Seven dead from e-coli contamination in Ontario, Canada

By Keith Jones
1 June 2000

The deaths of seven residents of the rural Ontario town of Walkerton have shaken public confidence in the Ontario Tory government and its program of deregulation and privatization. The seven, and one thousand other Walkerton residents, fell ill last month after the local water supply became contaminated with Escherichia coli O157:H7, a potentially deadly strain of e-coli bacteria. Walkerton has a population of 5,000.

Medical experts are terming the Walkerton outbreak the world's second-worst instance of e-coli contamination spread through a water system. (Most e-coli infections come from eating tainted meat.)

Fueling the public outcry is a mountain of evidence that the deaths were entirely needless.

The Walkerton Public Utilities Commission (PUC) knew the water supply was contaminated for at least five days before it told the public that anything was amiss. Even as many Walkerton residents were falling sick with bloody diarrhea, and water test results were showing e-coli contamination, PUC officials allegedly told the area medical officer on three separate occasions that the water supply was safe.

The private lab that found Walkerton's water to be contaminated with a potentially fatal bacteria failed to alert either local health authorities or the Ontario Ministry of Environment, which has legal responsibility for ensuring the safety of drinking water in the province.

Walkerton's water system has been plagued with problems for years. Two years ago the Ministry of Environment made recommendations to the Walkerton PUC regarding the use of chlorine, the training of staff and the testing of the water supply, but the Ministry failed to ensure that its recommendations were implemented. Nor did it act on several reports earlier this year that showed contaminants were getting into the Walkerton water supply.

The Ontario Ministry of the Environment's failure to intervene in Walkerton is bound up with a drastic downsizing of its operations. Since Tory Premier Mike Harris came to power in 1995, the Ministry's annual budget has been cut by 42 percent, from $287 million to $165 million, and the Ministry's workforce has been slashed from 2,400 to 1,500.

In 1996, the Ministry had 113 employees responsible for monitoring drinking water quality. Now it has 65. In recent years, much of the Ministry's efforts have focused on meeting the Tories' objective of cutting the number of provincial environmental regulations in half.

John Ibbitson, the Globe and Mail's commentator on Ontario politics and the author of a book enthusiastically supporting the Ontario Tories' "Common Sense Revolution," conceded on May 30, “The Mike Harris government's environmental policies contributed to the deaths in Walkerton. The details have yet to be determined.... But they caused people to die.”

However Harris has brazenly rejected any responsibility for the tragedy. Speaking May 29 in an emergency Ontario Legislature debate on Walkerton, Harris insisted that the Tories' public and social services cuts—which have financed massive tax reductions, overwhelmingly to the benefit of the rich—were directed solely at making government “more efficient.” “At no time was any person downsized in a way that should have affected the delivery of any service,” declared the Premier.

Last week, when confronted by Walkerton residents, some of them carrying placards denouncing the Tory cuts to the Ministry of the Environment, Harris said they should focus their anger on the New Democratic Party (NDP) government which the Tories replaced in 1995, because it was NDP Premier Bob Rae who first allowed Ontario municipalities to have their water tested by private labs, rather than by the Ministry of the Environment.

In truth, there is enough blame to go round. With regard to the environment and public health, as with many other matters, the Harris Tories intensified and accelerated regressive changes in public service and social welfare policy initiated by the Rae NDP government.

Rae began the process of privatizing the testing of Ontario's drinking water. In 1993, his administration ordered municipalities to pay for government water tests and allowed them to use private labs. In 1996, the Tory provincial government closed down four of the province's five water testing labs, ignoring warnings from the province's former environment commissioner, Eva Ligeti, that the safety of Ontario's water supply might be jeopardized.

Whereas the closed government labs had a legal obligation to inform the Environment Ministry and local health authorities of any tests revealing contaminants, the new private testing regime left it to the labs' discretion as to whether they would inform health authorities or even the Ministry. Moreover, the testing of Ontarians' drinking water by labs certified by the Canadian Standards Association was not required, only recommended.

Exactly how Walkerton's water system came to be contaminated with a deadly strain of e-coli bacteria may never be known. Many
have suggested that livestock fecal matter got into the wells that feed the town's water system as a result of heavy rains on May 12.

