

TIPPING THE SCALES GLOBAL WATER JUSTICE MOVEMENT FINDS NEW ENERGY AND ALLIES

by Anil Naidoo

In mid-August, Maude Barlow, world-renowned global water activist and chair of the Blue Planet Project, flew to La Paz, Bolivia, to speak with Bolivian and Norwegian government officials about the human right to water. It was a historic meeting, with the growing international water justice movement acting as a bridge between the North and South governments.

Among the topics that Barlow, Bolivian water activist Oscar Olivera, and other representatives discussed with the Norwegian and Bolivian officials were possible collaboration on the right to water, alternatives to water privatization, and support for removing water from a list of commodities at the World Trade Organization (WTO) and General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS).

It was a breakthrough for the water justice movement, which continues to gain allies and to grow as corporations retreat from failed private water contracts around the world. It also highlights an international shift in opinion with regard to the status of water as a human right, not an economic good.

IRREFUTABLE EVIDENCE

That shift was obvious at the World Water Forum this past March. Over 30,000 people marched peacefully through Mexico City to draw attention away from the forum, which was dominated by multinational water companies and the World Bank. The protest also pointed to the irrefutable evidence against the corporate control of water. "In the past decade . . . private companies have managed to extend water ser-



Maude Barlow and Oscar Olivera, appreciating the safe and clean public water in Solidaridad neighbourhood, El Alto, Bolivia.

vice to just 10 million people, less than 1 per cent of those who need it," wrote the *New York Times* in an article critical of privatization.

The fact that the mainstream media are paying attention to the problems of privatization is just more proof of how far the right to water movement has come. In 2002, the United Nations Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights declared water a human right. Known as General Comment 15, the declaration stated that water is not a tradable good but a human right. The declaration prompted activists to pressure national governments to make similar enforceable declarations.

Now, governments are joining the fight too. Bolivia, Cuba, Venezuela and Uruguay all refused to sign the final ministerial declaration at this year's World Water Forum because it didn't include a statement affirming the right to water and demanding that water be left out of

free trade agreements. And while South America has taken a lead on protecting water and stopping privatization, the global North is also making progress.

In March of this year, the European Parliament voted for a resolution stating that water is a human right. As well, several European governments have decided that water should be exempt from internal services liberalization within Europe. The Norwegian government deserves special congratulations for its Soria-Moria Declaration, which states clearly that no support will be provided for international aid or debt relief that is conditional on privatization.

GROWING ENERGY

There have been significant victories for the growing right to water movement. Bechtel has settled a multi-million-dollar lawsuit against the nationalization of water in Bolivia for the sum of 2 pesos; Tanzania has kicked out the water transnational Biwater; and the U.S. city of Atlanta, Georgia, recently terminated a water contract with the company Suez. In Uruguay, a social movement is currently trying to force the government to nationalize water supplies, following a successful campaign to change the constitution so that it recognizes the right to water.

Unfortunately, despite this progress, the global water crisis grows worse each day. When private companies threaten water systems globally, it becomes more difficult to improve public water systems and bring communities into decision-making roles. Using the framework of water as a right, we must concentrate on how to deliver water as efficiently as possible, with the greatest benefit to people and the least impact on nature. The challenges are enormous, but by working with grassroots activists from around the world, we are building momentum toward achieving a vision of true global water justice

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