

WATER PRIVATIZATION AND THE PROSPECTS FOR TRADE UNION REVITALIZATION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: CASE STUDIES FROM BOLIVIA AND PERU

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INTRODUCTION

The privatization of public water utilities has been one of the most controversial aspects of neoliberal restructuring in the late 20th century. Powerful social movements that aim to protect water from corporate control have emerged across the planet, particularly in the global South. Since water privatization affects people from all walks of life many protests have been organized by broad-scale social movement coalitions which have included labour, environmental, consumer, social justice and indigenous groups. While public sector workers—arguably one of the constituencies most affected by water privatization policies—have participated in many of these coalitions, they have also played a controversial role. Preliminary research on workers' responses in Latin America demonstrates that labour unions have employed a variety of strategies when faced with the privatization of public services, including active support and resistance (De la Garza Toledo 1991; Ducheim 1998; Murillo 2001; Novelli 2004).

Based on two case studies from Peru and Bolivia, this paper investigates why certain unions of water workers and not others have sought to form deep coalitions with community groups when confronted by privatization. Although in both cases, trade unions decided to participate in coalitions with community groups, the political strategy of forming “deep coalitions” (Tattersall 2005) has emerged as a conscious practice in the case of the water workers' union in Peru but not in Bolivia. Drawing from Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman's (2000) study of revitalization amongst service unions in northern California, the paper argues that the reactions of these two public sector unions can be explained as the result of three factors. First, in both cases there have been internal crises which have led to new leadership. Second, these new leaders who come from outside the labour movement see decline as a mandate for change. Only in the Peruvian case,

however, has there been a strong union federation at the national level which supports innovative organizing practices.

The first part of the paper discusses the prospects for building labour-community coalitions in the water sector in order to engage with current debates on union revitalization and renewal. The second part of the paper contrasts the experiences of anti-privatization coalitions in Huancayo, Peru and Cochabamba, Bolivia. Research for this paper is based upon a review of trade union documentation, and observation of events organized by trade unions between February and May 2008 in Bolivia and Peru, as well as and 24 formal interviews with trade union and community leaders.

DEBATES ON UNION REVITALIZATION AND RENEWAL IN LATIN AMERICA

Public sector unions in Latin America have traditionally been unlikely candidates for studies of revitalization and renewal. Indeed, most studies of public sector unions' reactions to neoliberal policies in Latin America have highlighted a politics of co-optation rather than resistance to privatization. Worker opposition was quickly neutralized in the privatizations of local water utilities in La Paz, Bolivia and Buenos Aires, Argentina, when the government offered to sell the workers shares in the new public utilities (Loftus and McDonald 2001; Spronk 2007). In her detailed study of the privatization in the Mexican telecommunications company Telmex, the largest privatization deal in the region in the 1990s, Judith Clifton (2000) describes how President Salinas worked together closely with union leaders to make the privatization process as smooth as possible. The union leadership exchanged guarantees to suppress dissent for government promises to minimize job losses. Political scientist Victoria Murillo (2000) similarly observed that due to strong corporatist ties forged between unions and political parties in Argentina, Mexico and Venezuela, union leaders often remained loyal to the party in power with the hopes that their collaboration with government would encourage the latter to mitigate the worst effects of neoliberal restructuring on union members.

In contrast to the literature on renewal and revitalization on the Anglo-Saxon democracies, studies of mobilization unionism in Latin America focus on the importance of establishing independent trade unions rather than on the expansion of union affiliation given the strong history of corporatism in the region (Antunes 2001; Bensusán and Cook 2003; Patroni 2004; Bensusán 2005; Ellner 2005).¹ Although the average trade union density in the Latin American region has fallen considerably in the last twenty five years, unlike the Anglo-Saxon democracies, density is a poor predictor of union strength in Latin America.² As Maria Lorena Cook (2006: 21) notes, in the post-authoritarian contexts of Latin America, high density may simply reflect involuntary or

compulsory union membership, and is therefore “less meaningful as an indication of member commitment or mobilization capacity.” Indeed, as labour researchers Gabriela Bensusán and María Lorena Cook argue in their study of Mexico, labour revitalization is “not to be understood primarily in terms of new organizing or more mobilization, but rather in terms of: (1) the creation of a political-institutional framework that allows ‘real’ trade union activity; and (2) the presence of labour groups to take advantage of this framework” (Bensusán and Cook 2003: 229).

