



UN member states endorse resolution on the human right to water

On 28 July 2010, member states at the United Nations General Assembly in New York endorsed a resolution on the human right to water and sanitation. This new resolution is non-binding; its value is principally symbolic. But the vote is an important victory for progressive groups around the world, because the resolution increases the pressure on national governments and on the UN system to move more quickly towards implementing water and sanitation as a human right – which was omitted from the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights.

The United States called for a vote, rather than let the resolution pass by consensus. Member states voted 122 in favour, none apparently dared vote against, but 41 abstained – which shows serious lack of consensus. Reasons that governments oppose are varied... some western countries don't want to be responsible for sanitation costs in Africa, others don't even approve a rights-based approach, others are worried that they will have to share their water with other countries (UK, USA and Canada respectively). Most abstaining countries are from the 'north', and those eight from the 'south' are all former British colonies.

This campaign was spearheaded by the Bolivian government, whose ambassador in the UN is a former water activist, Pablo Solon. The broader mobilisation was coordinated by the NGO Council of Canadians/Blue Planet Project, which linked up many of the civil society groups working in the sector around the globe. Their website had all of the tools needed for a lobbying activity (background documents, model letters, talking points, contact points for UN missions, etc).

Implications for Public Service International unions:

A number of PSI unions responded to the international call to contact their governments about the negotiations and the vote in the UN.

Public service workers and their unions in the PSI family have been leading the fight for the past 15 years to create the conditions in which workers have the tools and training to deliver quality public water and sanitation services to all.

This campaign was launched during a time when many governments were being sold the promise of privatisation, a promise which has turned sour in many locations. It is worth noting that the private operators, mainly the two French giants, support a UN right to water, as they consider that many governments will be compelled to throw money at the sector, some of which will invariably stick to the two French operators.

PSI's campaign opposes privatisation on a number of grounds, not the least of which is that money siphoned from jobs and wages invariably goes to corporate profits. There are many more reasons which

unite unions with civil society groups, progressive elected officials, utility managers and academics, both in opposing privatisation and commodification, but in the struggle for quality public services.

The ongoing global campaign consists of supporting unions with a variety of tools. The research from the PSI Research Unit (PSIRU) provides the empirical data and analyses to boost campaigns and to influence policy debates.¹ Our education and union development brings strategic planning and programme implementation tools to help unions make their choices and put them into practice. PSI's global strategy and lobbying brings unions into the key policy arenas at the regional and global levels. This combination has considerably slowed the privatisation agenda and created more space for pro-public policies.

Working together with civil society groups has proven crucial to creating the political pressure to influence policies at all levels. And now, PSI unions are working more with public utility managers and elected officials to create exchange mechanisms among public utilities, without the need for profits, mergers and takeovers and all of the other distortions of a market-based environment, or PPPs. The PSI alternative is becoming known as PUPs, or public-public partnerships.

PSI will continue working with allies around the world to ensure that the right to water and sanitation is actually implemented in each and every country, such that all people have equal access. PSI will be calling on union support in the upcoming months for this effort.

PSI will also seek to use the language of the approved resolution for further strengthening QPS in water and sanitation.² We will support unions who want to be involved in decision making including developing appropriate capacity building measures in cooperation with management to deliver services to all. This recent resolution should also support our work in implementing PUPs between water utilities.

Links :

<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2010/ga10967.doc.htm>

<http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/news-by-industry/et-cetera/UN-declares-access-to-clean-water-a-human-right/articleshow/6230955.cms>

<http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFJQE66R0PB20100728?sp=true>

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=35456&Cr=SANITATION&Cr1>

<http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/unifeed/d/15605.html> (video)

¹ www.psiru.org

² Operative Paragraph 2 “**Calls** upon states and international organizations to provide financial resources, capacity building and technology transfer, through international assistance and co-operation, in particular to developing countries, in order to scale up efforts to provide safe, clean, accessible and affordable drinking water and sanitation for all.”