

The Walkerton tragedy and Ontario's water crisis-some political lessons

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The opening of a judicial inquiry on October 16 and the recent publication of two investigative reports have again focused attention on the e-coli contamination of Walkerton, Ontario's water supply that resulted in the deaths of at least seven people last spring. Notwithstanding their limitations, each of these inquiries has further substantiated the charge that the Ontario Tory government played a decisive role in preparing the Walkerton tragedy and that similar problems are to be found in communities across Canada's most populous province.

Since coming to office in 1995, the Tories have eviscerated environmental regulations, slashed the budget of the Ministry of the Environment and eliminated almost half of its staff. In their drive to cut public services, the Tories completed the privatization of water testing which was begun by the previous New Democratic Party (NDP) government and downloaded the responsibility for water management onto increasingly overburdened municipalities. This led to chaos in water testing and reporting practices. In addition, the Tories have promoted the unregulated growth of industrial farming which has contributed to the contamination of groundwater on which rural communities in particular rely.

At first, the Tories tried to minimize the significance of the breakdown of Walkerton's water supply, insisting it was a local problem due to local, if not individual, mistakes. But in the face of a public outcry they acceded to a full public inquiry, trusting that a drawn-out judicial investigation would diffuse criticism of the government and circumscribe any examination of the impact of the Tories' right-wing agenda of privatization, deregulation and government downsizing.

The first stage of the inquiry, which is expected to last several months, is being devoted to determining the immediate causes of the e-coli contamination and the reasons for failure to act in a timely fashion to contain it. Later the inquiry will look at contributing factors, including the impact of the Tories' changes to the province's water management system. Testimony in the first days of the hearings has nevertheless revealed that water quality and deteriorating safeguards have been growing problems across Ontario for years.

The government-appointed inquiry, which is headed by Justice Dennis O'Connor, will make policy recommendations to the government on how to avert a similar tragedy in the future, but is prohibited by its mandate from placing blame. An ongoing criminal investigation by the Ontario Provincial Police, which precludes any investigation of the government's role in dismantling the province's water management system, may result in charges against Walkerton Public Utilities and other officials whose failure to promptly inform the public of the e-coli contamination has come under scrutiny.

At the same time, the Ministry of the Environment is conducting its own probe. In a preliminary report, the ministry conceded that there have long been concerns within the ministry over the province's water management system, including explicit warning that municipalities were skimping on water tests because of the cost—concerns the Tory government chose to

ignore.

The week before the public inquiry began its hearings, the chief medical officer for the region, Murray McQuigge, published a 350-page report which examines the causes of the e-coli contamination of the town's water last May. According to McQuigge, heavy rains which introduced large amounts of animal waste into the ground water, inadequate chlorination, and faulty treatment systems, all contributed to the outbreak. While limited in its scope, the report nevertheless indicates that lack of government regulation over large-scale farming and confused procedures for water management and reporting prepared the conditions for the disaster.

Meanwhile the *Toronto Star*, which is considered the voice of the Liberal Party in Ontario, published a 10-page investigative report into Walkerton subtitled "Bad policies, bad decisions, bad water." The report shows that problems with Ontario water supply date back at least three decades, but were greatly compounded by the cuts the Tories made to Environmental Ministry staffs and budgets and the privatization of water testing. The report also provides still further evidence that the Tory government was repeatedly warned by both government and civilian experts that their policies threatened to produce a tragedy such as the one in Walkerton.

The contamination of the water supply in the town of Walkerton was the greatest crisis for the Harris Tory government since the teachers' strike of the fall of 1997. That the tragedy in Walkerton was the direct consequence of government actions over the last several years, was in fact a crisis waiting to happen, reaffirmed many in their opposition to the Tories' right-wing, "free market" agenda. Many middle-class Tory supporters, meanwhile, were shaken out of their self-delusion that taxes could be cut and cut again without ever placing public services at risk.

The Tories' knee-jerk denials of responsibility, patent attempts to shift blame onto others, and failure to swiftly come to the aid of the beleaguered people of Walkerton caused even their boosters in the big business media to speak out against the Harris government's handling of the crisis. While much of the commentary was limited to questions of government competence and sensitivity to public opinion, some media pundits who had previously championed the Tory agenda warned that the jury is now out on the government's Commonsense Revolution. Behind these statements are concerns in ruling class circles that the Walkerton tragedy and the palpable failure of deregulation and privatization of water testing will fan opposition not just to the Ontario Tories—who have spearheaded the political and ideological offensive of big business—but feed anti-corporate and anti-capitalist sentiments as well.

Moreover, among the more circumspect within the ruling class there is a recognition that unchecked market forces alone cannot provide the ordered delivery of services such as safe drinking water which are essential to capitalist production. With the complexity of modern production, a high degree of planning and coordination is required to counteract the turmoil of the market and this necessarily rests on the

provision of a dependable social infrastructure. It is along these lines that the divisions have been drawn between the major political parties: to what extent should government provide the infrastructure needed to operate a modern economy and to what extent these functions can be entrusted to private and even unregulated companies.

The Tories were clearly shaken by the public outrage over Walkerton. At the conclusion of a cabinet meeting in September, Premier Mike Harris promised “balanced reforms and changes,” saying his government would take “a far more pragmatic look” at how services should be delivered. He was at pains to distinguish himself from ideologues who “if you’re not privatizing everything,” don’t consider “you’re in the same wave-length.”