Even in cases such as Bolivia and Peru in which ‘real,’ independent trade unions exist, public sector trade unions have rarely embraced a democratic, class struggle unionism. Indeed, popular images of militant, combative trade unions are based upon workers from export and manufacturing sectors who have fought victorious struggles against the state and capital.³ Oscar Olivera’s (2004) well-known account of the role of workers in the Cochabamba “Water War,” for example, depicts the protagonist role that manufacturing workers played in alliance with urban consumers and indigenous peasant organizations in the struggle to reverse privatization, but says nothing about the water workers’ union. As noted above, public sector trade unions have traditionally been deeply enmeshed in corporatist relationships with their employers contributing more generally to trade union decline (Balbi 1997; Arce 2001; Kruse 2001; Solfrini 2001). Yet, as neoliberalism has advanced, corporatist relations in the public sector have come under increasing strain as public employees face the constant threat of expulsion and wages and benefits have stagnated under neoliberal austerity policies.

Public sector workers are uniquely positioned to form alliances with community groups given their dual construction as both “citizens” and “workers.” As Franco Barchiesi (2007) observes in the context of neoliberal reforms in South Africa, public sector workers face dual challenges originating from labour processes and the normative frameworks that govern the conditions of employment and services provision. Their juridical construction as “servants of the state” can be used by employers to both stigmatize and constrain wage militancy and collective bargaining at the same time as it facilitates the articulation of public sector workers’ tactics and demands on a directly political ground. Furthermore, limitations on collective bargaining and the right to strike also drive public sector workers towards political rather than industrial strategies (Maceira and Murillo 2001). In short, workers who provide a public service can easily frame arguments about protecting the “public good” in order to buttress the unions’ demands on moral grounds.

In an uneven way, some public sector unions in Latin America have started to reposition themselves as active campaigning organizations. A number of political campaigns against neoliberal economic policies led by public sector trade unions, including teachers’ and health workers’ unions, as well as unions

in the telecommunication, water, and electricity sectors (Fruendt 2002; Murillo and Ronconi 2004; Novelli 2004; Hall, Lobina et al. 2005; Almeida 2006; Almeida 2008). Many of these unions have adopted social movement tactics, such as the use of direct action and the formation of labour-community alliances. The following section examines two such cases of resistance to privatization in the water sector in Peru and Bolivia.

WATER PRIVATIZATION AND THE WATER WORKERS' UNIONS IN PERU AND BOLIVIA

In April 2000, residents of Cochabamba, Bolivia, managed to expel the private, foreign-led consortium that had taken over the city's water system just six months before. Outraged at the exorbitant increases in water prices and convinced that access to clean water was a basic human right and a gift from the *Pachamama* (an Andean earth deity), residents of Cochabamba and the surrounding region violently opposed the plans to "lease the rain" by taking to the streets in protests known as the "Water War" (Finnegan 2002). The coalition that was formed to coordinate the protests—the Coordinadora—brought together groups from different social classes, including rural peasants, formal and informal urban workers, each of which had different reasons for participating in the struggle.

While the water workers participated in the coalition, as the Secretary General at the time put it, they supported the struggle by "showing up for work" (Author interview, July 2005). While many individual workers supported the coalition, the union leadership failed to make any public statements against privatization until the battle was over. The relationships between union leaders and community members that were formed during the heat of battle were distant. As a result, the coalition between organized workers and other members of the community was short-lived. The union leaders whom I talked to during my investigation in 2005 showed very little interest in supporting community demands for expanded water services. For example, one day I arrived at SEMAPA to find workers in their blue uniforms lolling around the grounds of the water utility. When I asked General Secretary Cardona why no one was at work, he told me that the union decided in an emergency morning assembly that no worker would leave the premises that day to avoid being confronted by angry residents. That day, poor neighbourhoods of the Southern zone who lacked water services organized a march to protest the corruption in SEMAPA and the failure of the utility to expand services to their neighbourhoods in the poor, southern zone of the city. Five years after the Water War as tensions grew between the workers' unions and the community associations representing users, the relationship between the Coordinadora and the official union leadership broke down completely.

As noted by researcher Philipp Terhorst (2003), tensions between the SEMAPA workers' union and the Coordinadora emerged early on during the transition period after the Water War (April 2000 to April 2002) when the utility was returned to municipal control. Building on the experience of the Water War, the Coordinadora put forward radical proposals to decentralize and democratize the management of the utility in order to give the community more control over decision, known locally as "social control" (see Driessen 2008). As Terhorst writes, "The change process created pressure for change and uncertainty for the workforce.... Majority control by citizens was too far reaching for the workers to accept" (2003: 76). Indeed, the SEMAPA workers' union blocked the Coordinadora's proposal, instead supporting the proposal by the Mayor which would reduce community control to a minimum. While many of the Coordinadora activists remained committed in principle to the notion that workers had an important role to play in the public-social utility, "the workers seemed to be less willing to join the change process than could have been wished and anticipated" (2003: 65).

