Texas state government takes control of Houston public schools

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In a long-feared move, the Texas Education Agency, a part of the Texas state government, has taken control of Houston Independent School District (HISD), the eighth largest school district in the country. The pretext for the move was the "underperformance" of students, although the real motive is the hostility of the ultra-right state government to the democratic right of working people to public education.

The TEA originally tried to take over the Houston district in 2019. After several years of litigation and the introduction of a law to facilitate the seizure, the Texas Supreme Court removed an injunction against the takeover in January, allowing it to go forward.

The response of educators, students, and parents has been overwhelmingly negative. Hundreds of students and teachers staged walkouts at schools across the district, raising the issues of inadequate funding, staffing levels and the danger of a push toward charter and private schools. Multiple community meetings were held, and there was so much hostility to the TEA that state education commissioner Mike Morath did not attend any of them but sent representatives.

The school board itself caved to the state's pressure, voting to end a lawsuit against the TEA and allow the takeover to move forward. The real interests behind the decision are reflected in a statement by HISD Board Trustee Kendall Baker, who supports the takeover, who claimed the lawsuit is "a waste of taxpayer dollars and causes instability in the school district." Board President Dani Hernandez also echoed these concerns saying that there was "no changing in the outcome" and that "It's time to make a smooth transition."

"Instability" and the need for a "smooth transition" are coded references to concerns about emboldening the deep-seated opposition of workers and students in the district, who in addition to holding walkouts last Friday, also organized sickouts to oppose the murderous school reopening policy pursued in HISD and schools around the US in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

HISD, with 187,000 students and 274 schools, as well as 11,000 teachers and 12,000 support staff, will be placed under the control of a board of managers and a new superintendent appointed by the state. They will control "the budget, school closures, collaborations with charter networks, policies around curriculum and library books, as well as hiring or firing the superintendent, among other important decisions," according to Houston Public Media.

State officials justified the takeover of the massive district on the basis of the problems at one high school, Wheatley High School, which received a failing grade seven times in a row.

As Trustee Elizabeth Santos pointed out while arguing to continue the lawsuit against the state intervention, the district earned a B report card, much higher than many other districts. While this isn't anything to cheer about considering the dismal state of public education in the US, which has been underfunded for decades, it goes to prove the state action isn't about district performance.

Additionally, Morath said that an investigation revealed that school board members had violated multiple laws, and that board meetings were "chaotic" and "marred by infighting." Board members were originally investigated for violating the Texas Open Meetings Act in October 2018 by discussing the appointment of an interim superintendent, Grenita Lathan, behind closed doors. The investigation expanded to include possible violations of state laws relating to vendor contracts and district policies on governance procedures.

The Democratic Party-dominated Houston ISD has no shortage of corruption. The former chief operating officer, Brian Busby, who "earned" a salary of over $194,000 in 2018, is facing tax charges in relation to steering millions of dollars in contracts to construction companies for bribes. Busby was caught red handed with over $90,000 in cash at his residence in February 2020. According to the Department of Justice, five others have pleaded guilty in relation to the scheme, including former HISD Board of Education president Rhonda Skillern-Jones, officer of construction services Derrick Sanders, general manager of facilities, maintenance and operations Alfred Hoskins, area manager for maintenance-south Gerron Hall, and area manager for maintenance-north Luis Tovar.

The briber, Anthony Hutchison, and Busby are facing charges of conspiracy, bribery and witness tampering, with possible prison sentences, in addition to possible three-year sentences for tax charges. The charges also carry a $250,000 fine.

That said, preventing school funds from being funneled away from educators and children and into kleptomaniac bureaucrats and construction company executives' pockets isn't the cause of the intervention by a state government itself awash in corruption and corporate profiteering.

When asked if any HISD schools would close during the state takeover process, Morath refused to say, claiming he did not know

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yet. This amounts to hinting at possible school shutdowns and layoffs to come in HISD.

