



Oil and Water do Mix:

Citizen Struggles in Energy and Water

Susan Spronk

Social movements have been successful in beating back the tide of water privatization that swept the world in the 1990s, forcing the retreat of water multinational companies in the poorest countries of the global South. With global temperatures rising, unions in the energy sector can learn from these struggles – many of which were worker-led – to give rise to a strong counter-movement for energy democracy. While the political economies of the energy and water sectors are different, we can build on water justice victories and draw lessons on: how to frame our demands for local control over the commons; the importance of building broad coalitions with unlikely allies; and how to practice internal democracy in our movements.

The acceleration of climate change is fuelling resistance movements to the deepening of carbon-dependence worldwide. Energy workers have been at the forefront of many of these struggles. In Canada, for example, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union has taken a progressive stance against the further development of the Alberta tar sands.

Activists in this global movement for energy democracy can find inspiration in the victorious struggles against water privatization. The latter “magic bullet” solution to the problems of service provision has since floundered as governments in places as diverse as Buenos Aires (Argentina), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Hamilton (Canada), Malaysia, and Paris (France) have returned water to public hands. Many

lessons can be learned from these struggles, including how to frame demands and the importance of building broad-based coalitions.

Comparing oil and water

The battle for energy democracy presents a much larger threat to big capital than the battle for water justice. This political-economic difference is important because we need to know when we have scored a victory. We do so by assessing corporate strategy.

It is simply much more difficult to make money selling water than oil, as many of the multinational

water companies discovered in the early 2000s. Indeed, a decade into the project of water privatization, the multinational water companies started threatening to withdraw from the water sector in the global South because they were simply not making enough profit. The former Executive Director of the IMF, Michel Camdessus, struck a commission to study the problem, recommending that the international financial institutions implement a project of corporate welfare to help private companies privatize the profit and socialize the risk. Since then, those companies have turned their attention to more lucrative contracts in China, Eastern Europe, and now Western Europe.

Clearly, we face steeper uphill battles against multinational petroleum companies since we are taking on the nature of the modern world economy. Most wars are still fought over oil, not water. There is no international market in trading water as there is in oil. Despite this important difference, however, there are two strategic lessons from the water struggles that we can apply to the energy sector.

Framing demands for local control of the commons

Battles for water and for energy democracy are both essentially about local, democratic control over resources. Social movements in the water sector in both the global North and South have framed their struggles around demands for control over the “commons.”

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It may be easier to frame demands for water this way because we have a direct connection to water. In most places on Earth where there are human settlements, we can get drinking water from a well or a river. Water also has a spiritual quality as the essence of life. By contrast, making gasoline to fuel our cars involves expensive, complicated technology and we have little spiritual attachment to it. As such, it is easier to claim that water is “ours.”



An indigenous woman faces the police during the Cochabamba Water War, 2000

Photo : Tom Kruse

The struggle for energy democracy, however, is easily linked to struggles for the water commons. For example, in Canada, effective resistance against the Alberta tar sands can be found all the way up the Athabasca River, where First Nations are using the right to free and informed prior consent to try to prevent the destruction of their livelihoods, which depend on commons resources such as rivers. In the process, they are also contesting the tar sands.

In such struggles, activists face a decision whether to formulate demands in terms of “rights” or the “commons.” While these strategies are not mutually exclusive, human rights claims tend to be less radical. Rights claiming seems appropriate in places where campaigns are hard to win due to the political persecution of activists. In the highly militarized context of Colombia, for example, the water workers union in Cali launched a successful mass mobilization campaign to stop the privatization of the public utility by focusing on the human right to water, which inspired a national-level campaign for constitutional change. Similar campaigns for constitutional guarantees to the right to

water have won partial victories in South Africa, Uruguay and Italy. Yet these claims for state protection can only take us so far because they do little to question the links between the state and big business, and can be easily co-opted by corporate agendas.

By contrast, struggles for the “commons” make radical demands for democratic control over productive resources. These struggles provide a much stronger basis for a progressive politics than human rights claims. The struggle for energy democracy links to other struggles for democratic control of the commons, such as decolonization, food sovereignty, climate justice and “degrowth.”

Broad-based coalitions and unlikely allies

Given the enormity of the challenges ahead, it is necessary for the energy movement to build broad coalitions. Sometimes, this strategy may push us into coalitions with unlikely allies. For example, the Italian referendum to overturn water privatization laws was a resounding success from an electoral standpoint. Of the 57% of the electorate that voted (about 26 million), 96% voted to keep their water services public. The support of the Catholic Church and the mainstream media were essential to the victory.

One of the difficulties involved with building broad-based coalitions is that the messaging tends to be much more mainstream, limiting the campaign’s ability to advance the struggle for true alternatives. As legal scholars Jackie Dugard and Katherine Drage observe in *Shields and Swords: Legal Tools for Public Water*, legal strategies such as referenda “have proven to be an effective way to tap into widespread public opposition to reverse or challenge privatization” but where they are “less successful is in defining alternative models of public water services.” Despite the resounding success in Italy, for example, the government has refused to overturn privatization since the referendum did not outlaw private water services per se.

Activists can use a staged approach that begins with campaigns that propose more mainstream, reformist strategies (i.e. rights claims) and then radicalize demands once the legitimacy of the movement is established. Such a strategy requires, however, a democratic politics.

Direct democracy

Successful social movements are built from the ground up, not from the top down. Without directly participating in decision-making, our fellow neighbours will not be willing to take action, such as supporting us in strikes or participating in protests. In the Cochabamba Water War, community leaders and spokespeople used open, assembly-style politics where decisions about protests were made in the town square. To take a more recent example, the victorious student movement in Quebec also started with a reformist demand to stop tuition fee hikes but then radicalized its demand for free post-secondary education. We must prefigure the society we want to live in with our activism and build capacity for democratic self-governance.

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Conclusion

Fortune magazine claims that, “Water will be to the 21st Century what oil was to the 20th.” This may be true if the big water companies get their way. Thus far, water justice activists have been able to beat back the privatization agenda, and prevent the world’s water resources from being thoroughly commodified. With respect to energy, our struggles have a long way to go. As Sean Sweeney suggests, the struggle for energy democracy will require us to “resist, reclaim and restructure” our communities to draw on locally sourced, decentralized, alternative energy resources. In the struggle for energy democracy, we can build on our victories in the water sector by drawing lessons from these struggles: frame energy demands for local control over the commons, form broad coalitions, and build energy movements that involve direct democracy.

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Acknowledgements

This briefing note would not have been possible without the efforts and contributions of Sean Sweeney, who commissioned it; as well as David McDonald and Meera Karunanathan, who reviewed it; and Madeleine Bélanger Dumontier who completed the copy-editing.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Municipal Services Project (MSP) explores alternatives to the privatization and commercialization of service provision in the electricity, health, water and sanitation sectors. MSP studies progressive models deemed successful in an effort to understand the conditions required for their sustainability and reproducibility. The project is led by academics, NGO representatives, labour leaders and activists from different sectors and regions who believe in strong research for social change.