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Water Fight

The World Water Forum Comes to Mexico City

by John Gibler; April 05, 2006

In Mexican water politics, poverty is good business. Eleven million people here live without access to potable water and another 25 million live in villages and cities with taps that run as little as a few hours a week. Most of those who do have in-door plumbing and supposedly potable water do not drink it. This all makes Mexico a \$32 billion a year market for bottled water companies like Coca Cola and Nestle.

In 1992, as part of the constitutional reforms necessary to approve the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), then-President Carlos Salinas pushed an amendment of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution to allow concessions of water and water services to foreign companies. In the decade that followed, Mexico privatized twenty percent of its water services and became the second largest bottled water consumer in the world.

In Iztapalapa, Mexico City's largest neighborhood, residents say that tamarind water flows from the tap, generously comparing the brown liquid that waits in their pipes to a lunchtime beverage. Their water problems, however, pre-date the Salinas era privatizations.

"Water distribution in Mexico City has been unequal since 1917," said Angel Martinez, coordinator of the national water workers union. "While some areas of the city receive better water service—areas like Polanco and Las Lomas—others have scant water access. We see this in areas like Iztapalapa."

Nearly 2 million people in Iztapalapa live in the belly of a dried lake and depend upon a fast-sinking, contaminated aquifer for drinking water. The Churubusco River that used to flow into the lake is now caught on the edge of the Valley of Mexico and rerouted to the high-end neighborhoods of Las Lomas, where the fourth World Water Forum was held from March 16-22 in a convention center owned by Mexico's largest bank, Banamex.

The Mexican federal government's budget for hosting the World Water Forum was \$15.5 million, enough money to fund potable water projects in 190 isolated rural communities. Presidents and representatives from the largest multinational water companies in the world were in attendance. Anyone who could pay the \$600 entry fee was granted the opportunity to hobnob with the world's water elite. Six-hundred dollars is four times the monthly minimum wage in Mexico.

The World Water Forum is held every two years in different countries, organized by an opaque group called the World Water Council. The Council's membership mostly includes water companies and research organizations that promote water privatization.

"The World Water Forum presents itself as a representative of the people, as a United Nations agency," said Maude Barlow, director of the Council of Canadians and co-author of the book *Blue Gold*. "It is not a UN agency; it is an agency for private companies."

Running parallel to the private-sector's World Water Forum, activists, non-governmental organizations and indigenous communities from all over Mexico and the world held an International Forum in the Defense of Water, including several days of workshops and a massive march from Mexico City's Angel of Independence to

the Banamex compound hosting the World Water Forum.

The march was energetic and diverse, including indigenous communities, punk collectives, union workers, environmentalists, socialist parties, and thousands of individuals. The numbers game is always dangerous. In the Mexican press the numbers ranged from 3,000 to 20,000. At one point, about half way down Reforma Avenue, I climbed up a street lamp and looked in both directions: I could not see the end of the march in either.

Most of the press coverage the following day focused on a small outburst of violence—masked punks smashing up a police car. When I had heard that there was something going down, I went sprinting with about 10 other reporters, but could not get there in time. The incident took place so fast that the quickest of us who were up toward the front of the march could not race back to catch it. Those who were there, however, and captured the wooden rods crashing down on the hood and windshield of the patrol car provided the raw material for a standard media jiu-jitsu move: making a flash of violence outlive hours of marching; taking the image of a handful of masked youths attacking what for them is an emblem of state repression, stripping it of political context and using it to completely supplant the political demands of the 10,000 plus people of various ages and backgrounds who filled the streets.

The media impulse, intentional or habitual, is to associate the demands of a social movement—in this case protecting water resources and services from speculation and hoarding through privatization—with irrational outbursts of violence. The message is this: those who take to the streets to make their voices heard are those who make the streets unsafe; their demands like their tactics are irrational.

At a press conference the following day, the organizers of the International Forum in the Defense of Water, also called the alternative forum, denounced the heavy tilting of information about the march.

“The march was very successful, it brought together rather diverse sectors, but the press doesn’t talk about this,” said Jaime Reyo, from the Popular Urban Movement (Movimiento Popular Urbano). “Eighteen states were represented, indigenous people, farmworkers, union workers, environmentalists, thousands of individuals,” but they do not appear in the photographs or texts of the capitol’s newspapers. Reyo held up a copy of the left-leaning newspaper, *La Jornada*, which had published an aerial photograph of the march, showing the thousands filling the streets, as the sole exception to the media manipulation.

