Contaminated water supply in Australian city

Mike Head
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Three million residents of Sydney, the Australian city scheduled to host the year 2000 Olympic Games, have been instructed to boil their water for fear of serious disease caused by two dangerous parasites detected in the supply system. Authorities have instructed parents, schools and day care centres not to even allow children to wash their hands in tap water. Hospitals and nursing homes face special difficulties in caring for patients.

Earlier this year, one of the Australasian region's largest cities, Auckland in New Zealand, was paralysed for months by a power blackout that had its roots in the semi-privatisation of the electricity grid. Now, the region's most populous city has been struck by a water system failure resulting from a parallel process.

Sydney Water, the profit-making agency responsible for the city's water, and the Labor government of the state of New South Wales belatedly issued the health warnings just before midnight on Wednesday, days after contamination was first found in the inner city. By the end of the week, the authorities were forced to acknowledge that the danger had spread throughout the metropolitan area.

The two microscopic pathogens, giardia and cryptosporidium, can cause severe diarrhoea and vomiting, and the latter can result in death among the young, the elderly and the sick, especially those with AIDS or otherwise weakened immune systems. An estimated 403,000 residents of the American city of Milwaukee were stricken with cryptosporidiosis and about 100 died when the single-celled organism found its way into the city's water supply in late March and early April 1993.

It is too early to tell how many people will be affected by the current Sydney outbreak because the diseases can take more than a week to incubate and then may last for several weeks. According to one report, four possible cases had been reported in Sydney hospitals and medical centres by Thursday evening.

Yet Sydney Water did not require the private contractor, Australian Water Services, that operated the filtration plant blamed for the contamination, to test for either of the two organisms. The state Auditor-General has confirmed that the three privately run filtration plants in Sydney are not contractually obliged to filter out the parasites.

This and many other aspects of the scandal point to the disastrous impact of the processes of privatisation and corporatisation, which have placed even the most essential services such as water supply and sewerage in the hands of the capitalist market. The result has been the sacrifice of water quality and public health considerations to a drive for higher dividends.

Sydney Water, once the Sydney Waterboard, was corporatised -- that is, transformed into a profit-making company -- by the previous state Liberal government in 1995. The Labor government of Premier Bob Carr has continued to milk it as a growing source of revenue, while facilities have deteriorated, consumer charges have risen and thousands of jobs have been eliminated. In the present financial year, Sydney Water was due to return a dividend of some $280 million to the government, nearly six times the amount paid six years ago.

Over roughly the same period, the management has slashed the number of jobs in the service from more than 9,000 to less than 5,000, including in the vital areas of water testing and maintenance of pipelines and other facilities.

Contracts worth $3 billion to build and operate water filtration plants over 25 years were awarded to private companies in 1994 despite the recommendations of a parliamentary committee. It proposed alternative methods of water treatment and reforms to Sydney Water to make it publicly accountable, with specific standards and external audits of those standards. Sydney Water secretly abandoned plans to flush and

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scour its 20,000-kilometre water reticulation system before opening the new filtration plants.

Now the authorities are refusing to release water quality data so that the degree of risk to public health can be independently assessed. The state government claims to have traced the source of the contamination to a single source -- the Prospect water filtration plant. Urban Affairs Minister attributed the problem to a number of dead dogs found in a canal leading to the plant. However, Sydney Water's managing director Chris Pollett and Monash University water expert Mike Grace cast doubt on that explanation, questioning whether such an isolated and small-scale occurrence could create widespread contamination.

Others have pointed to residential and other development that governments and local authorities have permitted to encroach on the water catchment area. Recent heavy rain may have led to sewage and drain overflows reaching Sydney's dams. The two parasites can be released via human sewage as well as animal faeces.

The government now claims to have overcome the crisis by bypassing the Prospect plant and ordering water to be drawn and disinfected direct from Warragamba Dam. It is suggesting that the water system will be given an 'all-clear' within 48 hours. Likewise, health authorities have begun to downplay the health dangers. To minimise political damage, the Labor leaders have called in David Harley, the chairman of the state Environment Protection Authority, to head an inquiry into the system's breakdown and the delays in informing the public.

Meanwhile, the crisis is already becoming a legal morass, with lawyers predicting multi-million dollar law suits by affected businesses and individuals. Government statements and inquiry findings will no doubt be tailored to limiting official and corporate liability as well as political responsibility.

The contamination of Sydney's water supply highlights the continuing rundown and decay of urban infrastructure in Australia and other industrialised countries. Sydney has joined a list of so-called Third World cities -- including Istanbul, Caracas, Bali, Jakarta, Beijing, Rangoon, New Delhi, Calcutta, Harare, Lusaka, Kinshasa, Addis Ababa and Lagos -- where people must boil their water.

The list is itself an indictment of the profit system at the end of the 20th century. Despite vast advances in technology, capitalism has proven incapable of organising clean water supplies for hundreds of millions of people. In fact, a study published in *Scientific American* last November calculated that one billion people have no safe water and 1.8 billion lack adequate sanitary services. The researchers estimated that the expenditure of $68 billion over 10 years would answer the crisis, just 1 percent of the world's military spending.

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