

State takeover of Philadelphia schools temporarily delayed

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Hours before the midnight November 30 deadline for the state takeover of the Philadelphia public schools, which includes the privatization of dozens of the district's schools, Republican Governor Mark Schweiker and Democratic Mayor John Street announced the action was being postponed for at least three weeks. State officials said the postponement was needed in order to implement a "cooperative" rather than hostile takeover of the nation's fifth largest school system.

The delay comes as protests, including walkouts by hundreds of students opposed to the takeover, have mounted in recent weeks. The Coalition to Keep Our Public Schools Public, made up of school employee unions, parents, community organizations and student organizations, has held rallies and other protests. At one recent rally students chanted, "Go home, Edison!" a reference to the for-profit education company that will be given control of so-called failing schools.

The leaders of the school unions, however, offer no viable perspective for a struggle to defend and improve public education and are chiefly motivated by concern that privatization could undermine their influence and dues income. The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers and the other unions have for years backed various Democratic politicians who have slashed school funding to finance corporate tax breaks. In order to maintain their close ties to the Democrats the union officials have blocked any struggle by teachers and other school employees against the destruction of jobs, school closings and other budget cutting. In this way the unions directly contributed to the deterioration of the public schools, which the right-wing and corporate proponents of privatization are now cynically exploiting to advance their demand for "school choice."

The union officials are telling workers and students to place their trust in the Democrats once again. They are also claiming the Pennsylvania Supreme Court can be relied on to overturn the 1998 legislation being used by state Republicans to take over the schools. With this perspective, and a record of betrayed struggles to boot, the union

bureaucracy has been able to rally only limited support for its protests despite misgivings among working people in Philadelphia over the state takeover and privatization plan.

To get the city government's cooperation, the state had backed off from plans to turn the central administration of the school district over to Edison Schools, Inc. While the Street administration is cooperating in the outright privatization of 60 of Philadelphia's 264 schools, major differences remain between the city and state. Schweiker wants the state and city each to contribute \$75 million to the district to help close a \$216.7 million deficit in the school district's \$1.7 billion budget. Schweiker also wants the city to float a \$300 million bond issue to close a deficit, which is expected to exceed \$1 billion in five years. Street said accepting these terms "was like robbing Peter to pay Paul" and would result in cuts in city services.

Another bone of contention is the makeup of the School Reform Commission, which will replace the Board of Education. The commission will have the power to negotiate union contracts, outsource school district jobs and appoint the school district CEO. It will also have the authority to raise the taxes of Philadelphia residents to fund the schools. State officials have indicated they would like the commission to hire Edison to implement instructional and administrative systems.

These differences chiefly reflect a turf war among different sections of the political establishment over control of resources. There is no doubt, however, that the most vocal proponents of privatization and their corporate backers are willing to running roughshod over democratic rights and see Philadelphia as a key battleground in their national fight to reorganize public schools on the principles of the capitalist market.

On Monday the *Wall Street Journal* denounced the protests by union workers and students in Philadelphia in a lead editorial entitled "City of Brotherly Thugs." The *Journal* criticized Governor Schweiker's decision to delay the takeover, suggesting he was capitulating to the "implicit threat of city unrest." The *Journal* then likened wrenching

control of school systems from “the political machinery of inner cities” to “trying to root al Qaeda from their caves” and urged the Republican governor to stay the course despite protests.

Under the proposed privatization school employees will face the brunt of attacks. Though no details have been given, in its study Edison recommended cutting maintenance by 30 percent, even though over 50 percent of the district’s schools were built 60 or more years ago. State legislators voided all school employee contracts except the teachers’ on October 23. Custodial workers and bus drivers fear losing their jobs to private, nonunion contractors.

Many of Edison’s claims to improve the running of the schools are based on fraudulent data. For example, in its \$2.7 million report Edison said the district’s cleaning staff covered far less square footage per person than the national average. But according to the school district’s operating officer Thomas McGlinchy, Edison’s figures were based on an employee workday of eight hours. Most of these employees only work five hours, and therefore clean more square footage than the national average when the numbers are adjusted.

In a letter published in the *Philadelphia Daily News* November 30, Caroline Grannan, co-founder of San Francisco’s Parents Advocating School Accountability, enumerated 17 things to “watch out for” based on the city school district’s “bitter experience with for-profit Edison Schools.” She pointed out how the company “spun” test results and hired predominantly inexperienced teachers without credentials in order to cut costs. This resulted in a high turnover rate among teachers. Edison sent handicapped students, who are more costly to educate, to other schools. The letter reported that Ken Mitchell, president of United Educators of San Francisco, said, “We are afraid that Edison’s major goal is to break the entire public school system.”

At a recent rally, protesters marched to City Hall where ceremonies for the annual lighting of the Christmas tree were being held. Chanting “Our kids are not for sale!” and “Where is Street?” the hundreds of protesters joined the thousands watching the Christmas tree lighting. When Mayor Street rose to light the tree, Christmas music was drowned out by boos and the chant “One term mayor!” One protester shouted, “This is a wake-up call for this city.”

A group of high school students staged a sit-in outside the mayor’s office until he would see them. They presented him a list of ideas on how schools should be run. It included lower class sizes, requiring a technology plan for each school, one counselor for every 250 students, after-school homework help rooms, a new state formula for paying for schools, and a ban on private companies managing public

schools.

In each of the two days before the threatened state takeover, hundreds of high school students walked out of all of the city’s high schools in protest. A march and rally by the Philadelphia Student Union drew hundreds of high school students on the evening of November 29. They marched from City Hall to the School Administration Building, which Edison proposes selling as a cost-cutting measure. The students formed a human chain around the building, shouting, “1-2-3-4, we can’t take it anymore! 2-4-6-8, we need funds to educate. It’s not right, it’s not funny, all the other kids have money! Like the kids across the nation, we just want our education.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several students about the struggle after the takeover had been postponed. Esteven, a junior at Bartram High School, said, “I think they are waiting until Christmas to distract us, but it’s not going to happen. We know we have problems, but things cannot be improved with privatization. We need more funding to fix the schools.

Geraldine Mensha, a junior at Bartram High School, said, “The delay will give them time to prepare something behind our backs. Everything is being done in secret. The state is trying to ignore the fact that we just need money. We don’t need Edison coming here to run things. We will be old enough to vote soon. Mayor Street better not let this happen or no one will vote for him in the next election.”

James Clark, a junior at West Philadelphia High School, said, “I think the postponement is the governor trying to wreck our unity with time. We are against privatization because it hasn’t worked anywhere. We are not test rats. We are not going to let them experiment on us! We think the media is trying to make it look like we were put up to protesting. We are serious about what is going on and are not going to let it happen.

“We can think for ourselves! That is why students walked out of school. It’s like in the ’60s. Students are angry about the way the schools are but know privatization is not the answer. All of Philadelphia is against this. Mayor Street should support us because he is supposed to represent the people. We do not want our schools privatized.”



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