

The Struggle Against Mayoral Control in Milwaukee

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Trinational Coalition for the Defense of Public Education

It's hard to find reasons for hope in the "education wars" these days – brutal budget cuts, massive testing schemes, and news stories about hedge fund aristocrats funding private charter school franchises. These are enough to make any educator feel powerless.

Probably the last place people would look for a story of hope is in Milwaukee, WI, a city, 100 kilometers north of Chicago with a school system of 85,000 mostly black and Latino students. In Milwaukee, school politics have been dominated by privatizing forces for two decades.

And yet, since last August, a rather remarkable struggle unfolded in which grassroots organizing stopped powerful forces to have a mayoral takeover of the public schools.

For years Milwaukee has been ground zero for school privatization efforts. Right wing foundations and philanthropists like the Bradley Foundation and the Waltons have spent millions of dollars to pressure politicians to maintain and expand the United States' largest publicly-funded private school voucher program. The *Wall Street Journal* has editorialized about the school board elections in Milwaukee to promote pro-privatization candidates. The Wisconsin state legislature has seen fit to spend nearly a half billion dollars for private schools in Milwaukee, and yet do nothing to change a grossly unfair public school funding system.

Milwaukee is beset with deep problems – both in the schools and the community. Large sections of the African American community have been suffering depression-like conditions for more than a decade, with jobless rates among black males as high as 55% in certain neighborhoods. Milwaukee's rates of childhood poverty, teenage pregnancy, and racial gaps in school achievement rank among the worst in the nation.

A year and half ago Wisconsin's Democratic Governor and Milwaukee's Democratic Mayor hired the international consulting firm McKinsey & Company to evaluate the Milwaukee Public Schools. With no input from teachers or parents, the firm issued a report outlining ways to save more than \$100 million. Proposals including laying off food service workers (by using prepackaged lunches), increasing from one to 15 the number of school buildings engineers should be responsible for, and denying full health benefits to part-time employees.

Last August the Governor and Mayor in an attempt to implement the recommendations called for a mayoral takeover of the schools and the dismantling of the democratically elected 9 person school board. They received support from the U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan,

Initially this proposal seemed like a slam-dunk. Such top-down governance switches are a national trend, promoted by Duncan who told the Associated Press last

spring that he “will have failed” if, when his tenure is up, more urban districts aren't in mayors' hands.

One of the Governor's and Mayor's key arguments was that mayoral control would curry favor with Duncan and almost guarantee Wisconsin being selected as a recipient for the Race to the Top Funds.

The Governor and Mayor started to line up support in the state legislature. The daily newspaper hailed the dramatic school improvements in cities where mayors have replaced elected school boards.

We activists started to organize. Within a few weeks Educators' Network for Social Justice – a network of public school and college teachers -- and the local NAACP convened a coalition. Over time the Coalition to Stop the MPS Takeover grew to 28 organizations, including locals from the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association and many individual activists.

Meeting weekly at the NAACP office, teachers, parents, neighborhood association members, church pastors, community and union activists, students, and a few politicians debated direct action tactics and lobbying strategies. Meetings were at times contentious, as the coalition brought together organizations that had serious past differences. From the first meeting on, members agreed that significant changes had to be made to improve the Schools, but that changes in governance wasn't one of them.

Members of the African American and Latino communities viewed the matter as a question of basic democracy. “We have struggled for over 100 years to protect and sustain our right to vote,” explained Jerry Ann Hamilton, President of the Milwaukee Branch of the NAACP, “and we are not going to allow our rights to be taken away from us now.”

Ultimately the coalition united on three things: Oppose the mayoral takeover, protect and defend voter rights, and invest in parent and community involvement in our schools.

The Coalition organized rallies at City Hall, attended public forums on the issue, and held press conferences. Members distributed thousands of flyers and appeared on local radio and TV shows. When the mainstream media failed to cover our activities, we borrowed a tactic from the Civil Rights Movement and picketed the homes of the two Milwaukee legislators who sponsored the mayoral control legislation. The spirited picket lines further energized coalition members

It was an uphill battle. The coalition was up against not only the powerful Democratic governor and mayor, but other forces as well. The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, which is anti-teacher union and has supported the expansion of the voucher program, editorially endorsed mayoral control, labeling those who oppose it “defenders of the status quo.” They also refused to report on any of the coalitions press conferences or activities or even mention the Coalition's name in any print news article.

Nationally, Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) and Education Reform Now (ERN), based in New York City intervened as well through their Wisconsin staff. Those two groups, whose board of directors include major financial investors and

supporters of private charter schools, have been pushing the Democratic Party to support market-based reforms in education.

Part of the Coalition's strategy was educational. We created a blog, used face book, and email as key ways to communicate. We hosted a public event of Chicago union activists who detailed the negative consequences of mayoral control and Arne Duncan's time as superintendent. We used the Rethinking Schools magazine, which is based in Milwaukee, and worked closely with both the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association and our statewide affiliate, the Wisconsin Education Association Council.

Despite the efforts of the media, the business community and their political operatives, the pro-mayoral control forces were unable to out organize us. A culminating event was a January hearing in front of the State Senate Education Committee. During the 11-hour hearing, in which some members of the public had to wait six hours to testify, NO TAKEOVER signs and buttons dominated the hall. The sentiment was overwhelmingly opposed, with 81 speakers speaking against and only 20 in favor. This fact didn't stop the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* from reporting the following day that "members of the public at the hearing were fairly evenly divided."

By the end of January, the Wisconsin legislature voted to close its special session that had been convened by the Governor to push mayoral control. While the Governor refused to admit defeat, leading legislators announced the plan was "dead."

What can we learn from the coalition's success? A key component of that success was the patient organizing and coalition building that are at times neglected when activists focus mainly on large mobilizations. Public demonstrations were an important ingredient of the Milwaukee experience, but building relationships and focusing on a deep understanding of the issues laid the foundation. Those relationships are built over time – in this case some had been forged two years earlier when community and educators groups had mounted a successful campaign against the adoption of a racist and anti-worker social studies elementary textbook series.

If teacher unions only seek to build coalitions when our self-interests are threatened, our capacity to build such coalitions is compromised. We need to be guided by a social justice perspective and be involved in struggles that are not directly related to school issues. Moreover unions should encourage their members to **teach** about social justice issues. It's important for two reasons -- it educates the students -- future members of society -- on how to be active, critical participants in our societies. Second, it politically educates the teachers. It will change attitudes of teachers. In the United States too many teachers don't know the real peoples' history of our nation – they don't learn it in the teacher training courses -- whether it's the heroic resistance of native peoples, the working class struggles, the work of women rights activists, the movements for civil rights, or the struggle against US imperialism. The more successful we are in promoting social justice education among our members, the greater will be their capacity and willingness to be active in our political campaigns.

Even more basic to the success in Milwaukee was the simple, yet often elusive, recognition that, even in difficult times, believing that people can change reality is essential.

As the late Howard Zinn wrote, “Everything in history, once it has happened, looks as if it had to happen exactly that way. We can’t imagine any other. But I am convinced of the uncertainty of history, of the possibility of surprise, of the importance of human action in changing what looks unchangeable.”

The success of the Coalition to Stop the MPS Takeover can be a lesson for all of us. We, the people, can shape our futures. We must.