the water table had been spoiled by all kinds of pollution. It is the entire environment that must be protected and preserved.

CRITICAL LEVEL

In New Brunswick and Québec, besides a few extremely hot days, there is not much cause for us to worry about the quality and amount of fresh water. Québec has about 3.5% of the planet's renewable water resources. This equals 135,000 cubic metres per person per year, while 500 cubic metres is the critical level for human survival. We therefore have eight times the average level per inhabitant on the planet, and thirteen times that of the United States. However, the global situation is altogether different.

Our planet has a population of six billion, of which 1.4 billion do not have ready access to water, and over three billion (one in two) do not have access to sanitation services. The problem is real, and risks are high that it will affect several more billion people by the year 2005, most of these people being the poor living in the Southern hemisphere which is already affected by lack of drinking water. In most countries in the world, a high proportion of water (70%) is used for industrial agricultural production. This is very disturbing. To the FAO, the United Nations food and agriculture organisation, actual agricultural production uses too much water because of the type of irrigation required by monoculture for export. Multinationals exercise such pressure on certain Southern hemisphere countries that these must direct their agricultural output to massive exports in order to pay off debts to foreign financial institutions controlled by their Northern neighbours. Many small farmers are thus forced to abandon their depleted lands and swell the number of poor seeking relief in the fifteen biggest cities in the world, cities with populations over ten million, in Africa, Asia, Latin America: a demographic explosion; and there, the people have no more ready access to drinking water than before their exodus, and nor is there the possibility of purifying the water from disease-carrying parasites.

A HIGH COST

Some transnational water corporations – the new water barons – under the guise of solving the world water crisis – impatiently await permission from their Northern governments to free water resources for commercial

exploitation and exportation, and deregulation and privatisation of water resources management. This becomes part of free trade agreements with North America, as we were able to ascertain at the Summit of the Americas, in Québec. The water transnationals are already present in 150 countries worldwide. They take advantage of the little quantity and quality of water available to 200 million consumers and apply without exception the World Bank "full cost" policy to water at the going rate which, in turn, qualifies the distribution of additional aid toward debt repayment to crediting nations, by having consumers pay for the water. It bears remembering that 2.8 billion people live on less than two dollars a day, and that some 1.3 billion must survive on less than one dollar. With the water crisis, the transnationals have an incredible, insatiable thirst for profit and work endlessly at strengthening their positions on the emerging water market. That is the reason they are so avid for protection, thanks to continental and international commercial agreements, or fail-safe bilateral treaties to be invoked without risk of popular resistance. Through privatisation of water services, water bills have doubled and even tripled in Bolivia.

WATER MORE EXPENSIVE THAN GAS!

The water market is a most lucrative multinational venture. Annual profits from water represent about 40% of profits generated by the petroleum industry, and they are nearly as high as profits from pharmaceuticals. Between 5% and 10% only of water infrastructures are privatised. Total investment of the water market is between 10 and 15 billion dollars per year, and a report of the World Bank estimates the need for investing some 380 billion dollars in order to give drinking water to 500 million people, in the next thirteen years. Commercial sale of bottled water, which is mostly under such transnationals as Coca Cola, Pepsi, Danone and Nestlé, is in full swing. In 2001, over 90,000 billion litres of water in plastic (non-recyclable) bottles were sold and profits reached 22 billion dollars, several times more than for the same amount of water coming from public water works. We have reason to fear that transnational water companies will succeed in having their rights entrenched regarding water services, in the different international government agreements. I don't want to overload you with statistics, but I want to say that we must pay careful attention to the water situation not only in our own country, but throughout the world. It is important that people rally together to ensure that water remain the common birthright of all humankind. In the next three years, Development and Peace will often focus on this battle for water, and I count on your participation: the life and survival of billions of people depend on it.

GENERAL ALARM

Water access is a human right. Water is a social and cultural good, and not a simple economic commodity. We are asked to oppose every form of privatisation and marketing of water, including water services, in the list of negotiable items in the framework of the world commercial organisation. We must demand collective, public financing of costs incurred by the free access to water by all, as well as the property, management, promotion and conservation of the entire water cycle as a common good. The World Forum on Water which met in Kyoto recently, will take place in Montreal in the year 2006. The battle for water represents billions of lives on the balance. This is a general alarm being sounded!

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