Northern Ireland gripped by water crisis

Steve James
5 January 2011

A sudden thaw, following weeks of freezing temperatures, crippled much of Northern Ireland's water and sewage system over the holiday period.

Hundreds of water mains burst, along with thousands of industrial and domestic water pipes—leading to a collapse in water supply. Twenty thousand repair orders were issued in a few days and several reservoirs ran dry. As a result the holiday plans of tens of thousands of people were ruined.

Up to 40,000 houses were left without any running water for days on end.

Community, sports and Salvation Army centres opened up to provide toilet and washing facilities. Emergency supplies of bottled water were distributed from the depots of the sole water utility, Northern Ireland (NI) Water, as supermarket supplies ran out. Hundreds of people queued day and night in winter conditions for safe potable water. Thousands more without transport, ill or housebound had to rely on friends, relatives and neighbours to collect water from distant depots.

The water crisis rapidly became a public health crisis, as sewers overflowed in Lurgan Co. Armagh, flooding houses in the Shankhill estate. Water supplies failed to a number of hospitals, at a time of year when the infection rate for winter vomiting bug was increasing. Hospitals were forced to call the fire service to provide water.

The press was filled with complaints from people warning that emergency water tankers provided by NI Water were delivering water variously described as yellow, brown and in some cases giving rise to stomach complaints. At Avoniel Leisure Centre in Belfast, for example, hundreds of people queued to collect water in bottles, buckets, and any makeshift container they could find. Jodielee Currie told the *Belfast Telegraph*, "Look at the state of the water. It's stinking. You can see through the bottles how yellow it is. It's not something you can give to babies in their bottles."

By January 1, despite huge efforts by water engineers and repair staff, NI Water admitted that some 440 million litres per day were being lost through leaks, against 852 million litres that were being pumped into the system. Normal daily input is 600 million litres. Some 20,000 houses still faced intermittent supplies, with emergency supplies of bottled water being delivered from Britain. At the time of writing, 2,600 houses were still reported to have no supplies at all. Sixty thousand homes were deliberately cut off overnight in an attempt to fill drained reservoirs.

NI Water's interim chairman, Padraig White, warned that supplies were unlikely to be restored to normal until at least the middle of next week, contradicting previous optimistic estimates of the company's chief executive, Laurence MacKenzie.

Meanwhile, NI Water's public information system collapsed. Desperate householders attempting to cope with days without water, or leaks, or both found the company's web site crashed due to the volume of traffic and engaged tones from the company's help lines.

Clearly, the melting ice has exposed a major infrastructure failing across Northern Ireland. Political and business figures immediately sought to relate the chaos to the lack of water charges in Northern Ireland, or NI Water's status as a government agency, rather than it being a privately owned utility. The Northern Ireland secretary, Tory Owen Paterson, warned that discussions on the events would focus on "the difference in the way that water is paid for in the rest of the UK and the way it is paid for in Northern Ireland".

Paterson insisted that the events of the last weeks would "bring this to a head". Business leaders organised in Chambers Ireland also called for the introduction of water charges.

But attempts to link the collapse to insufficient

© World Socialist Web Site

progress on privatisation are ideologically driven lies. In fact, the roots of the crisis are in decades of underinvestment by the British and Northern Ireland authorities, and in moves *towards* privatisation.

For decades, especially during The Troubles, the north's Victorian-era infrastructure has been low on the priorities of both Westminster and Stormont. High levels of public spending were diverted to maintaining an immense security apparatus, while Water Services, the forerunner of NI Water, was simply a government department.

Following the Good Friday Agreement of 1999, which aimed to include Sinn Fein and the Unionist parties in a power-sharing government, one of the British government's goals has been the introduction of water charges. Bills were already printed and due to be sent out in 2007, shortly before the re-establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly, which had again been suspended in 2002. NI Water was established shortly before the Northern Ireland Assembly re-convened with the intention of moving forward on charges and privatisation. It immediately announced the loss of hundreds of jobs.

But part of the deal, which brought Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party back into Stormont, was an agreement to postpone the introduction of charges, which in the meantime had become the target of a non-payment campaign. To date, charges have not been introduced and are at this point not anticipated until 2014.

Meanwhile NI Water was quickly mired in corruption controversies over directors' payments and un-tendered contracts. Early in 2010, four of its directors were forced to resign. The four promptly took up positions in the private companies with which they were accused of being allied. A new board was appointed in early December by Sinn Fein's minister of regional development, Conor Murphy.

Water provision has, therefore, become a deeply contentious political issue with rival business and political cliques at loggerheads over who benefits from the eventual sell-off, the profits of which will be paid by the working class in terms of lost jobs and rocketing bills.

In England and Wales, following privatisation, which cost tens of thousands of workers' jobs, the swathe of new private utility operators have proved extremely lucrative for their directors and shareholders. Thames Water, for example, intends to hand over ?75 million to its shareholders out of this year's profit of ?119 million on ?814 million turnover. Meanwhile the cost of water supply to the consumer has risen four-fold in real terms.

To justify their profits, the new companies have been forced to divert some of the wealth squeezed from water users for upgrading and replacing some of Britain's ancient water and sewage infrastructure. It is this—the gouging of ever-greater wealth from a captive market—that is now being cited as proof of the superiority of privatised water supply over Northern Ireland's state sector.

But the most cursory examination of any of the privatised utilities in Britain reveals an equally appalling response to the cold weather crisis. British airports, including Heathrow, the busiest airport in the world, bus and rail services, many motorways and major roads were blocked for days with immense disruption and misery—all due to a few inches of snow and a few cold days. Water provision is not immune. At the time of writing, 6,000 houses in Yorkshire, customers of privatised United Utilities, are without water.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site