

Report from Milan by Anna Fontana

Italy revolts over water shortages

Local mismanagement scandals abound, but the national water crisis reflects the national energy crisis.

Italy, the fifth most industrialized nation in the world, on the eve of the World Cup soccer tournament for which so much money was spent, faced civil uprisings caused by infrastructure failures comparable to parts of the Third or even Fourth World.

A veritable war broke out in the streets of Naples, especially in the southern suburbs of the city where 200,000 people blockaded the streets, lit bonfires in the squares, occupied offices, or blocked access to the highways and the beltway. The reason was a simple question of human dignity. The water had been undrinkable for some time; bottled water is used to make pizza or boil water for pasta. Water from the faucet has turned into a dark slime that makes people long for the yellowish liquid of earlier days.

The official reason is that water was being used from the runoff of the notoriously polluted Lufrano. There was even fleeting talk of sabotage. That talk was like putting a match to a powderkeg.

The people were so angry that they rejected, or only grudgingly took, aid from the municipal authorities, the Health Ministry, and the Red Cross. Naturally the Neapolitans want water from their own faucets in their own houses and cannot accept tank trucks, nor the official promises to suspend water bills or to not collect taxes on bottled water. These are just stopgap measures which in no way aim at resolving the basic problem, that of reorganizing the water grid and investing massively in building new ones.

Water management for Cam-

pania, the region (comparable to a U.S. state) that includes Naples, is shrouded in mystery. No one even knows how much water is managed by Campania. Not even the officials who run the Naples Aqueduct know. They stick to guesswork and to wondering why it is that the Western Campania Aqueduct, which was supposed to quench the thirst of Naples, is still unfinished 17 years later.

AMAN, the Naples municipal water works, can't balance its books. In 1987, some 3,000 liters of water per second got from the region to Naples. Now, not even 1,000 arrive, although new wells have been dug in the meantime.

In Palermo, a similar revolt broke out, also with highway and railway blockades. The Sicilian capital has suffered through a year of alternate-days water distribution. The situation worsened because the Oreto River's water level fell. Mafia-linked politician Vito Ciancimino is on trial in Palermo, together with officials of AMAP, the municipal water works, for criminal conspiracy and fraud for mismanaging the water supply. This "plumbers unit" is charged with having pocketed trillions of liras with the pretext of seeking and repairing water losses in the east and west zones of Palermo.

In Caltanissetta, another Sicilian city, fistfights are a daily occurrence as people line up for water supplies. Bottled water is costly, or at best, available on the black market. Locals cannot bathe in their bathtubs, because they use them as reservoirs. It is reckoned that the city spends about

\$10.4 million a year for bottled water, not counting the government surtax of 100 liras per bottle, recently imposed by the Italian cabinet. Residents spend about \$175 per capita per year for water, and get an average of 103 liters a day; while the average Italian spends \$21 a year for 282 liters a day.

Just horror tales of the underdeveloped South? Lombardy, Italy's richest and most industrial region, could be next. "Risk of water rationing," proclaimed a May 29 headline on the local page of the Milan daily *Corriere della Sera*. The article reported that 203 localities of the Province of Milan may have dry faucets 12 hours a day starting in September. This discomfort could afflict 3 million residents, not because of lack of water, but lack of money. It would be the result of the 22¢ surcharge placed on each cubic meter of water for civilian use, by a recent decree by the Italian government.

The \$111.2 million that would be collected through this tax would not be turned over to local authorities, which are always looking for funds to repair and upgrade a water system that has been in need of upgrading for 35 years. Rather, this tax has to be paid *in advance* by the local water companies before they collect it from the users every three months! If the decree becomes law in two months, local authorities say they have no choice but to cut back what they pay for electrical energy to pump the water 24 hours a day.

There are no local solutions. Remember, Italy abandoned nuclear energy, and this has affected every aspect of its infrastructure. Without low-cost, high-energy-density energy there is no way to build the water supply and purification networks the nation desperately needs. Italy needs great projects, and that means getting back to nuclear—now.