If violence is what the press is so hungry for, Reyo said, they should look into the violence leveled against the eleven million Mexicans without access to water. “They are the ones generating violence,” he said of the corporations, financial institutions, and governments pushing to privatize water resources and services.

“In 2005, Veolia posted 60 percent profit. Suez-Environment had a profit increase of 170 percent,” said Barlow of the two largest private water companies. “This is appalling when every eight seconds a child dies of a water-borne disease.”

“It is very important to understand the depth of anger at the world system,” she said later in an interview. “While we don’t support direct action, it is necessary to understand that people express their anger in different ways. These are matters of life and death.”

Barlow said that the march and forum were a great advance from the previous World Water Forum meetings in the Hague and Kyoto where only a handful of international and local activists gathered to protest. “This is the coming out, the true launch of the global water justice movement,” she said.

At the opening panel of the alternative forum, over 500 people packed into the auditorium at the Mexican telephone workers union to hear speakers from across Mexico, Bolivia, South Africa, France, Venezuela, the United States and Canada.

Oscar Olivera, one of the leaders of the Cochabamba social movement that overthrew the San Francisco-based multinational Bechtel's attempted privatization of the city's water, was among the most sought after speakers. Within a few months of taking over the water system, Bechtel raised rates by several hundred percent and—as if echoing British colonial control over India where it was forbidden to collect salt from the ocean—went so far as to make it illegal to collect rain water. The largely indigenous population of Cochabamba organized and took to the streets, meeting police repression and even snipers who were captured on film firing into the crowds, killing one protester.

Cochabamba has become the both the cautionary tale of what can happen under water privatization as well as one of the most celebrated social movement victories in recent years. And water privatization was the grand theme of the alternative forum, with most of the workshops, panels, literature passed around, and chants during the march focusing on the perils of water privatization and the urgent need to organize to defend public water systems. The World Water Forum was described as a thinly veiled meeting to hash out the necessary legal and public relations strategies to push water privatization.

For some, however, the focus on privatization was too limited. Amy Vanderwarker of the Oakland-based Environmental Justice Coalition for Water, said that all-too-often local and national governments create water distribution systems that cut out indigenous and communities of color, channeling both water and public funding to industry and real estate, not people. "Institutional racism within governments has prevented many communities from accessing their own water resources for a long time, and the international movement against privatization needs to address this issue," she said. "The answer to most of the dire water access and quality problems is not simply public control, but public institutions that are actually accountable to the people they serve."

Most of the Mexican groups at the alternative forum presented cases that illustrated Vanderwarker's point: the state acts as the main arm in the misuse and abuse of water resources with projects that benefit few and injure many. In case after case, representatives of local and federal government agencies slipped into rural communities offering "development" assistance while studying the depth of aquifers or the strength of rivers. The projects they offered involved "relocating" local communities and setting up lake-side hotels, pumping out aquifers to deliver the water to bottled water companies, and building hydroelectric dams.

About fifteen miles outside of Acapulco—one of the world's greatest shrines to inequality—rural farmworkers who scratch a living from the dry earth growing beans and limes have blocked a planned hydroelectric dam that would flood their homes, their farm land, and their cemeteries, to deliver more water and light to the hotels of Acapulco. Armed with sticks and machetes, local residents set up camp on the thin road that leads to the site of the La Parota dam project on the Papagayo River. Men and women stand guard twenty-four hours a day beside signs that read: "Prohibited: transit of all governments, CFE [Federal Electricity Commission] and treasonous local officials."

Hundreds of residents from the small communities surrounding the projected dam site traveled to Mexico City to march down Reforma Avenue and speak in the alternative forum. Margarita Mendoza, a fiery septuagenarian spoke in the opening panel, railing against the government's desire to dislocate them to "use rivers as if they were simply machines."

In the countryside, and particularly among indigenous communities, water politics involves embedded land and community struggles that date back to the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and, most recently, the Salinas Administration's constitutional reforms to privatize communal land holdings.

"To defend water we have to defend land," said Aldo Gonzalez of the Unified Organizations of the Sierra Juarez, Oaxaca (Union de Organizaciones de la Sierra Juarez, Oaxaca). "We cannot disconnect one from the other. As indigenous people we want to defend water in the context of our culture, which implies communal land use and decision making."

Oscar Olivera presented among the most far-reaching political critiques of water privatization, implicating capitalism and electoral democracy in the destructive and exclusionary policies in fashion among the water companies and the international financial institutions like the World Bank that push privatization programs.

"The politics of Western Democracy have cut average people out of the practice of politics by making it a profession. We need to construct a grassroots alternative," he said. "We need to think of politics as a process of transformation of the way people relate to each other and the way people relate to nature."