

CUPE'S Plan to Strengthen Canada's Public Water and Wastewater Systems



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The Canadian Union of Public Employees is Canada's largest union, representing more than one half million women and men who work in municipalities, health care, education, utilities, social services, libraries, child care, transportation, emergency services and airlines.

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Clean, safe and affordable water is essential to people's health and well being. Since 1997 CUPE has been waging a campaign to keep water and wastewater services under public ownership and operation. We have fought privatization in all its forms, whether short-term operation and management contracts, long-term public private partnerships (P3s) or the complete sale of water infrastructure assets.

We can be proud of our accomplishments, but it is clear that transnational water corporations are as determined as ever to obtain control of our water and wastewater services and use our water resources for their benefit.

It is also clear that we cannot limit our struggle to fighting off privatization. We must also campaign for better, high-quality public water systems and promote solutions to problems facing public water and wastewater service delivery.

What follows is CUPE's position on what is needed to strengthen Canada's public water and wastewater systems. It sets out what we will be fighting for, so as to ensure that all Canadians have access to safe, clean public water. And it forms an integral part of our national campaign *Rebuilding Strong Communities*.

Water Source **Protection** and the Environment

Source protection

- ◆ One of the best ways to ensure quality drinking water is to protect our water sources and ecosystems. Watersheds are not usually within municipal boundaries and it is therefore imperative that federal, provincial/territorial and local governments recognize the fragility of our water resources and cooperate to protect and enhance them. CUPE will urge governments to take such a collaborative approach.
- ◆ Municipalities can take measures to help protect our water sources. These include establishing sewer bylaws that restrict the toxics that can be disposed of in wastewater systems as well as strong anti-pesticide laws that prevent these substances from entering the water table. CUPE will actively promote these measures within municipalities.
- ◆ The export of bulk water for profit jeopardizes water sources. Water cannot be treated as a commodity. The export of water destroys the environment and does nothing to alleviate on-going water shortages in other parts of the world. The provisions of NAFTA and other trade agreements are such that the export of even one drop of water may have far-reaching consequences. Canada needs a federal, Canada-wide ban on water exports now and CUPE will support efforts to implement such a ban.
- ◆ Working through coalitions is the most effective way of achieving these objectives. CUPE will join with environmental activists and other progressive people in the community to push for measures that will protect and enhance water ecosystems.

Keeping Water Services Public

Drawing the line on privatization

◆ Public ownership and operation of water and wastewater systems is essential to safeguarding the public's interest. Privatization of our public water systems puts profits ahead of people and public health. Privatization efforts must be resisted and water services that are already privatized must be brought back under public operation and control. CUPE will continue to fight against the operation, financing and ownership of public water and wastewater services by the private sector.

The not-for-profit principle

◆ Governments should not allow basic water and wastewater services to be used as a source of profit. Daily operation, control and ownership of water facilities and infrastructure must be kept in public hands and water systems run on a not-for-profit basis.

Fighting the Trade and Investment Agreements

◆ International trade and investment agreements such as NAFTA, the FTAA and GATS facilitate the privatization of public services, including water services. These trade agreements put corporate rights ahead of citizen rights, giving corporations the right to sue governments for any actions taken that might restrict their business operations. Once a service is privatized, trade agreements make it difficult, if not impossible, to bring them back under

public ownership and control. Stopping the expansion of trade agreements, and fighting against their most harmful provisions, is a major component of CUPE's program to strengthen public water systems.

Democratic control

◆ Public water systems must be owned by the people and operated in their interest. Public water utilities also must be managed in a way that respects the rights of the water workers who operate them and promotes the interests of the citizens who depend on them. Managers and politicians responsible for water services must be held accountable. CUPE advocates that citizens have access to decision-making bodies, and have the right to appeal their decisions regarding water prices, water quality, infrastructure renewal and water conservation.

Water Watch committees

◆ One of the best ways for citizens to ensure a good public water system, and to fight privatization, is to organize at the community level into independent citizen groups. CUPE will continue to promote and participate in community-based Water Watch committees.