Even if the heavy rainfall did play a critical role in the Walkerton tragedy, the contamination of the town's water system was not a sudden event. On May 29, the deputy minister of the environment said the Ontario government had been aware at least since 1994 that Walkerton was having problems with its water supply, and that these problems included bacterial contamination. In 1998, after the PUC said it accepted the Ministry's recommendations for improving the system, nothing was done to ensure that Walkerton had the will or the means to carry them out.

That a rural community such as Walkerton should be hit with an outbreak of e-coli has not surprised experts. Walkerton is a center of industrial livestock production—a form of agriculture that environmentalists have frequently criticized as a threat to water safety, because it results in the production of large amounts of fecal matter.

A 1995 Heath Canada study made known to Ontario officials in 1997 identified Walkerton as a high-risk area for e-coli contamination and attributed the danger to the large cattle population. When asked to comment on the Walkerton e-coli outbreak, the author of the 1995 study, Dr. Pascal Michel, said, “I was surprised by the scale of the event, but no, I was not surprised by where it happened.”

It is believed that in recent months the Walkerton PUC was trying to cope with a breakdown in its chlorination system. Five times in the first four months of this year, a private lab, GAP EnviroMicrobial Services, detected bacteria in water samples from Walkerton. The lab claims that in all cases the Ministry of Environment was informed of the problems. The Ministry has conceded that it was notified on at least two occasions, including in early April, when four of eight Walkerton samples were found to contain coliform, a broad category of intestinal bacteria that includes the O157:H7 strain.

Yet, in violation of its own regulations, the Ministry did not inform the local health commissioner in Walkerton of the potential health hazard. Nor, from all reports, did the adverse tests prompt the Ministry to offer the Walkerton PUC technical or financial assistance.

Thus, far, PUC manager Stan Koebel has failed to provide any explanation as to why he waited until May 23, some five days after being informed that e-coli was in Walkerton’s water supply, to warn the public of the danger. On May 30, Koebel emerged from a week in seclusion to appear at a press conference along with a well-known Toronto criminal lawyer, whom he has retained as his legal counsel. However, they refused to answer any questions.

For its part, the non-accredited, private lab that found the e-coli contamination, A&L Laboratories Canada East, has defended its failure to inform either the Ministry or local health officials. A&L Laboratories, which was hired by the Walkerton PUC on an interim basis when the above-mentioned GAP Services gave up water-testing to concentrate on more lucrative consulting work, says it is blameless since there is no regulation obliging it to inform anyone other than the local utility.

Alarmed by the large numbers of Walkerton residents falling sick, Dr. Murray McQuigge, the Walkerton-area health commissioner, on May 21 issued his own order to Walkerton residents to boil their water. This was two days before Koebel finally admitted that the town’s water supply was contaminated.

Dr. McQuigge has said publicly that the PUC manager’s tardiness in informing him and the public of the e-coli outbreak may have played a role in at least some of the seven deaths. At the same time, Dr. McQuigge has insisted that responsibility for the breakdown also lies with the provincial government. Ontario’s water purification system has been “a disaster waiting to happen since 1996,” he explained.

In a back-handed admission of its own responsibility, the Harris government on May 29 announced plans to introduce legislation tightening regulation of Ontario’s water system and the private testing of drinking water. Henceforth, all local water systems will have to be recertified by the Ministry every three years, private labs will have to inform the Ministry of problematic results, and water-testing labs will have to be accredited. But the government has said nothing about committing additional funds or resources to the monitoring of Ontario’s drinking water. Says McQuigge, “You just can’t announce something like that and not have adequate staff to do it.”

Premier Harris has pledged that his government will ferret out the truth about what happened in Walkerton, noting that the e-coli outbreak is currently under investigation by the Ontario Provincial Police, the Ministry of the Environment, and a committee of the provincial legislature, and will also be the subject of a coroner’s inquest. But the Tory Premier has already exempted his own government from blame, declaring that there is no causal relationship between the gutting of the Ministry of the Environment and the deaths in Walkerton.

Harris has, moreover, publicly reaffirmed his support for privatizing environmental regulation. Taking his cue from Conrad Black’s National Post, Harris argued May 30 that while “human error” appears to have occurred in public institutions—i.e., the downsized Ontario Ministry of the Environment and the tiny Walkerton PUC—the private sector, including the lab that chose not to inform provincial or local authorities of the e-coli outbreak—performed admirably. “It looks to us,” declared the Premier, “that the private sector labs reported very efficiently, effectively, and have done the job they were supposed to do.”