However, when the new legislative session opened only a few weeks later Harris vowed his government will press forward with the dismantling of public services and deregulation. Ignoring the real dangers that have been sharply expressed in recent events, he stated that his government will continue “to outsource, to contract out and to privatize....This is the only way to eliminate public-sector monopolies that cost taxpayers hard-earned dollars.”

In pledging to press forward with privatization and deregulation Harris was responding to calls from the *National Post* and other voices of right-wing, corporate opinion that the Tories not allow Walkerton to derail the government from its agenda. Instead, argue these elements, the Tories should try to push Walkerton from the front pages by seizing the initiative and pressing forward with new right-wing measures, including new anti-union laws and further deregulation of the workplace.

But what has above all given the Tories the courage to press forward is the role played by their establishment opponents, comprised of the Official Opposition Liberals, the social-democratic NDP and the unions, in dissipating the opposition to the government. The public outcry over Walkerton raised the possibility of a reemergence of mass, working class opposition to the Harris government. But this was the last thing the Tories' establishment opponents wanted.

The NDP and Liberals have appealed to public anger over Walkerton all the better to channel it back into parliamentary protests. Insofar as the three parties disagree it is over how government should best facilitate the market economy and how best to manage public opinion. A central tactic used by the opposition parties to obscure their own complicity in the downsizing of public services and promotion of the capitalist market is the demonization of Mike Harris—as if this one-time golf pro and veritable know-nothing is the fount of the attacks on the working class.

Certainly, the Tories have been in the forefront of the assault on the working class. But their policies are only the sharpest expression of the class war being waged by all capitalist parties. Billions in cuts to transfer payments by the federal Liberals, inroads to privatization and the attacks on public service by the former provincial NDP, in fact the records of both parties refute the lie that the Tories are solely to blame for the crippling of social infrastructure.

As for the unions, they have been quite content to let the Tories' parliamentary opponents try to exploit Walkerton to boost their electoral fortunes. Heaven forbid that the working class should intervene as an independent force, using the events in Walkerton to expose the Tories' big business agenda and present an alternative corresponding to the needs of the working people. The Ontario Federation of Labor couldn't even beboove itself to produce a press release on the political lessons of Walkerton, although it joined with other union bodies in asking for workers to make charitable donations to the United Way! This is consistent with the record of the unions since the Tories came to power in 1995. When the 1997 teachers' strike threatened to become the spearhead for a broader working class offensive against the Tories, the unions scuttled it.

A key figure in the union bureaucracy is Leah Casselman, head of the provincial public sector workers union, the Ontario Public Service

Alliance (OPSEU). Unlike her counterpart at the OFL, Casselman has been very public and forthright in her denunciations of the Harris government over the water scandal., “Tragically,” says Casslemen, “the Harris government has been anything but responsible. They’ve cut the Ministry of Environment budget by 42 percent, laid off 900 staff, and told those who are left that they can’t perform surprise inspections because it’s too expensive. This is the price you pay for a tax break.” But Casselman’s indignation is a calculated disguise to cover the record of her own leadership.

OPSEU, was one of the first declared targets of the current government, which has cut at least 16,000 public service jobs in Ontario, a disproportionate number of those in the Environment Ministry. During the fights waged against the cuts of both the NDP and the Tories, however, OPSEU pointedly refused to take their fight into the political arena, and with every setback portrayed their defeats as victories to their membership. In the one-sided war being waged on workers, the union bureaucracies have proceeded from the most narrow defense of their own interests, ultimately disconnected from the fate of their membership and in opposition to any broader mobilization of the working class against the dismantling of social and public services.

For most working people and much of the middle class, the water crisis has confirmed their worst fears about the Tories. This disaster has renewed public debate over the Tories demagogic claims that the market is the highest form of social organization and that state planning and regulation are inherently wasteful and inefficient barriers to personal initiative and freedom. But for those who have opposed the Tory onslaught, the lethal consequences of their policies and the prostration of the official opposition must now lead them to draw some fundamental political conclusions.

The water crisis in Ontario cannot be viewed as an aberration. It as a logical result of the Tories' program of privatization, deregulation and dismantling of public and social services—a program, moreover, in which all the parties have been complicit. This is demonstrated in big things as in small. It was the Rae NDP government that opened that door to the Harris Tories, by initiating wholesale cuts to social and public services, and, which on shedding its own mild reform program, declared there is no alternative to the exigencies of capitalism. And it was the Rae NDP government, which in the name of providing greater efficiencies and transparency spun off the Ontario Clean Water Agency from the Environment Ministry and allowed for private water testing.

The answers to the collapse in social structures provided by the official opposition do not go beyond mild adjustments within the existing political framework and can offer no real solutions. Efforts to pressure these formations to effect fundamental change are futile and can only lead to political despondency. The profit system, for much of the world’s population, has never proven capable of providing even the most basic requirements of life, as harshly demonstrated by the millions who die each year from the lack of clean water. That this threat has reemerged in one of the wealthiest and technologically advanced countries in the world is an indication of how the drive for private accumulation stands as a barrier to the rational organization of society to meet human needs.



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