

Why water is a public service: exposing the myths of privatisation

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Introduction

The spectre of water privatisation is once again haunting the people of Europe. From the 1980s to the 2000s, water privatisation was promoted by multinationals, right-wing politicians, and international institutions, including the European Commission. This was successfully resisted by popular campaigns, which halted and even reversed water privatisation in almost every country in Europe, and in many other countries around the world. But the threat has now returned.

The main initiative comes from the privatisations services as part of the conditions for financial support from the EU, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – the ‘troika’. The conditions for Greece include the privatisation of many public sector bodies, including the full privatisation of the water services of Athens and Thessaloniki. The troika also expects Portugal to sell much of the public sector, and Aguas de Portugal is being considered for privatisation. The European Commission and the ECB asked Italy to plan for water privatisation and liberalisation even after a national referendum voted overwhelmingly against it. More generally, the new central EU economic policies create more pressure for liberalisation and privatisation of all public services, by imposing even stricter limits on public finances. In the “neighbourhood” countries outside of the EU, water privatisation is still promoted by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) – the private sector support division of the World Bank – despite the failures that have already happened under this policy. EPSU is therefore publishing this booklet setting out the reasons for rejecting water privatisation, in a number of languages. It has been prepared by the PSIRU at the University of Greenwich, based on empirical evidence, with references. It is intended not only to support campaigns against water privatisation, but also as a reminder why the public sector is a much better way of providing water services. The UN in 2010 declared water and

sanitation as human right. It obliges governments to provide their citizens with accessible, affordable, safe and clean water and sanitation.

The European public services unions will launch a “European Citizens’ Initiative” to promote the implementation of this human right and oppose the liberalisation of water services at EU level.

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