

Water

On World Water Day: Culture of Life should prevail over Culture of Profit

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As the world observes today the annual celebration of the World Water Day with the theme, "Water and Culture," the Freedom from Debt Coalition (FDC) and rogresibong Alyansa ng mga Tagapagtangkilik ng Tubig sa Kamaynilaan (PATTAK) greet this year's occasion with an increasing alarm over the undue suffering being experienced by Metro Manila water consumers brought about by the disastrous privatization of Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System (MWSS)-hailed as the biggest water privatization undertaking in Asia.

Contrary to the promises of the privatization policy, water distribution under corporate control has negatively affected Metro Manila residents, especially the urban poor communities, with skyrocketing water rates, very limited service expansion and highly questionable water quality. Worse, it has plunged the Philippine government into deeper debt problem.

Nine years since the MWSS was placed in private hands, water tariffs have gone up by 563% (West Zone) to 750% (East Zone). Despite this, the two private companies have continuously failed to meet their respective service obligations. This gross negligence already took its toll on the consuming public when in 2003 more than eight hundred individuals from Tondo and Malabon communities were hospitalized, eight of them died, due to contaminated water.

Amid this sorry state of water services, the Arroyo government-with the support of the international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank-has time and again favored the interests of private companies over the life of the people. This is evident in countless decisions of the MWSS Regulatory Office and the MWSS Board granting the requests of the two water distributors for water tariff hikes, delay in service improvement, extension of income tax holiday, contract amendment, bailouts etc. They even declared the two private corporations as mere agents and contractors of MWSS and not as public utilities. This allows the concessionaires to pass on their income tax to the consumers and earn beyond the 12% rate on return base (RORB) ceiling required under Section 12 of the MWSS Charter.

The experience of Metro Manila consumers along with those of Buenos Aires (Argentina), Cochabamba, El Alto and La Paz (Bolivia), Jakarta (Indonesia), Atlanta (Georgia, U.S.A.) and in many other countries, speaks well of the sordid condition of access to water worsened by the corporate drive to amass humongous profit out of the people's fundamental need for survival.

And on this precious occasion, FDC and PATTAK hold the Arroyo administration and the MWSS officials, in particular, accountable for all the havoc wrought upon the unwitting water users. We also remind this regime that the current trends in the local water sector are starkly inimical to government's commitment to United Nation's Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN CESC) concerning the efforts to improve universal access to safe, clean and affordable water.

FDC and PATTAK call on international and local leaders to choose the path towards a life-promoting

culture over a profit-obsessed civilization.

Water is a Human Right!

Public Service, Not Private Profit!