By mid-2005, the Coordinadora came to see the union as a barrier preventing the possibility of implementing "real" social control within the public utility. One of the major problems has been the bloating of the public utility with excessive staff. In 1997, SEMAPA employed 4.7 workers per 1000 connections (Nickson and Vargas 2002: 104). By December 2003, the Superintendent of Basic Services reported that this number had jumped to 11.5. The tripling of the staff became a public concern in 2005 because it jeopardized the next instalment of a US\$11 million loan offered by the Inter-American Development Bank, which was needed for system expansion. At the time, it was difficult to get an accurate picture of the utility's financial situation because the representative of the union on the Board of Directors was also the Director of Finances, making it impossible to pinpoint financial "leaks" within the company. To make matters worse, the union had a lot to hide. The corrupt union leadership was suspected of running a system of clandestine connections that was estimated to cost the utility almost \$100,000 a month in lost revenue.

Although the alliance between labour and community groups immediately before the Water War may have been short-lived, the relationships between community organizations and the union forged have opened up the possibilities of renewal coming from the rank-and-file. Since 2002, loose ties between the Coordinadora and insurgents from the rank-and-file were maintained through "Banderas," a young activist with close links to the Coordinadora who was hired by the water company shortly after the Water War. Initially hired as a general labourer, Banderas has helped to create an insurgent force within the public sector union which eventually succeeded in overthrowing the corrupt, mafia-type leadership that ran the union for over twenty years (Author interview, February 2008).

Thanks to these counter-organizing efforts of insurgents within the union, the head of the union “mafia” was fired in October 2005 for organizing an illegal strike that aimed to protest the dismissal of the corrupt general manager. For the first time in over twenty-five years, the elections that were held to replace him were conducted using secret-ballot. Members also had a choice between two platforms of candidates. Nine out of ten members turned out to vote; over 70% of the members voted for the new leadership (Author interview, Secretary General of the SEMAPA union, February 2008). While it is yet unclear as to whether this truly indicates a new direction within the SEMAPA union, it is an important step on the road to union democracy.

A similar anti-privatization backlash to the Cochabamba “Water War” ensued five years later in Huancayo, Peru. In March 2005, a vibrant movement made up of a defensive front of the residents of Huancayo and the surrounding region—the water workers’ union, associations of market workers and parents’ associations, and irrigating farmers—fiercely opposed the privatization of the local water utility, SEDAM-Huancayo. Protests reached their climax with a city-wide strike on March 30 involving over 15,000 people, which successfully pressured the local government to back down and to cancel plans for privatization. In this case, the public sector trade union, the Single Union of Potable Water Workers of Huancayo (Sindicato Único de Trabajadores de Agua Potable de Huancayo, SUTAPAH), played a leading role in the struggle, actively seeking to build and sustain the coalition with community leaders, represented by the Water Defense Front of the Junin Region (Frente de Defensa del Agua – Region Junin, the Frente). After the initial victory, the demand for and development of a public alternative turned into a central aspect of the Frente’s and the union’s work (Terhorst 2008).

The two contrasting experiences with labour-community coalitions suggest that not all coalitions are created equal. The level of interaction between community and unions can indicate degrees of revitalization and renewal. In Amanda Tattersall’s (2005) terms, the close, collaborative relationship between SUTAPAH and the Frente that emerged in Huancayo is an example of a “deep coalition,” while the relationship between the water workers’ union and other community organizations within the Coordinadora represents a short-lived “support coalition.” Deep coalitions “facilitate long-term relationships between unions and community organisations, where the breadth of activity between groups is complemented by a depth of activity by participating organizations,” while support coalitions “operate as short-term, structured coalitions between unions and community organizations” (Tattersall 2005: 107, 100).

