



by Emma Lui

Water is Life: Strengthening our Great Lakes Commons for Everyone

In September, approximately 200 people gathered at the Woodside Church in Flint, Michigan for the Water is Life: Strengthening our Great Lakes Commons summit.

Council of Canadians Honorary Chairperson Maude Barlow kicked off Friday evening with an important keynote speech about water justice struggles around the world and the work that is being done to have the UN recognize the human rights to water and sanitation.

Over the two day summit, participants learned about water injustices around the Great Lakes where governments are allowing Nestlé and other water companies to take, control and sell water from local sources for a profit, while failing to secure the human right to water for residents in Flint, Detroit, and many Indigenous nations.

Wearing a “Flint Lives Matter” t-shirt, Saturday’s keynote speaker, Claire McClinton of Democracy Defense League, pointed out, “In Flint, Michigan, you can buy a gallon of lead-free gas, or a gallon of lead-free paint, but you can’t get a gallon of lead-free water from your own tap.”

Lila Cabbil from the Detroit People’s Water Board talked about how race influences the water concerns in Michigan. “The fight we have in Michigan is very

much racialized. We need to understand that truth and we need to speak that truth, because what is happening even as we speak in terms of how Flint and Detroit are being treated would not happen if it was a white community.”

In Canada, the lack of clean water is also often racialized. There are routinely more than 100 drinking water advisories in First Nations, some of which have been in place for nearly two decades. Sylvia Plain from Aamjiwnaang First Nation spoke to the audience about how Aamjiwnaang First Nation has had methylmercury in the sediments in their river for a couple of decades. She also talked about the Anishinaabe, who have cared for the waters and land for thousands of years.

Rob Case from Wellington Water Watchers and Peggy Case from Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation described Nestlé’s water takings in their communities and how concerned residents are objecting to Nestlé’s bottling operations.

In Ontario, Nestlé continues to pump up to 4.7 million litres of water every day despite the fact that both of the company’s permits have expired – one expired at the end of this summer and the other expired more than one year ago. Local groups and residents are calling for a phase-out of bottled water takings to

protect drinking water. The Council of Canadians wants to make Nestlé and other bottled water takings an election issue in next year’s Ontario election.

Nestlé’s bottled water operations in B.C. have also outraged residents. Despite the province’s 2015 drought, Nestlé continues to extract 265 million litres from a well in Hope, located on Sto:lo Territory. The well connects to an aquifer that 6,000 nearby residents rely on. But Nestlé is not the only company taking water and selling it for profit. Agriculture Canada reports that 83 per cent of Canada’s bottled water exports come from B.C.

During the Water is Life summit, participants joined the more than 50,000 people who have taken the Council’s pledge to boycott Nestlé and to stop using single-use bottles of water. This would help stop the plastic bottles from ending up in landfills and the ongoing commodification of water.

At the end of the summit, one thing was clear: participants were energized and ready to take action to end to Nestlé’s bottled water takings, have the human right to water implemented, and secure water justice for everyone who lives around the Great Lakes and beyond.

Emma Lui is the Water Campaigner for the Council of Canadians.

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