

Democrats narrowly retain control of Philadelphia City Hall

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In the closest election in nearly fifty years, Philadelphia voters on November 2 elected Democrat John Street to be the next mayor. Though Democratic registration outnumbers Republican by four to one in Philadelphia, Street won the election by a margin of fewer than 7,500 votes over his Republican opponent Sam Katz. Of 988,005 registered voters in the city, 211,136 voted for Street and 203,908 for Katz.

Philadelphia's mayoral contest was the most expensive election campaign in the country this year. Over \$25 million was spent on advertising by candidates in the primary and general election. \$15 million was spent in the May primary alone by six major candidates, an average of \$47 for each vote cast.

Despite the cost of the election, the candidates in their campaign speeches, newspaper ads, and radio and television commercials made few proposals on how to deal with the loss of industry and steady decline in the city's population, which has fallen by 150,000 in the 1990s.

Republican Sam Katz has never held elective office. The only public office he has held was the appointed post of Philadelphia School Board member from 1981 to 1984. As the board's budget director, he joined in 1981 in the attempt to cut a \$223 million school district deficit by laying off 3,500 school employees and cancelling contractual ten percent wage and benefit increases. This resulted in a 50-day strike by the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers which won partial restoration of the cuts.

After 1984 Katz went on to build up his financing company, Public Financial Management, Inc., into one of the nation's pre-eminent public financing firms, with an annual bond issuance of \$18 billion and offices in two dozen cities. Over the next decade he was involved in financing transportation projects in dozens of cities

and came to specialize in the financing of sports stadiums. In 1990 he switched his party affiliation from Democratic to Republican and ran against Pennsylvania's current Governor, Tom Ridge, in the 1994 Republican primary.

John Street began his political career as a lawyer representing community groups and his black nationalist brother Milton Street in his many bouts with the administration of Mayor Frank Rizzo in the 1970s. He was elected to City Council in 1979. Over the next 19 years he won the support of the business and banking community by promoting pro-business city budgets.

When Democrat Ed Rendell became mayor and Street became City Council president in January 1992, the city faced a \$250 million deficit due to federal and state funding cuts. Street was instrumental in working a deal with leaders of the four municipal unions in 1992 which resulted in a four-year contract with no wage increase in the first two years and a \$360-a-month reduction in employee health benefits. The city was given the right to contract work to private firms for the first time, and a no-layoff clause was eliminated. This pattern of making workers pay for the city's fiscal crisis was to continue for the eight years of the Rendell-Street administration.

Decisive in giving Street the edge in the election was strong support from the building and construction trades unions. These unions feared Katz would try to privatize labor for the construction of major building projects such as a proposed new sports stadium.

Municipal unions, however, gave more limited support to Street. Some, such as AFSCME District Council 47, representing the city's white-collar workers, decided for the first time not to endorse a candidate for mayor. While the Philadelphia Federation

of Teachers endorsed Street, union officials stated "a substantial number" of members voted "no endorsement" in the union's election referendum.

Another major factor in the closeness of the vote was the endorsement of Katz by some Democratic politicians. Two of Street's rivals in the Democratic primary, John White, Jr. and Happy Fernandez, endorsed Katz. One voting bloc where Street had little support was the city's gay and lesbian community, because of the role Street played, and homophobic remarks he made, during debate in City Council on domestic partnership legislation for city employees.

The policies of the Rendell-Street administration have had disastrous consequences for working people in Philadelphia. In 1997 census data revealed that nearly a third of the city's residents were living below the poverty line. At the same time, Governor Ridge has begun implementing a welfare reform program which will deprive thousands of people of benefits.

The plan will remove from the welfare rolls those not working 20 hours a week, a policy outgoing Mayor Rendell endorsed during the campaign. The ranks of the homeless in Philadelphia were rising prior to the implementation of the new welfare plan. Now they are certain to increase more rapidly.

It is estimated that 25,000 Philadelphians found themselves homeless at some time in 1999. According to the Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition, on any given day in the city 6,500 people are homeless—forced to live with relatives, in shelters, or on the streets. One of Street's last actions before he resigned as City Council President to run for mayor was passage of his Sidewalk Behavior Bill, which gives the police and the courts new powers to harass and punish the homeless.

Street's reactionary social policies are expressed most starkly in his silence on police brutality. The Philadelphia police department continues the legacy of corruption, racism, and brutality left by the late police commissioner-turned mayor, Frank Rizzo.

Frequent shootings of civilians under suspicious circumstances and acts of brutality by police were not addressed by either candidate. Street refused to take a public position on the case of Philadelphia political prisoner and death row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal, despite demands by Abu-Jamal's supporters that he do so.



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