The TEA has taken over 15 school districts over the past three decades. Four of those districts no longer exist, having been absorbed into other districts. This process has been accompanied by school closures and mass firings. The largest of these other districts that have been taken over, El Paso ISD, is approximately one-third the size of HISD.

A 2020 report in the *Beaumont Enterprise* on the returning of control to Beaumont ISD's elected board stated, "As a result of financial cuts in the months following the takeover, officials slashed staffing at schools across the district—increasing class size and contributing to discipline issues such as suspensions that have skyrocketed to the highest in the state."

A newly elected member of the reconstituted BISD Board of Trustees told the paper, "They cut all the teachers thinking that that was going to unburden the finances. Now looking at the discipline numbers, we are feeling that cut five years later."

North Forest ISD, a small district outside of Houston, was shut down by the TEA and absorbed into HISD in 2013. Out of a total of about 500 NFISD teachers, a mere 25 were rehired into HISD. Additionally, all of the district's support staff were fired.

The same thing has happened in other cases of state government takeovers of districts. When the state of Louisiana took over New Orleans public schools in 2005, virtually all 7,500 teachers and school workers were fired, and the schools were transformed into charter schools.

Numerous studies of school districts that have been taken over by state authorities have concluded that the takeovers have not improved school districts. "The best evidence we have shows that takeovers don't often achieve their intended results, don't improve student achievement and don't yield better outcomes for kids," said Josh McGee of the University of Arkansas. McGee cited Little Rock, Arkansas, and Detroit, Michigan as examples of takeovers that either had no effect, or else made the schools significantly worse.

Currently, applications for the Houston ISD Board of Managers, which is to be drawn from local residents, are still being taken. The Board of Managers will be used to push curriculum in the largest district further to the right. The state government's recent book-burning campaign reveals the far-right political criteria the state government will be considering as it selects the board.

Houston Democratic Party officials condemned the takeover. However, they did so only on the basis of identity politics. "Today is a very—and I emphasize very—dark day for HISD and the many Black and Brown students and communities that are within HISD," said state Rep. Ron Reynolds. The American Civil Liberties Union stated that the takeover is "about political control of a 90 percent Black and brown student body in one of the country's most diverse cities."

While it is true that 84 percent of HISD's students are members of minority groups, 79 percent are classified as "economically disadvantaged." The takeover must be seen as an attack on the working class, including the teachers and school workers in HISD. The takeover is anti-democratic, flagrantly stomping over the democratic rights of parents of all skin colors to elect their own school board as well as those of education workers to their jobs. Moreover, public education and workers' democratic rights are under attack in every part of the US and internationally.

The takeover of HISD is taking place amid a wholesale war by the financial oligarchy against public education, which is being carried out by Republicans and Democrats across the US. In Los Angeles, 65,000 school workers and teachers recently struck against poverty wages and intolerable working conditions.

The resources needed to improve schools exist but have been funneled by Democrats and Republicans alike into massive military, police and intelligence budgets and into the coffers of the financial elite.

Meanwhile, the trade unions, which function to suppress the class struggle and bolster the Democratic Party and capitalist state, have refused to wage a defense of even the most limited necessities of the working class amid the worst inflationary crisis in decades. In response to the HISD takeover, the Houston Federation of Teachers, the local affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, has done nothing to mobilize its members.

This is a continuation of the treacherous role of the unions throughout the pandemic, during which they have served as key partners in the ruling class's deadly campaign to cover up the dangers of in-person learning and force the schools open so that parents could be forced back to work, contributing to the deaths of thousands of educators and students just in the US.

The defense of public education, democratic rights and academic freedom cannot be left in the hands of these organizations but requires workers taking democratic control of their struggles through the formation of independent, rank-and-file committees that will fight to mobilize the working class—teachers, parents and other workers—in defense of public education.

At the same time, educators must not hold any illusion in the corrupt, capitalist interests that dictate to the local school boards, which have their own responsibility in years of budget cuts across Texas. The fight to reallocate society's resources toward meeting social needs, including fully funded public education, requires a fight by the working class against capitalism.

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