

# Out of Order

**Why Canada is taking on the bottled water industry one town or school board at a time**

**by Stuart Trew**



**At first glance it seems like such a small gesture. Across this country, city**

**councils, school boards, teachers and private business owners are taking bottled water out of their buildings.**

To date, 26 municipal councils and at least three school boards have passed resolutions phasing out the sale and provision of single-use water bottles in publicly owned spaces. Many more are currently working on bans, and even more are considering them.

The fight against bottled water has brought environmental and social justice groups in touch with each other and their elected representatives in a way that doesn't happen often enough. Some complain about excessive waste from PET plastic bottles, others worry about greenhouse gas emissions in the production and transportation of bottled water, and others, like the Council of Canadians, are most concerned with the commodification of water that bottling and selling it for huge profits entails.

But for everyone, the push centres on making public policy more responsive to public, not corporate, priorities – primarily a cleaner and more sustainable future.

## **WHAT'S IN A BOTTLE?**

Despite claims from the Canadian Bottled Water Association and Refreshments Canada, a lobby group representing Coke and Pepsi, that bottled water has one of the smallest ecological footprints within large industry, it is clear that bottling water is highly



**Singers add a festive atmosphere to the Toronto stop of the recent joint Council of Canadians and CUPE Ontario "Unbottle It!" tour.**

polluting and dangerous to individual aquifers and other sources.

The Earth Policy Institute states that manufacturing the 29 billion plastic bottles used for water in the United States each year requires the equivalent of more than 17 million barrels – or 2.7 billion litres – of crude oil.

And many of these bottles are not being recycled. While the numbers are different in communities across North America, according to the plastics industry on average only 35 per cent of plastic water bottles are being recycled. The rest end up sitting in landfills for the hundreds of years it takes for the plastic to decompose. Even in communities with a better recycling record, the bottles still accumulate. The only way to change this is to reduce the number of bottles that are produced, and this means bottled water phase-outs.

Bottled water industry representatives also downplay the impact on individual watersheds. Coke, Pepsi, Nestlé and others don't just skim water off river surfaces across the country. They enter a community and "mine" the water in individual aquifers. For example, Nestlé

is taking 3.6 million litres of groundwater per day in Aberfoyle, Ontario, depleting the nearby Mill Creek. This is one of the reasons that the Ontario government refused to grant Nestlé's recent request to remove 5 million litres of water per day for their operations. The government had no choice but to order a study of the water-taking by Nestlé when citizens banded together under the Wellington Water Watchers to save a crucial water source from being completely drained.

## **AN UNNECESSARY COST**

As Council of Canadians Chairperson Maude Barlow and Sid Ryan, President of CUPE Ontario, told Unbottle It! tour audiences across Ontario in January, the most powerful argument against bottled water is that it commodifies a product that should be a human right, a natural right for our wildlife, and a public trust managed in the public and nature's interest.

When city councillors talk about the quality of public water, but drink bottled water in their meetings, what kind of message does that send? What do we say to our children when we put bottled water vending machines next to water fountains in their schools and universities? In both cases it says we don't trust our public water, despite the fact that public water is cleaner and better regulated than bottled water. It says we're not willing to invest in our public water systems, which can only lead people to think it is normal to pay for water, not to expect their society to manage it and keep it clean for current and future generations.

"Unbottling it" is about far more than bottled water. It's about reclaiming public water, keeping it clean, recognizing it as a public trust, and demanding it be treated as a right, not a commodity. There are dozens of groups across Canada working towards these goals, asking their school boards, hospitals, private businesses and municipal councils to "Unbottle it!"

**For more information on the Council's "Unbottle It!" campaign, visit [www.unbottleit.org](http://www.unbottleit.org).**

Stuart Trew is the Ontario/Quebec Regional Organizer for the Council of Canadians.