



"The water is ours, damn it!" proclaims the banner above a celebrating Bolivian crowd photo: nadir.org

Looking South Uruguay and Bolivia Lead the Way

Uruguay Voters Drive the Right to Water into Their Constitution

Saying that all people have the right to water is one thing, but actually making it a part of a nation's constitution is quite another. This is just what the people of Uruguay did when they voted in a national referendum on October 31, 2004, to amend their constitution. The vote came as a result of a two-year campaign led by the National Commission for the Defense of Water and Life, a grassroots network including Friends of the Earth Uruguay.

As a result of the vote, the Uruguay constitution now guarantees that piped water and sanitation is a fundamental right to be available to everyone in the country. Further, social considerations are to take precedence over economic factors in setting water policy, and for-profit corporations are banned from supplying water for human consumption.

Maude Barlow of the Council of Canadians and co-author of *Blue Gold* was in Uruguay to witness this historical moment. She relates, "The night before I left I spoke to hundreds of people at a big public forum, assuring them that their work had been worth it and that we would take their constitutional amendment and use it as the basis of an international campaign. But the standing ovation and tears came when I ended my speech with the words affirming that on October 31 'Todos somos Uruguayos' – we are all Uruguayans."

When Thomas Linzey of the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund, with whom the Defending Water for Life campaign works closely, says movements drive rights into the constitution, this is the kind of action he is talking about. When will the right to water be made part of a state constitution? Or the U.S. Constitution?

Bolivia Establishes First Water Ministry in Hemisphere and Calls for Water Out of All Trade Agreements

The story of the people's revolt in Cochabamba against Bechtel taking over their water system and charging outrageous rates has now been told many times, including in the documentary *Thirst*. Less known is the social uprising in El Alto in January 2005 which has led to steps which will force Suez to sever its contract with the city. Now the new government of President Evo Morales has created a Ministry of Water to protect the people's right to water from corporate predation.

Bolivian Minister of Water, Miguel Lora, spoke this past March at the International Forum on the Defense of Water held in Mexico City as a counter to the corporate-led 4th World Water Forum. He made clear that the Ministry's goal is to have all water companies operating in Bolivia be public and to have in place a public water model that is efficient and transparent. The Ministry will also be in charge of protecting Bolivia's water resources, looking at the cumulative impacts of concessions granted to mining, electric and oil companies, while respecting traditional knowledge, uses and cultural diversity.

Further Lora expects that including the right to water in the Bolivian Constitution will be on the agenda of the Constitutional Assembly when it convenes in August to rewrite the Bolivian Constitution. He will also press for an international right to water for all living things.

At the 4th World Water Forum, the new Bolivian government caused intense political debate about the Ministerial Declaration by insisting that four major points be included:

- Water is a human right.
- Water is a social/cultural good, not an economic commodity.
- Water must be excluded from all trade agreements.
- Water infrastructure can be financed by governments if they don't finance their military operations.

Despite the World Water Council issuing its report *The Right to Water* (see p. 1), Bolivia's insistence that the human right to water be included in the final World Water Forum declaration led to "fierce controversy during the two-day negotiations by government representatives from around the world." Support by Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Paraguay, Venezuela, Uruguay and some European countries such as Spain and Sweden was overcome by strong opposition from Mexico, the UK, the Netherlands, France and the U.S. In response, Bolivia, Cuba, Venezuela and Uruguay tabled a "Complementary Declaration" with their demands. See www.corporateeurope.org/water/mexicocity.htm for more information.

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