Employees of water districts and water supply providers, together with consumer groups and water advocates gathered in an assembly today to express opposition on the ongoing efforts to privatize the water sector. These privatization efforts include Senate Bill (SB) 2997, authored by Sen. Edgardo Angara and identified as a priority bill by Malacanang.

The assembly, which gathered water stakeholders and members of the Water for the People Network (WPN), including its member federation Water System Employees Response (WATER), expressed its protest on the 'Angara Bill'. Sen. Angara filed SB 2997 or the Water Sector Reform Bill in 2011, claiming that water districts should be "more friendly to private investment", and that the Local Water Utilities Administration (LWUA) and local government units (LGUs) should open up to the private sector through joint ventures. SB 2997 also intends to create new bodies to administer water distribution.

According to WPN, the bill will facilitate the further privatization of water services in the country by empowering local water supply and sanitation companies to enter into private-public partnership (PPP) arrangements such as management contracts, concession agreements and other build-operate-transfer deals. This, they argued, will only result in more expensive water rates at the expense of poor consumers.

Moreover, under SB 2997, water districts will be combined within each Provincial Water Resource Zone PWRZ into one or more Local Water Supply and Sanitation Companies (LWSSCs) which would mean the concentration and control of assets, personnel, market and resources in the hands of a few, private business or local politicians. For water district workers, the privatization and reorganization of local water service providers could lead the layoff of thousands of employees.

The groups also reminded the Aquino administration, which is pushing for PPPs in the water sector, the harsh experience of Metro Manila for the past 15 years after the MWSS sale. Since taking over the water service, the two private concessionaires, Maynilad Water Services Inc. and Manila Water Company, have already hiked their basic charges by 564% (Maynilad) to 1,083% (Manila Water), while poor communities still suffer from water 'shortage' that is even worse than in the 1990s.

Amid the ongoing efforts to expand and tighten the control of the water sector by private corporations, the assembly resolved to strengthen its opposition against SB 2997 and other proposed measures to privatize water. Consumers, employees of water service providers, local government workers, farmers, indigenous communities and other sectors most affected by the corporate takeover of water resources vowed to defend the people's right to clean, adequate and accessible water. (end)

The WATER FOR THE PEOPLE NETWORK (WPN) is a broad national network in the Philippines that campaigns for people's control over water services and resources. It has more than 100 member organizations from all over the country.

The Water System Employees Response (WATER) is a national federation of employees unions and associations in water districts and water systems representing more than 30,000 members nationwide.

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