

Protests grow against the selloff of public schools to Wall Street

by Suzanne Rose

In school districts around the country, angry parents, students, and teachers are waging battle against school "reform" schemes which are desperately seeking to cover up for the collapse of the tax base that used to fund education. Much of the fire has been directed against the Minneapolis-based Education Alternatives, Inc., one of two national school privatization companies. EAI has been exposed by this news service as a transparent attempt by speculators to grab control of school budgets, as their derivatives ventures falter (see *EIR*, April 8, 1994, p. 61). EAI claims to cut school costs while improving education, but, as shown in a report released in April by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), their claims are as phony as a \$3 bill.

If the movement to save public education in this country is to be effective, it must include the taxpayers, who are being brainwashed into supporting the destruction of education in order to cut their taxes. The movement must focus on challenging both the content and the method of imposing school reforms through privatization, by demanding an end to financial speculation and by rebuilding the economy as the means to fund the schools.

Here is how the battle now stands in some important "hot spots" around the country:

In **Baltimore, Maryland**, teachers wearing signs saying "Don't Sell Our Students to Wall Street Brokers" and "Don't Give Our Schools Away to EAI" marched from school headquarters to City Hall on June 6, protesting the privatization of the schools. On the ground in front of chanting protesters at City Hall was a coffin under a huge banner which said, "Mourning the death of public schools in Baltimore City. Cause of death: Privatization." A week before, the pro-privatization school superintendent, Walter Amprey, had released a letter to 10,000 employees of the school system, warning that a considerable number of them would be reassigned or laid off by June 30 because of last-minute budget cuts and the system's move to local control. The teachers, who took to the streets following Amprey's letter, saw it as a terror attack to get them to back down from their opposition to privatization, because they have been the most outspoken opponents of the school reform scheme.

In **Hartford, Connecticut**, the teachers union fought back when EAI sought to take over their financially troubled schools. In April, EAI made a bid to run the largely black

and Hispanic schools of Hartford. By running a whole district, EAI claimed, they could make use of economies of scale and use the savings to improve education. When EAI brought in Walter Amprey from Baltimore to testify before the city council on its behalf, Hartford teachers mobilized, armed with the report on EAI which the Baltimore AFT had produced. Four hundred people rallied, with union leaders and teachers standing on a 50-foot flatbed truck, shouting into microphones, "Take no bids, no profit from our kids," "Our schools are worth more than 30 pieces of silver," and "I'm not paying taxes to EAI." The teachers took out radio ads and full-page ads in the daily *Hartford Courant*, and sent out mailings to parents.

In **Pinckney, Michigan**, a similar campaign to privatize the schools has met with fierce opposition from both parents and the teachers union, with hundreds of parents showing up at school board meetings to grill EAI representatives. In March, 500 students staged a demonstration protesting the privatization of their high school. So far, the Pinckney School Board has repeatedly postponed a final vote on bringing in EAI.

Setbacks for OBE

In **Minnesota**, a victory against New Age education reform was scored by parents and teachers in the Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan school district. Minnesota is nationally recognized as in the forefront of outcome-based education (OBE) reform schemes. OBE is, like privatization, a cynical ploy to destroy public education, while claiming to improve it. First promoted in 1989 by President George Bush at his education summit, it later evolved into his "America 2000" strategy to reform education. The idea behind it is to reorient education away from cognitive development, toward the performance of tasks that can be assessed by standardized tests. The OBE reforms are increasingly being seen as aimed at "dumbing down" students, to prepare them for menial jobs, and to save money.

The Rosemount district school board voted on May 23 to support recommendations made in April by a 27-member task force of parents, teachers, and staff to remove OBE from the school system and reinstate high academic standards. The task force report was written after parents complained about the lack of emphasis on academic achievement, repeated



A demonstration in Baltimore against privatization of the public schools. The teachers union has now joined the call for firing the school superintendent who is pushing the privatization plan.

testing of their children, and a grading system which prevented students from knowing where they really stood.

In California, Gov. Pete Wilson, campaigning for re-election, has been forced to cut the funding from his 1994-95 budget for the state's controversial CLAS assessment testing, which delves into the psychology of students in order to profile them. The most outspoken of the 12 or so candidates for school superintendent in California against the CLAS test and other OBE reforms has been LaRouche Democrat Dave Kilber. Kilber has been speaking to angry parents groups throughout the state, picketing schools, and holding press conferences.

Kilber describes the CLAS reading test: "The stories are weird, morbid, and existentialist. One of the stories is about a barber who fantasizes about cutting the throat of the person he is shaving and how the blood would gush out. The children are then told to write down their 'thoughts, feelings, and questions' about the story or how it relates to their own life and experiences. After one story about a violent relation between a mother and son, the student is instructed to 'think of problems that families have' and 'things that young people do that they are later ashamed of.' The reading section of CLAS is nothing but psychological profiling of children and their families."

In response to the growing opposition, the *Los Angeles Times* editorialized that the attack on CLAS "was started as a small but vocal campaign by special interest religious groups, but is beginning to mushroom into doubts raised by a cross-section of parents and educators."

The spearhead for education "reform" in many states has been court decisions which find that poor and minority schools have been discriminated against in terms of re-

sources. Without addressing the lack of resources, education reform is mandated: Recently in Philadelphia, Judge Doris Smith ruled that inner-city schools were not receiving the resources of their suburban white counterparts. She established a panel of experts to "improve the quality" of the schools. The experts appointed are all associated with the OBE reforms.

Kentucky introduced its radical education reform package KERA, after a similar court decision ruled that its method of financing schools was unconstitutional. Michigan introduced OBE reforms after the legislature threw out the property tax as an "inequitable" means of funding education.

LaRouche associates mobilize

Electoral campaigns by associates of Lyndon LaRouche around the country have served as lightning rods to catalyze and focus the opposition to school restructuring schemes. The Rosemount district, for example, was the site of picket lines by Minnesota gubernatorial candidate Richard Van Bergen. Especially vulnerable to exposure has been EAI, which has suffered serious setbacks in Baltimore, where it is trying to expand the number of schools they run from 9 to 11.

Maryland gubernatorial candidate Lawrence Freeman issued a call for the firing of Baltimore School Superintendent Amprey, during hearings this winter when Amprey proposed that EAI's contract be expanded with Baltimore's schools. This call has now been taken up by the teachers union. The union, first supportive of privatization, only recently took up full-scale opposition, with the release of a report in April that exposed the fact that test scores of children in EAI-run schools in Baltimore fell, and that EAI achieved its economies by hiring college student interns and non-union custodial staff. The union has called for a government investigation of EAI's management of federal funds for learning-disabled students.

In February, three company shareholders filed a class action suit against the company for financial fraud. The suit, filed in Minneapolis, charged the company and its accounting firm with conspiring to use unethical accounting practices and unfounded predictions of new business to mislead investors and boost the company's stock prices. These exposures have forced national press coverage of the issue. On June 4, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* carried front-page coverage of charges against EAI, including the AFT and stockholders' claims. The *Hartford Courant* recently featured coverage of EAI founder John Golle, which sheds light on his motivations for starting a company to run public schools for profit. According to the *Courant*, Golle was a super-salesman for the Xerox Corp. before founding his own company, which specialized in teaching brokers how to pitch their securities. He built up a clientele from the top Wall Street firms (180 out of the top 200), whose interests he still serves through his efforts to gain control for corporate investors of the billions spent annually on public school education.