Improving Public Water Services

Fighting privatization is only one part of our plan to revitalize public water services. Governments have allowed (and in some cases actively promoted) the decline of our public systems. We must organize against this decline and push for major progressive changes in how our water systems are operated, regulated, and financed. We must also insist that public water systems promote water conservation.

Federal water standards

- ◆ Canada needs stronger regulations governing public water systems. And these stronger regulations must be enforced. The tragedy at Walkerton has prompted some provinces to strengthen their regulations. But our water continues to be governed by a patchwork of provincial regulations that do not guarantee all Canadians access to high quality water. CUPE will push for national water standards and sufficient federal resources to enforce these standards in every community.

Operator training and certification

- ◆ Water workers keep our public water systems running. Municipal water utilities must invest in the workforce. This means negotiating fair compensation and good working conditions. It also means investing in the training and certification of all water workers. CUPE will advocate better training of water workers and will insist that training expenses be paid by the employer. Decisions about training must be made jointly by the employer and union. Workers should not be required to undergo testing without adequate training and preparation. All expenses related to testing and licensing, including fees, should be paid for by the employer.

- ◆ Training and testing requirements and procedures for water and wastewater operators are a patchwork of regulations mainly under the jurisdiction of the provinces. CUPE will advocate that the federal and provincial/territorial governments develop uniform training, testing and certification programs for all water and wastewater operators. Furthermore, we will advocate that these be made-in-Canada programs and regulations and not merely adopted from those in the United States.

Funding for water infrastructure

- ◆ Adequate financing of water and wastewater systems must be restored and maintained. Cutbacks and downloading have put more financial burden on municipalities. The grants and loan arrangements that remain are woefully inadequate. There is a large infrastructure deficit in Canada.

- ◆ The various estimates of monies needed for water and wastewater infrastructure over the next fifteen years are as high as \$90 billion. More financial assistance in the form of grants and loans to municipalities from higher levels of government must be made available, especially in the short term. CUPE will continue to pressure federal, provincial and territorial governments to provide more funding for municipal water and wastewater systems.

- ◆ First Nations communities have special needs regarding funding for water and wastewater facilities. Significant additional targeted funding is needed to assist First Nations communities to develop their water and wastewater systems and CUPE will support First Nations in their demand for such assistance.

Financial management of water utilities

◆ Municipalities must take action to ensure good management of water and wastewater services. CUPE advocates that municipalities take a “life cycle approach” to assessing and funding water services and infrastructure. Municipalities should ensure that sufficient reserves are set aside for short and long-term water infrastructure upgrades, expansion and repairs.

Water pricing

◆ Municipalities are increasingly moving towards a “full-cost recovery” system for financing water systems – a system that recovers the full cost of water services by charging water consumers. CUPE does not support full cost recovery. Our union advocates that municipalities ensure water rates not become a burden on the poor and that treated water continues to be affordable for all residents. To that end, it is our position that:

- The amount of water required to meet the basic daily needs of people must be provided at nominal cost.
- Where increases in water rates occur, these increases should be implemented in a gradual manner and not in a way that causes hardship to lower income people.
- Smaller and more isolated communities are not in a position to recover the costs of operation and infrastructure from water charges without causing undue hardship on lower income people. First Nations communities certainly are a case in point. Such communities need to be provided with special financial assistance from other levels of government.

Water conservation

- ◆ Water meters are used by a growing number of municipalities as a way of measuring water consumption by households and businesses and promoting conservation. CUPE recognizes that water metering is a means to measure consumption and promote water conservation.
- ◆ However, CUPE believes that education needs to play a greater role in promoting water conservation.
- ◆ Metering and billing are important functions within public water systems and should not be contracted out to private contractors. CUPE will fight the contracting out of these services and strive to bring in-house all new or contracted out metering and billing operations.

The goal of CUPE's **Rebuilding Strong Communities** campaign is to restore and renew quality public services and to press for public investment in needed public infrastructure.

Building on the success of its Water Watch campaign, CUPE is committed to stopping the privatization and contracting out of water and wastewater services and to improving and expanding services in a socially, environmentally and fiscally responsible manner.

For more information and to access additional resources, visit communities.cupe.ca or email communities@cupe.ca.



