

New Jersey governor announces state takeover of Camden schools

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On Monday March 25, New Jersey governor Chris Christie, citing “chronic and severe problems,” announced that the state would assume control of public schools in the impoverished city of Camden. While this is the first schools takeover since the Republican Christie became governor three years ago, Camden becomes the fourth New Jersey school district to be taken over by the state, following Paterson, Jersey City, and Newark.

Christie pointed to the schools’ poor relative performance, with 23 out of 26 Camden schools ranking in the bottom 5 percent statewide and a 49 percent high school graduation rate, according to statistics released by the governor’s office. The move allows Christie to appoint a new superintendent and reduce the school board to an advisory role.

The state also assumes authority to oversee teacher selection, classroom curriculum, schoolbooks and resources, and will take on a central role in bargaining with the New Jersey Education Association, the state’s largest teachers union.

Camden is one of the poorest cities in America. Judged by the number of its 77,000 residents living below the official poverty line—42.5 percent—it is in fact the poorest city in the US, although it has plenty of competition. The unemployment rate was 19.6 percent as of 2011, and has not moved much since then. The city had a peak population of 124,000 back in 1950, when such industries as shipbuilding, Campbell’s Soup and RCA Victor provided thousands of jobs.

Despite the indices of poverty, however, per-student spending in Camden’s public schools is higher than the state average—\$23,709 per student in the 2011-2012 year compared with a statewide average of \$18,045, according to the governor. This is so because Camden is an Abbott District, so called after the Abbott v.

Burke litigation in which a state court ruled back in 1985 that Camden’s schools were unconstitutionally substandard, and ordered remedial spending.

Christie’s argument that a state takeover will somehow benefit Camden’s students is based on the fraudulent thesis that the education crisis has little to do with poverty, whereas of course that is the fundamental issue. Poverty is “overlooked” by the governor because there is nothing that the profit system and its political representatives can or wish to do about it.

In fact, the school systems of the three largest cities in New Jersey have been run by the state for nearly a generation. Jersey City lost control of its schools back in 1989, Paterson in 1991 and Newark, the state’s largest city, in 1995.

During this lengthy period, there has been no visible improvement, based on test scores or on the far more important measures of providing a genuine and rounded education, preparing young people to make a contribution to society and giving them the confidence to do so. None of these school districts have regained full autonomy since they lost it several decades ago.

Although Christie’s announcement was laced with professions of concern for the kids, the Camden school takeover paves the way for further cutbacks, layoffs, school closures and privatization. The governor has no personal stake in the fate of public education—he sends his children to a private school costing over \$27,000 per year.

What Camden and similar cities need is a massive jobs program, combined with the vast expansion of education and other public services. There is zero chance of Christie or any other big business politician, Democrat or Republican, fighting for that. Instead Christie offers fake solutions and demagogic platitudes. “I believe that there are so many people in Camden

who will look at this as an opportunity to hit the reset button, to restart and put aside some of the failings, some of the bickering, some of the mistakes of the past,” he claimed.

The school takeovers, both in Camden as well as the earlier cases, have several aims. First there is the pretense of taking action in the face of “failing schools” and diverting attention from the real causes of the crisis. This is bound up with scapegoating parents, students and teachers alike—all the sections of the working class that are faced with the immediate consequences of unemployment, inequality and poverty. Second there is the goal of boosting charter schools and the longer-range goal of privatization of the school system, beginning in the most deprived areas and cities and spreading out from there. As in the whole charter school and school “reform” movement, the poorest sections of the working class are to be pitted against the teachers, and wherever possible the crisis will be posed in racial terms.

It is significant that leading Democrats have joined with Christie and supported his latest move. Camden Mayor Dana Redd, a black Democrat, spoke at the governor’s news conference, claiming that the state takeover of the local schools was all about providing Camden schoolchildren the same education “afforded their peers in suburban America, which is just a few miles away.”

The teachers union is also responsible for the growing educational crisis. NJEA President Barbara Keshishian did not oppose Christie’s move, saying only that “the track record for state-run districts has been questionable at best, and NJEA will withhold judgment on the Camden takeover model until we see the details.” This mealy-mouthed comment sums up the complacency of the trade union bureaucrats, who will do nothing to defend the rights of the teachers or the students.



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