

THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY

GUARDIAN

June 16 - June 22, 2004 • Vol. 38, No. 38

Script Doctor

By Mathew Hirsch

STREET DEMONSTRATIONS OUTSIDE Bechtel Corp. headquarters notwithstanding, the war over access to freshwater takes a different form here among the rich than it does in the mesas and barrios of the global south. The resistance in this country has emerged as a quiet refusal to spend between \$2 and \$5 on a bottle of water, depending on the venue. Our weapons include the water filter, which we store neatly on the top shelf of the refrigerator. Theirs is the piercing glance of the snack vendor who, upon demand of free water, hands over the liquid in a five-ounce Dixie cup.

Even if we all don't drink expensive brands of water, North American and European consumers are quickly growing accustomed to our new for-profit water world. But the transition in places like Cochabamba, Bolivia, and Rajasthan, India, hasn't been, shall we say, nearly so fluid. As antiglobalization activists will promptly recall, the people of Cochabamba took to the streets four years ago to protest steep water-rate increases brought by Bechtel within a year of taking over the city's water system. The upheaval forced Bechtel out of Cochabamba but not before the military killed 17-year-old Victor Hugo Daza, who had been participating in the demonstration.

As the struggle for freshwater access was coming to a head last year at the third World Water Forum in Kyoto, Japan, Berkeley filmmakers Alan Snitow and Deborah Kaufman took their cameras to three regions of the world where citizens rose up against the corporate takeover of their rivers, streams, and wells. Snitow and Kaufman, who last explored the pitfalls of privatization in their 2001 collaboration, *Secrets of Silicon Valley*, sought to portray the often overlooked human dimension of this struggle. Their film *Thirst*, which premieres June 18 at the Roxie Cinema and airs next month on PBS, takes the sometimes dry, didactic globalization debate away from the economists and policymakers and turns its over to the people who are most affected.

Thirst begins with footage of the confrontation in Cochabamba, images of people marching through the streets and being met by severe police repression. From there, the film shifts to Stockton, where a coalition of environmental, civil rights, and labor activists have taken up a grassroots campaign against plans to auction off the municipal water system. Though clearly the stakes are higher in Bolivia, where access to water is less an issue of cost than one of life and death, you get the sense that what's happening there will sooner or later make its way north. In fact it already has, as one participant at the World Water Forum notes in the film. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency two years ago issued "boil water" alerts to residents in Atlanta after tap water came through rust-colored with debris floating in it. Atlanta's water system was then controlled by a subsidiary of Suez Water, the largest water company in the world.

Next, Snitow and Kaufman visit Rajasthan, where water conservation leaders are organizing a boycott of Coca Cola for pumping water from the region's underground aquifers. Unlike the San Francisco Bay Area, which enjoys a plentiful supply of water from the High Sierra Mountains, the people of Rajasthan have had to labor intensively to harvest rainwater and replenish water levels underground. Then, after the beverage industry began viewing water as a more profitable commodity, Coca Cola pumped water from beneath the Indians' land and sold it back to them at the price of milk. It was as if somebody had come along and smashed all those delicate clay pots the women of Rajasthan stack atop their heads to transport water back to their village.

All the while, everywhere government and corporate officials were seen discussing the water crisis during the filming of Thirst, each had a bottle of crystal-clear water set out before them. The filmmakers purposefully avoided using narration throughout the documentary, but here the message couldn't have been spelled out in plainer English. The white men in power went through all this trouble to privatize water, and now they have it while lots of poor people don't.

In conversation, Kaufman and Snitow told me one of the scenes that missed the final cut showed a water industry lobbyist talking about the industry's plans for the United States. Currently, 85 percent of municipal water systems are publicly owned and controlled, while only 15 percent are private. Kaufman said the industry intends to reverse these numbers to maintain growth amid consumer backlash in Europe and around the world. "Until we did the film," Kaufman said, "we did not know how serious the intent of the water companies was to take over the water systems in this country." Now that they do, they're touring with Thirst as much as possible and sending

proceeds from the ticket receipts to the Public Citizen Water for All Campaign.