

City should sink its own breed of water pirates

By **Dominique Paul Noth**
Editor, Labor Press

Our pioneer founders blessed Milwaukee with proximity to Lake Michigan. A progression of civic leaders over a century blessed us with public attention and public workers to respond to water needs and treatment. All this developed an admired Water Works and a future where water is emerging as the main energy and environmental bargaining chip for the next century.

Unless some idiot buys into privatization schemes that take it all away.

Sure enough, some business leaders and their stooges never learn. They still don't believe it

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was their short-term quick-fix mentality that got America into the current economic trouble. They don't believe in a brighter future but in selling off assets as quickly as they can.

How else can one explain this push to privatize Milwaukee's water through a century-long lease?

Rather than work day in and out on the financial issues facing the city, rather than fighting for a better tomorrow or even a better next month, the scheme would sell off the public water for a half billion dollars over 99 years to create County Pension Scheme Light, an endowment of about \$25 million a year to theoretically help the property taxpayer, while actually destroying the city's revenue future.

The Water Works makes

money now, but the Public Service Commission frowns on using its excess profits to fund other city functions. But rather than address these issues, the lease option, as one alderman admits, would allow the private operators to stick it to the suburbs and the citizenry, making water deals not out of regional cooperation but to get the biggest bucks possible. Forget the inevitable political and legislative fallout from that.

Leasing would let a profit company set the rates, probably as high as they can get away with. While deals to privatize public resources and publicly-built utilities are crashing and burning around the country, the water lease idea would tie the city's hands and guarantee no one would be left alive to see the outcome 100 years from now.

The companies pursuing water deals are largely foreign,

and would use employees from outside the region. They would be layers removed from public response, unlike the city workers of today.

As Jack Norman, research director for the Institute for Wisconsin's Future, points out, the privateers could woo businesses with lower water rates while sticking residents with the highest rates. The city is already moving to spend taxpayer money on commission studies that would pay for concepts on how to privatize, not how NOT to privatize. An incentive to bad advice!

On June 15, KPOW (for Keep Public Our Water) gathered at City Hall to make waves against this waterlogged idea. (Wet puns are pretty much impossible to avoid in this issue.) Their petition with the facts is at www.thepetitionsite.com/3/Stop-Water-Privatization-Wisconsin.

One national opponent, Food & Water Watch, has already startled the privateers by discovering that the lease scheme requires a binding referendum by city voters.

And here's a frightening thought: Were it not for such watchdogs this privatization push would have been quietly moving ahead at City Hall, using taxpayer money to sell out the taxpayers.

In early committee votes, the Common Council has seen through the snake oil. But as one alderman told Labor Press, their votes may have put the lease idea on "life support." Yet it is not dead, not by a long shot.

It always sounds positive when politicians say they are

keeping their options open. Sure enough, Common Council President Willie Hines and some other aldermen have said it would be "irresponsible" for them to take the lease idea off the table.

If they examined the facts, the loopholes and the salivating privateers determined to siphon off Milwaukee's treasure, it becomes clear. The "responsible" approach is to drown this idea outright.

Feed the need at St. Ben's Sunday

It's Union Day once again at St. Ben's -- 5 p.m. Sunday, June 28, when the church basement dining hall opens to an annual tradition of feeding the needy and the homeless.

And once again the Milwaukee Area Labor Council seeks volunteers not only to serve but also most immediately to make financial donations.

A true summer cookout -- brats, hot dogs, beans, potato salad plus fruit, drink and dessert -- marks this highly anticipated meal. Union volunteers shop union stores for this event at St. Benedict the Moor Church at 9th and State Sts.

It is no secret that a harsh economic climate has made the demand grow, and that includes the need for money from locals and unions to help the AFL-CIO Community Services Committee and field liaisons with purchas-

es. Call Mike Balistriere at (414) 771-9829 or email mikeaflcio@sbcglobal.net to lend or confirm your support.

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