The collaborative relationship between the union and community groups in Huancayo is based upon a set of perceived mutual interest. Thanks to support from the national trade union federation and global unions, SUTAPAH provides the Frente with financial resources while the latter is able to mobilize public

support for campaigns and events due to its deep links with different community organizations such as community kitchens, parents' associations, and the irrigating peasant organizations. Personal relationships have developed between high ranking members in both organizations. In Huancayo, the Secretary General of SUTAPAH (Josefina Gabriel) and the President of the Frente (Nelly Avendaño Roca) have worked together actively since 2005 to coordinate political campaigns and public education events in the region on issues related to reform of the public utility. When the Frente lost its office space last year due to a lack of funds, the union allocated it space within their building next to the water company. Over time, the relationship between the two organizations has deepened, although the Frente is still looking for its own office space which will allow it to maintain its autonomy (Author Interview, Nelly Avendaño Roca, May 2008). Initial collaborations focused on public education campaigns to raise awareness about the dangers of privatization and direct action campaigns to reverse the decision of the municipal governments to privatize the water company, including the broad-scale mobilizations noted above.

While new leaders with a mandate for change have emerged within the trade unions in Cochabamba, Bolivia and Huancayo, Peru, the union's decision to pursue a deep coalition in the latter was largely the initiative of the national federation, which has been fighting for almost two decades to rebuild trade unionism in the water sector. Previous to the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s, urban water services in Peru were supplied by a central company that was managed by the federal government. The arrival of the repressive neoliberal Fujimori administration meant dramatic changes in public services and labour relations. At the beginning of the 1990s, the water sector of Peru was reorganized under the Fujimori dictatorship, with collaboration by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB). In April 1990, the centralized state company was dissolved and the sector was divided between urban and rural areas. Under the decentralization program, 54 new municipal water companies were created. Responsibility for ownership and management of these operations was transferred to municipal governments (with the exception of the water company in Lima, which remains property of the central government).

Both before and after decentralization, water workers in Peru have been represented by a national trade union federation—the Federación Nacional de Trabajadores de Agua Potable (FENTAP). Established in 1981, today FENTAP represents over 8000 water workers across the country. In the 1990s, however, FENTAP found itself fighting not only against the government's neoliberal privatization agenda, but to maintain its organizational integrity. Following decentralization in 1990, the number of members affiliated to FENTAP dropped dramatically due to two changes in the labour law enacted by the Fujimori government: union pluralism allowed for the formation of more than one union in one workplace and ended union officer protection, which made it much easier

for employers to get rid of union leaders by refusing to grant them leave to perform their executive duties (Cook 2006: 122). Forming labour-community alliances is part of FENTAP's strategy to regain the confidence of water workers so that the organization can rebuild its membership base (Author interview, Luis Isarra, May 2008). FENTAP has spearheaded several successful campaigns to prevent or rollback the government's privatization agenda. Besides Huancayo, FENTAP has formed common fronts with community organizations in five other regions of Peru: Piura, Tumbes, Lima, Huaral, and Pisco (Isarra and Donner 2005).

Leadership change is the second key factor which explains why water workers' unions in Peru have repositioned themselves as active campaigning organizations. As noted above, FENTAP suffered an internal crisis in the early 1990s due to the dramatic drop in the number of local affiliates that splintered off from the Federation during decentralization. Since FENTAP depends on voluntary contributions to fund its activities, the leadership has to work hard to demonstrate its responsiveness to the membership. The federation's strong stance against privatization has been born out of a struggle to regain the confidence of its members. The existence of new leadership from outside of the labour movement is also a factor. One of the key architects of FENTAP's new organizing strategy has been Luis Isarra, who has held various positions on the national executive for the past ten years and became the Secretary General in March 2005. As a young man, Isarra was active in the student movement during his studies of industrial and public relations at the Universidad Nacional de San Agustín in his hometown in Arequipa. Upon graduation, Isarra was hired by the public water company in Arequipa and has worked in the water sector ever since. Isarra has been one of the organic intellectuals in Peru's movement for public water (see, for example, Isarra 2004). The Peruvian government sees Isarra as such a threat that in August of 2008, it pressured Isarra's employer (the water company in Arequipa) to revoke his paid time off for trade union duties and activities, offering to grant seven new accreditations should the union agree to the withdrawal of Luis Isarra's accreditation. Thanks to an international letter campaign, Isarra's paid leave was restored. Maintaining the protection for union officers remains a constant struggle for trade unions in Peru.

