

TAKING BACK THE WORLD WATER FORUM

ACTIVISTS BUCK THE WORLD WATER COUNCIL'S PRIVATIZATION TREND

by **Sonia Giovannina Vani**

Earlier this year, I had the chance to witness the power of citizen action in the face of a global push for the privatization of water. In March, I was part of a delegation from the Council of Canadians' Blue Planet Project that headed off to Mexico City for the 4th World Water Forum. We had two main goals: to protest against the commodification of the world's water, and to participate in an alternative conference supporting the right to water.

When I first heard of the Forum, I thought, like most people, that it represented an international effort to address urgent global water issues through inclusive dialogue. I imagined a summit aimed at finding sustainable and democratic solutions to water and sanitation problems. But the reality was disturbing.

The World Water Forum is organized by the World Water Council – an umbrella organization with over 300 members, ranging from NGOs and citizens' groups to financial institutions and public sector representatives. But despite the Council's multi-stakeholder image, it is largely dominated by the agenda of the world's biggest private water companies, including Suez, Vivendi and RWE Thames. As a result, the World Water Forum has consistently refused to declare water as a human right. Citizens' groups point out that the water companies are more concerned with profiting from a global water crisis than working toward sustainable public solutions.

ALTERNATIVE VOICES

But another important gathering took place in Mexico City in March. The Mexican Coalition of Organizations for



Courtesy of CUPE

Sonia Vani and Frank Mentés from CUPE on March 19 at a protest against the World Water Council in Mexico City.

the Right to Water (COMDA) hosted an alternative conference, serving as a counterweight to the corporate-dominated World Water Forum. An international delegation of organizations and activists from some 40 countries met to condemn water privatization efforts, discuss innovative public financing models, and strategize on how to defend the right to water.

The broad mix of participants included journalists, NGOs, academics, water sector workers, indigenous people, first-time protesters, and many seasoned activists. The alternative forum included symposiums and conferences, workshops, and networking events for organizations to meet and compare notes and objectives. One of its most significant outcomes was the drafting of a joint declaration that states civil society's demands for universal access to public water.

One of the highlights of the week was a 20,000-strong protest march on the inaugural day of the World Water Forum. Many Canadian organizations marched with the Council of Canadians' Blue Planet Project, including Development and Peace, KAIROS, and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

BRINGING OUR DEMANDS INSIDE

On March 19, we took citizens' demands into the World Water Forum. We unfurled banners, and caused noisy distractions to catch delegates' attention, demanding that water be treated as a global commons, rather than as a tradable commodity. But sadly, within days, it was clear that the World Water Council had not changed course.

On the last day of the Forum, the World Water Council released a ministerial declaration, and yet again, it refused to recognize water as a human right. But the World Water Forum participants were far from unanimous in their support for the Council. Bolivia, Cuba, Uruguay and Venezuela submitted an appendix to the ministerial declaration, which states their support for the recognition, promotion and safeguarding of the right to water. Declarations from the women's caucus and the Indigenous Peoples' Parallel Forum also supported water as a human right.

While it is encouraging to see World Water Forum participants bucking the privatization trend, there is still a lot of work to be done. By the time the next Forum takes place in Istanbul in 2009, we can only hope that more countries will challenge the World Water Council's profit-making agenda. The future of the world's water depends on it.

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For more information on the international campaign to promote the right to water, including the declaration endorsed by civil society groups in Mexico, check out www.blueplanet-project.net, or call 1-800-387-7177.