

**Fighting for water: resisting privatization in Europe. Bieler, Andreas. Zed Books, 2021. ISBN: 9781786995087.**

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Why should industrial relations scholars be concerned about water? At a first glance, the topic seems distant from the discipline's core. And yet, some of the most important social struggles in Europe over the last decade were born from the resistance to processes of water privatization, and trade unions were among the protagonists within many of them.

In 'Fighting for water: resisting privatization in Europe', Andreas Bieler analyses resistance to water privatization in the EU. Through the analysis of anti-privatization struggles in Italy, Ireland, Greece, as well as at the EU level, Bieler offers a comprehensive picture of the successes achieved and the obstacles and the limitations encountered by popular movements that opposed processes of commodification of water.

The first two chapters provide a theoretical framework to analyse water struggles. Bieler situates the processes of water privatization as part of a larger drive towards the commodification of public services and of social reproduction following the restructuring of the capitalist regime of accumulation after the 1970s. Struggles against water privatization should then be conceptualised as cutting across the sphere of production and social reproduction. Indeed, privatization can impact negatively both on wages and working conditions of the workers involved, as well as on access to affordable and high-quality drinking water.

The following four chapters deal with the empirical cases. The case selection avoids the 'methodological nationalism' that is still pervasive in social sciences. Bieler achieves this not only through the analysis of an EU-level campaign, but also through a strategy of 'incorporated comparison' that sees the individual cases as interconnected and co-constitutive. Indeed, presenting the cases in chronological order allows the author to show the direct and indirect relational processes (Silver, 2003) which connect the various struggles against water privatization in Europe (and across the world).

Chapter 3 deals with the Italian case. The approval of a 2009 law by a right-wing government mandating the privatization of local water services triggered a counter-reaction by a broad coalition of social movements and trade unions. Quite exceptionally, the latter included both established unions and rank-and-file unions, which usually do not cooperate among them. The coalition was able to collect 1.4 million signatures for a referendum rejecting water privatization, and then to conduct a successful referendum campaign in 2011, managing to surpass the required electoral turnout of 50 per cent plus of the electorate and obtaining a landslide victory.

The Italian example inspired the European Public Service Unions (EPSU), the largest European trade union in the public sector, to launch in 2012 a European Citizen Initiative requesting water to be recognised as a human right. Chapter 4 analyses how EPSU, together with its affiliates and a range of civil society organisation, managed for the first time in history to surpass the required threshold of one million signature to make the ECI valid. It was also thanks to this outcome that the European Commission excluded water from the commodifying Concessions Directive.

The EU played a key role also in the last two cases analysed, that of Greece (Chapter 5) and Ireland (Chapter 6). During the Eurozone crisis, successive Greek governments were forced to rely on financial loans from the 'Troika' of the EU Commission-International Monetary Fund-European Central Bank. These came with conditions attached, including the prescription to privatize publicly

owned water companies. In response, Greek activists and some trade unions representing water workers employed diverse tactics, including successful legal challenges as well as a referendum in the town of Thessaloniki. Between 2010 and 2013, also Ireland was under the conditionality of the Troika. While water for private households in Ireland is paid through general taxation, one of the prescriptions in the Irish Memorandum of Understanding was to introduce water charges, which many saw as the first step towards full scale privatization. Whereas protest during the Troika period was more muted than in Greece, after 2014 a broad coalition opposing water charges emerged. This included social movements, left-wing parties and trade unions from both the public and private sector, albeit not the largest ones. Organised under the banner of 'Right2Water' – inspired by the homonymous ECI campaign - the coalition organised huge demonstrations across the country, managing to stop the introduction of water charges up to this day.

For all their successes, popular movements opposing water privatization also encountered obstacles and limitations, which Bieler accounts for. The 2011 referendum in Italy successfully opposed the compulsory privatization of local water services, but in the context of austerity many local councils started privatizing water anyway. The ECI promoted by EPSU helped to exclude water from the Concessions Directive, but campaigners did not get the Commission to legislate on the human right to water. In Greece, despite popular opposition, the privatization of water remains very much on the government's agenda. Bieler points to capitalist structuring conditions as the main explanation for these drawbacks. Indeed, the strong and continued commodifying pressures exercised by the EU's new economic governance regime which emerged after the 2008 economic crisis (Erne, 2015; Szabó, 2019) act as a countervailing force to movements opposing water privatisation. But, as Bieler documents, agency also plays a role: struggles are hard to sustain over time as fatigue emerges, and different strategic views between different components of water movements can impair further advancements in the struggle.

Nevertheless, as Bieler argues in last chapter of the book (Chapter 7), 'water struggles will continue to play a crucial role in finding alternative to capitalism' (p. 176). Whereas the Covid-19 pandemic has shown the importance of well-functioning public services, it is likely that pressures for water privatization will continue, perhaps masked by environmental concerns, as it was the case in the debate over the introduction of water charges in Ireland (Szabó, 2019).

For industrial relations scholars, this book is interesting and valuable. Methodologically, it shows the value of a strategy of comparison which goes beyond methodological nationalism, which is still common within the field (Bechter et al, 2012; Erne, 2013). Thematically, it shows how trade unions can play a key role also in struggles outside the workplace, and forge effective alliance with social movements. It remains to be seen whether the lessons learned in the struggle for water will be applied by organised labour also in other important societal issues, such as healthcare and the impending environmental crisis. For anyone interested in exploring these topics further, this book will be a fundamental starting point.

#### **Notes:**

*The author acknowledges funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research programme, grant agreement No 725240, [www.erc-europeanunions.eu](http://www.erc-europeanunions.eu)*

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