The existence of a strong union federation at the national level in Peru but not in Bolivia explains why Peruvian water unions have adopted a strategy to form deep coalitions with community groups to defend public services against privatization, while no such strategy has emerged in Bolivia. This difference owes to the institutional contexts in which these unions find themselves in, particularly the history of decentralization. In Bolivia, water workers' unions have been isolated from each other since the water sector was decentralized over 30 years ago. Municipal water companies were created by presidential decree in the 1960s and 1970s when authoritarian regimes transferred the provision of

infrastructure for water services to newly-created regional offices of central government (Nickson and Vargas 2002: 101). As a result, no national-level federation exists for workers in the water sector in Bolivia. Instead, the SEMAPA union is affiliated to a national federation that represents workers in various sectors, the Confederación Sindical de Trabajadores de Luz, Fuerza, Telecomunicaciones, Agua y Gas de Bolivia (Union Confederation of Light, Electricity, Telecommunications, Water and Gas Workers of Bolivia), a loosely-organized peak association that has remained silent on issues of privatization. Indeed, the affiliates of the Confederación remain divided on the issue of privatization and therefore there is little support offered for the adoption of innovative organizing strategies “from above.”⁴

By contrast, the FENTAP has linked up with a global union federation and NGOs that have played key roles in supporting innovative organizing strategies to defend public services in Peru. Indeed, FENTAP leader Luis Isarra has been one of the leading personalities in the transnational networks to defend the right to water worldwide. FENTAP was a founding organization of the Red Vida (“Network of Life”), the network of unions and social justice organizations established to defend the right to water in the Americas. Crucially, FENTAP is one of the most active partner organizations with the Public Services International (PSI), a global trade union federation which supports public sector union campaigns against privatization worldwide. PSI and the Reclaiming Public Water Network of the Transnational Institute (RPW-TNI) based in Amsterdam have been strong promoters of the concept of the public-public partnership as an alternative way to achieve modernization without privatization. The basic concept is to match a strong public utility with technical expertise with a struggling public utility. With the aid of trips and workshops financed in part by the PSI and the RPW-TNI, the management of SEDAM-Huancayo signed a partnership agreement with the union that runs the public water company for the province of Buenos Aires (SOSBA) in June 2007.

At the local level, the support offered to the coalition of the Frente and SUTAPAHA by the public-public partnership has added a much-needed boost to the struggle for reform of the local utility, which is widely considered to be poorly managed. The coalition has met with resistance from local politicians in particular. One local politician, for example, asked local organizers point blank where he would find jobs for the people that worked on his political campaign if the municipal council no longer had control over management decisions in the public utility. A technical study conducted by SOSBA engineer found that the utility’s payroll could be cut by 35% if the number of unit managers was reduced from 16 to 5. Understandably, local officials have been slow to embrace the idea of the public-public partnership, knowing that their “botín político” (political booty) is being threatened.

CONCLUSION

The revitalization and renewal of trade unions is important in the public sector in Latin America where the quality of public services has often been undermined by patron-client relationships at the local level. In many cases, such as in the municipal water companies in Huancayo, Peru and Cochabamba, Bolivia, politicians have used public utilities as a way to distribute political favours to friends, relatives and political allies. Considering the need to democratize public utilities, the emergence of labour-community coalitions has been one of the positive outcomes of the struggles against privatization. Activists are building on the relationships forged in struggle to push for the democratization of their own unions and public utilities, two important steps on the path to modernization of public utilities without privatization.

As we have seen in the case of Peru, union revitalization has been a “top down” process dependent on the presence of a strong national federation that provides ideological and financial support for innovation with the help of its international allies. While these campaigns have successfully stymied privatization, what effect these “deep coalitions” have, if any, on the internal union dynamics at the local level are yet unclear. While the decentralization of the water sector in Bolivia inhibits the adoption of a common national strategy, there is some indication that the SEMAPA workers’ involvement in community coalition is facilitating a “bottom up” process of trade union renewal. Insurgents within the water workers’ union in Cochabamba have successfully thrown out a corrupt union leadership. In future research on alternatives to privatization, more attention needs to be paid to the possible links between renewal and revitalization in the struggles to democratize trade unions and service delivery more broadly.

NOTES

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1. As David Camfield (2007) argues, it is necessary to distinguish between “mobilization unionism” and the more radical, democratic “social movement unionism” in which the union is controlled by the rank and file, since the adoption of social movement tactics can be a progressive façade in a undemocratic union.
 2. Ken Roberts (2008: 6) estimates that trade union density in the 1990s was only about 13 percent, down from its height of about 22 percent at the peak level of labor mobilization during the era of import substitution industrialization.
 3. Miners’ unions have been particularly combative both in the past and present. See, *inter alia*, Laite (1980) and De Echave (2005) on Peru and Nash (1979) and Webber (2005) on Bolivia.
 4. The electricity workers in who are affiliated with the Confederación Sindical de Trabajadores Luz, Fuerza, Telecomunicaciones, Agua y Gas of Bolivia, for example, supported the governments’ privatization agenda and eventually become major shareholders in the newly privatized power companies (Rojas 2006).

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