

Water pollution cover-up continues in Australian city

Mike Head
7 August 1998

After days of boiling their water, residents of Sydney, Australia's largest city, have been told that the water system is now safe, but many unanswered questions remain. It is still not known how many people may suffer debilitating stomach diseases because it can take up to three weeks for symptoms to appear.

More fundamentally, the source of the contamination remains unknown. As it announced the all-clear on Tuesday, the New South Wales state Labor government declared that the causes of the pollution of the water supply were never likely to be discovered.

In deciding whether to start drinking water from taps once again, the 3.5 million affected residents have been asked to trust the assurances of the same government and agencies that have over the past week engaged in one cover-up after another.

It is now clear that dangerous levels of the giardia and cryptosporidium parasites existed in the water system as early as July 21, six days before the issue of the first alert, covering only a small area of eastern Sydney. The government still refuses to make any test results public but scientists have commented that a major surge of contamination must have entered the system by that date.

Even when senior officials of Sydney Water, the semi-privatised water supply company, became aware on Wednesday July 29 of widespread health risks, and planned to release a city-wide alert, a political decision was made to confine the warning to south-eastern suburbs. A full alert was not issued until more than 24 hours later.

Sydney Water chairman David Hill, a leading figure in the Labor Party and a candidate for the coming federal election, has admitted being involved in the decision to limit the ban on drinking water. According to one media report, he threatened to sack Sydney Water media officials if the originally intended wider warning went out.

Further, the government and Sydney Water have now revealed that a false statement was issued announcing that the alleged source of the problem -- a privately owned and operated filtration plant -- had been bypassed. In fact, it was

impossible to bypass the plant without severely damaging the pipeline system. The incident exposed a major design flaw in the construction of the filtration plant, which prevents it being isolated in case of emergency.

Another vital piece of official misinformation crumbled when scientists confirmed that the carcasses of two foxes found in a water canal contained no traces of giardia or cryptosporidium. Earlier, state Urban Affairs Minister Craig Knowles had pointed to the foxes as the culprits, claiming that the government had quickly isolated the source of the crisis.

Then Hill, after days of public silence, told the media that no-one could be blamed for the fact that Australian Water Services (AWS), the consortium given the contract to build and operate the water treatment plant, was not required to filter for the two pathogens. Hill sought to excuse the yawning gap in the company's contract by claiming the plant was 'designed and built pre-giardia and pre-crypto'.

But scientific papers and official records show that giardia and cryptosporidium were well-known before the \$200 million plant was designed and that a major disaster occurred in the United States before it was built. Contracts for the plant were signed in October 1993, five months after cryptosporidiosis killed an estimated 100 people and infected 403,000 in Milwaukee.

Moreover, a report by expert consultant Dr Primrose Hutton to Sydney Water in 1996 shows that the company's predecessor, the Sydney Water Board, knew four years earlier that both parasites were found in the city's dams during a 1991 pilot study. The levels of cryptosporidium were well above those that have caused disease in other countries. Her report also reveals that giardia is likely to be associated with sewage-contaminated water, not dead animals.

Faced with a growing outcry, state Premier Bob Carr personally invited NSW Environment Protection Agency chairman David Harley to head an inquiry into the crisis. It then emerged that Harley, as a former chairman of the Water Board, was directly involved in the process that led to the

granting of the contract to AWS. Harley was among those who argued for the private filtration plant, whereas a parliamentary inquiry recommended action to clean up Sydney's water catchment area. When this information became known, Harley was forced to stand down from the inquiry.

The longer this crisis has continued, the more the government's position has unravelled and the more obvious it has become that the Labor government and its Liberal Party predecessor presided over a systematic cover-up of the deteriorating state of water quality. Both slashed thousands of jobs in the water company, extracted multi-million dollar dividends from it and allowed profitable residential and industrial development to proceed in the catchment area.

It is now known that untreated effluent from two unsewered residential areas, The Oaks and Oakdale, leaks into Werribee Creek, which flows into Sydney's main dam, the Warragamba, just 5 kilometres from the dam wall. A 1995 draft plan for land management in the area warned Sydney Water that 'cryptosporidium and giardia and dangerous faecal bacteria have been recorded in The Oaks township stormwater drains'.

The document, *Stakeholders Consultation Report for the Warragamba Special Area*, said private landholdings comprised 14.5 percent of the 'special area'. It emphasised: 'The impact of these lands on water quality is a cause for concern. A major risk is the contamination of catchment waterways with pathogenic micro-organisms'.

Sydney Water's board has belatedly brought forward plans to sewer the areas but the two townships are only one part of the pollution of the catchment zone. In its outer reaches, the threats to water quality include mining operations, discharges from town sewerage plants, agricultural, chemical and fertiliser runoff, silt from forestry operations and land clearing, and livestock in streams. The problems of the inner catchments include native animals, feral cattle, pigs and dogs, and illegal hunting, fishing and camping.

Heavy rain in the Sydney region in mid-July may have caused heavy runoff and stormwater drain overflows that swept large concentrations of giardia and cryptosporidium into the Warragamba dam. Another potential source of the contamination is the suburban pipeline system. Over the past decade Sydney Water's workforce has been halved, preventing adequate maintenance and cleaning.

The pattern of cover-up and misinformation revealed in the current crisis is not new. Previous cryptosporidium outbreaks have been kept secret or downplayed as well. One incident occurred last year and there have been reports of a more serious one in 1996 in the inner-city area that was not made public.

What emerges is a damning picture of the capitalist market

at work. As part of the drive to reduce government spending and lower corporate taxes and charges, the state Liberal government in 1995 transformed the Water Board, a public authority charged with responsibility to provide safe and clean water, into Sydney Water, a profit-making corporation. After Labor was elected later that year, it demanded even greater cost-cutting and dividends from the company.

At the same time, the government and Sydney Water increasingly privatised the water system, letting contracts for four private water treatment plants costing \$3 billion over 25 years, without specifying any targets for two of the well-known disease-causing parasites. As a result, AWS, a partnership between a global water supply company, the French-based Lyonnaise d'Eaux, and Australian developer Lend Lease, is likely to escape all legal liability.

Amid mutual recriminations, the Labor leaders have blamed the previous Liberal government for implementing the privatisation program, while the Liberals have pointed out that the Laborites maintained the arrangements and stifled discussion on the health risks. To bolster their case, the Liberals have produced a quote from Craig Knowles, who told state parliament in October 1996: 'The attempts to beat up the likelihood of a cryptosporidium outbreak are little more than scaremongering.'

The reality is that both parties are committed to servicing the needs of big business, which are increasingly incompatible with the maintenance of even the most basic and essential social facilities and services.

See Also:

LTTE remains silent

International protests mount against arrest of Tamil socialists in Sri Lanka

[7 August 1998]

Contaminated water supply in Australian city

[1 August 1998]



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact