

Sydney's water crisis—a systemic failure

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With every passing day, it has become increasingly clear that the Sydney water crisis, which began officially with partial "boil alerts" on July 27, is not the result of minor glitches but a systemic failure with far-reaching consequences.

Sydney, a major financial centre in what is known as the developed world, has joined the ranks of the so-called Third World cities, from Jakarta to Addis Ababa and Caracas, where it is unsafe to drink the water.

According to the latest word from Sydney Water—the semi-privatised corporation entrusted with the responsibility of providing clean water to Australia's largest city—the 3.5 million residents may have to wait six months or more before getting the "all-clear."

The entire Warragamba Dam, the city's main water supply, now appears to be contaminated with the clumps of two potentially fatal parasites—Giardia and Cryptosporidium. No-one feels safe, especially parents with young children, elderly people and those with AIDS and other immune system disorders.

After two earlier official clearances, the city is currently in its third "boil water" alert after tests showed some of the highest levels yet of both bugs—up to 347 cysts of Giardia and 1,050 oocysts of Cryptosporidium per 100 litres. According to current US health standards, such levels can cause stomach and diarrheal illnesses. Cryptosporidiosis can be fatal for people with weak immune systems.

On several occasions, sample readings have been declared clear of the two microorganisms and then measured at dangerously high levels within hours. This has given rise to justifiable scepticism in the ability of the official authorities to tell the truth, let alone provide clean drinking water.

Similarly, the New South Wales state Labor government constantly claims that no higher levels of diarrhea or other stomach complaints have been detected. Some doctors at least are known to have reported markedly increased cases.

After nearly seven weeks and the launching of two

inquiries, the source of the contamination has not been found. Initial attempts by the government to blame isolated carcasses of dead dogs or foxes for polluting uncovered pipelines were soon shown to be scientifically ludicrous. It became obvious that the contamination was far wider and occurred after every heavy rainfall in the catchment area. Now the government of Premier Bob Carr says the causes may never be known.

But the general causes of the crisis are obvious. In the first place, they lie in the process of corporatisation and privatisation implemented by Labor and Liberal Party governments alike in order to slash spending, lower corporate taxes and hand big business free access to potential profit bonanzas in the supply of water, electricity, telecommunications, postal services and so on.

In the early 1990s, the previous Liberal state government increasingly privatised the Sydney water system, signing contracts for four private water treatment plants costing \$3 billion over 25 years, rather than spend money to clean up and provide sewerage in the catchment area and to overhaul an ageing pipeline system.

The contract for the main \$200 million plant at Prospect did not even oblige the company to provide safe water. Nor did it require Australian Water Services (AWS) to filter for Giardia and Cryptosporidium, even though the technology was available. The cost of not doing so had already been witnessed in April 1993 in Milwaukee, where Cryptosporidiosis killed an estimated 100 people and infected 403,000.

Now the contract terms mean that 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 for Sydney's disaster.

The former Water Board, a public authority, was corporatised in 1995 by the Liberal government and became Sydney Water, a profit-making organisation. After the Labor Party came to power in March that year, it stepped up the demand for cost-cutting and larger dividends, largely to be achieved by eliminating jobs and

cutting maintenance. This financial year, Sydney Water was expected to provide the state government with a dividend of \$280 million.

Today the estimates for installing effective filtration technology, whether it be ozonation, ozone disinfection or microfiltration, range from \$100 million to \$250 million. So the cost of installing this technology would be less than one year's dividend.

Meanwhile, Sydney Water has axed at least 4,000 jobs, almost halving the workforce. As a result, pipes have not been cleaned and maintenance has suffered. The wildly varying contamination readings produced in different parts of the metropolitan area suggest that the pipeline network may be another source of pollution.

Even the number of rangers employed to patrol the hilly catchment area to watch for pollution sources and intrusions by hunters, anglers and feral animals has been slashed.

It is in the catchment area that real chaos reigns. In its outer reaches, water quality is threatened by mining operations, unsewered residential developments, discharges from town sewage plants, agricultural, chemical and fertiliser runoff, silt from forestry operations and land clearing, and livestock allowed to graze near and roam into streams.

The inner catchments are even worse. Housing and "hobby farm" developments have been permitted to mushroom with little regard for the impact on the water supply. In the Shire of Wollondilly, for example, which surrounds much of Warragamba Dam, the population has risen from 7,000 to 35,000 in a decade. Fifteen townships have no sewerage, including The Oaks and Oakdale. Every time it rains heavily, residents in these villages complain of sewage rising from septic tanks and overflowing into Werriberri Creek, which runs into the Warragamba dam.

Questions have been raised about Sydney Water's latest marketing venture—the sale of human waste sludge. Every day, about 550 tonnes are spread on golf courses, agricultural lands, forests, public gardens and rehabilitation land throughout the Sydney catchment area and other catchments across the state. It appears that the sludge is not baked or pasteurised as required by international standards to kill off infectious parasites. Yet no tests have been conducted for Giardia and Cryptosporidium in run-off water. Testing is too expensive, it is said. As an agricultural chemist told reporters, "you are looking at around \$1,000 per sample for Giardia tests".

Finally, what people have long suspected has been proven. Successive governments have covered up high contamination readings. The Carr government has produced evidence that the previous Liberal government did not report high readings in 1993, 1994 and 1995. In Adelaide, the capital of South Australia, the state Liberal government stands accused of covering up dangerous levels six weeks ago, just when the Sydney scandal began.

While politicians from the two traditional ruling parties seek to use these revelations to engage in cheap point-scoring against each other, they are all equally responsible. Together, they implement the requirements of an economic system in which every aspect of water supply—from the construction and operation of filtration plants to pipeline maintenance and development permits in catchment areas—is determined by who can make profits from the process.

The medical knowledge and scientific technology exist to provide clean, safe water. But instead, the social infrastructure is eroded, staff are not replaced, ever more reckless entrepreneurs are entrusted with human health and chaos reigns. Only when the resources, knowledge and wealth of society are harnessed in the rational planning of society will the defence of the environment and public health be assured. As Sydney's pain shows, this is clearly incompatible with a system driven by the dictates of business.

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