
Philadelphia

Fight vs. Edison School Takeover Gets Victories

by Marianna Wertz

The battle to stop the state takeover and privatization of the Philadelphia school district scored two victories in recent weeks, with the deadline for takeover pushed back to Dec. 21. As *EIR* reported on Nov. 30, Pennsylvania Gov. Mark Schweiker (R) had set Dec. 1 as the absolute deadline for the state to take over the 264-school district for privatization. With 217,000 students, mainly black and poor, in the system, this would be the largest such takeover in American history.

Since then, the power of a mobilized citizenry in the city has forced Governor Schweiker to reduce the proposed takeover to only 60 of the worst-performing schools in Philadelphia; and to agree, with Philadelphia Mayor John Street (D), to a three-week extension in order to discuss the financing of the proposed privatization.

Opponents, however, want to stop the takeover cold. Their mobilization involves students, parents, teachers, school employees, civil rights organizations, and religious leaders. The main issue, they say, is that the takeover would remove decision-making from a locally elected school board, and give it to a state-appointed commission and for-profit private firms.

They also point with scorn to the chief culprit in the takeover—Edison Schools, Inc., the nation's largest private manager of public schools. When the takeover was first proposed earlier this year by then-Gov. Tom Ridge (R) (who left the state to head up Homeland Security in Washington in October), Ridge gave Edison a \$2.7 million contract to review the school district's management and prepare a plan for takeover.

Putting Edison in charge of a city's schools is like putting Enron in charge of a state's power grid. Founded in 1992, the New York-based Edison operates 136 schools nationwide, with more than 75,000 students. In its nine-year history, Edison has never turned a profit, operating on bank credit from Wall Street gamblers who want to loot whatever they can from school budgets.

According to an article in the Dec. 5 *Philadelphia Inquirer*, analysts say that Edison is "burning through cash so rapidly that it could run out of money by this Summer—with or without a Philadelphia contract." Edison consumed \$144 million over the last five quarters, according to the company's cash-flow documents. The firm expects to "enter into debt financing arrangements to finance a substantial portion of our expenditures during fiscal 2002," Edison said in documents

filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission in November.

A comprehensive study of Edison was released on Feb. 22 by Western Michigan University's Evaluation Center. It concluded that, "when it comes to measuring student achievement, Edison schools perform at levels similar to their host districts, but fail to make the educational gains Edison administrators claim."

And Governor Schweiker wants to give Edison millions more of taxpayers' dollars, and to put the future of the children of Philadelphia in the hands of such a company?

The people of Philadelphia think otherwise. On Nov. 29, just before the planned takeover, thousands of union members and supporters marched to downtown Philadelphia, where Mayor Street was holding a Christmas tree-lighting ceremony. As Veronica Joyner, a leader of the protest and president and founder of Parents United for Better Schools, told *EIR* on Dec. 3, "The union people were very upset and they were just chanting, 'Our kids are not for sale.' They also chanted to him [Mayor Street] that he would be a one-term mayor."

Also on Nov. 29, members of the Black Clergy of Philadelphia and Vicinity protested the takeover by blocking streets downtown and on the expressway. They vowed to hold future such demonstrations. Members of the Philadelphia Student Union camped out overnight outside City Hall on Nov. 29-30 to protest the privatization, vowing to walk out of the schools altogether if they are taken over.

Two Lawsuits

J. Whyatt Mondesire, president of the Philadelphia branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, told *EIR* on Dec. 3 that the civil rights organization is preparing to file a suit in Federal court, "which alleges that they want to privatize the school board without proper public notice and comment, which is a direct violation of the home-rule charter in Philadelphia." They will seek a temporary restraining order against the takeover, Mondesire said.

A second suit was filed in the State Supreme Court on Nov. 29 by unions representing teachers, school police, cafeteria workers, and bus drivers. The union-led Coalition to Keep Our Public Schools Public held a press conference on Nov. 26, announcing that the suit will challenge the constitutionality of the takeover law. Michael Churchill, an attorney involved in the suit, told *EIR* that the suit claims that the state law authorizing the takeover "substantively violates the State Constitution, because it gives extraordinary powers, legislative powers, in effect, to an appointed state control commission."

On the state level, Democratic Reps. Louise Williams Bishop and W. Curtis Thomas introduced a bill on Nov. 15, which would mandate that a special election be held, before implementation of the state takeover, to determine the will of the voters. In such an election, a majority vote against the takeover would stop it.