

police force; and Spain following the death of dictator Francisco Franco. "When the social fabric falls apart, we see the decomposition of a society," Ruiz says. "What we're seeing [here in Mexico] is ... the pulverization of a society."

Years of economic hardship—intensified by last January's peso devaluation crisis—are taking a grim toll on the world's largest urban center. Ruiz's statistics show a generally declining crime rate in Mexico City from 1930 through the 1970s. But beginning about 1980—with the advent of Mexico's debt crisis and the infamous "lost decade" of economic collapse—crime figures show a steep and uninterrupted increase.

While Ruiz admits that crime rates are influenced by other factors, such as the increase of single-parent families and poor educational standards, one fact is clear: rising crime has accompanied Mexico's adoption of neoliberal economic policies. "The crisis that began in 1982 forced the government to take a series of measures that without a doubt left people impoverished," he says. Moreover, he points out, the string of economic crises has sapped the government's ability and willingness to fund a wide range of social programs. "Now," Ruiz concludes, "there's no feeling of responsibility toward the people."

—Sam Quiñones

LABOR'S STRUGGLE FOR SUCCESSION

Ideally, the unfolding contest for the presidency of the AFL-CIO could trigger a healthy debate about the future of organized labor. But so far the struggle has mainly featured behind-the-scenes positioning by union leaders and a few acerbic exchanges among them.

Despite widespread discontent with his leadership, President Lane Kirkland decided last month to seek re-election. That prompted the resignation of Secretary-Treasurer Tom Donahue, who wanted the top job but didn't want to be a part of any challenge to his boss. As a result, John Sweeney, president of the 1.1 million member Service Employees International Union (SEIU), is likely to be the candidate of an expanding coalition of 21 unions that want Kirkland out. The group—which includes presidents of major unions such as the UAW, Steelworkers, Machinists, Teamsters, AFSCME, Carpenters, Painters and Mineworkers—controls 56 percent of the votes at the October convention that will elect a new president.

Meanwhile, another group has launched a defense of Kirkland and an attack on the challengers. It includes leaders of unions such as the Food and Commercial Workers, Communications Workers, Electronic Workers (IUE), Electrical Workers (IBEW), Teachers, Postal Workers, Letter Carriers, Bricklayers, Plumbers and the merging Clothing and Textile and Ladies Garment Workers (to be known as Unite!).

The division doesn't fall along clear, traditional lines of liberal vs. conservative unions or industrial and public unions against building trades. In some cases, Kirkland's defenders—though they come from diverse political camps—feel personally threatened by the idea of challenges to officers. (But then, some of the challengers have hardly been hospitable to insurgents in their own unions.) The defenders employ arguments widely used against virtually all union dissidents: The challengers (labeled "the divisionists") are splitting labor when it needs to be united, giving ammunition to employers, and failing to use the proper confidential or inside channels.

MEDIA BEAT

By Pat Aufderheide

The big grab

Congressional Republicans appear to have one rule of thumb as they draft legislation on telecommunications reform: Let the big get bigger.

It's an unhealthy approach to a real problem. We do need new policy. In 1927, when the current road map for telecommunications policy was drawn, there were no televisions or computers, and the phone company didn't offer cable service.

But the Republican solution, now in several House and Senate bills, is a little too easy: deregulate everybody in the name of competition, and hope for the best. Under the proposed legislation, most cable rates could be deregulated. Congress might let cable and telephone companies merge (which could let possible competitors simply buy out the competition), and the phone companies could get into other telecommunications-related businesses sooner than real competition would probably appear. The stage would then be set for the re-emergence of the old phone-company monopoly. Owners of broadcast stations and networks (like Fox, NBC, or Universal) could own more stations than ever before. And they could also own newspapers and cable companies in the same local markets. This would let today's vertically integrated companies—Murdoch's Newscorp, ABC/Cap Cities, Time Warner—and the metamorphosed phone/cable/computer companies of the future become one-stop-infoshops. They could stomp any remaining little guys, and make sure no new, diverse

sources of information get big enough to bother with.

The White House has protested the bills, especially the proposed deregulation of the cable industry. But one of the more egregious give-aways in the legislation remains pretty well-hidden: the gift of new "spectrum"—that is to say, space on the airwaves—to broadcasters. Years ago, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) gave broadcasters more spectrum to transmit new digital signals for high-definition television. The broadcasters were allowed to keep their old spectrum, which carry the signals that today's TVs understand.

Now it looks like high-definition TV may be moribund. But broadcasters don't want to give that spectrum back. They want to use it for pager services, for transmitting business data and for more broadcast channels. Spectrum is money; a much smaller slice of non-broadcast spectrum was auctioned off by the FCC last year for \$9 billion.

The new spectrum needs to be treated like the national resource it is. It could be auctioned, or leased, and the public could get a cut. Public television, a nonprofit children's channel, community services and more public service programming by broadcasters are all ways to make it not just pay, but pay out for the public. Several Democrats, including Joseph Lieberman (D-CT), have asked for a study. Broadcasters are digging in their heels, though—and let's not forget, they're the folks politicians have to be nice to if they want good coverage at election time.

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While the challengers claim the fight is not over personalities, but policies, Kirkland's defenders accuse them of having no agenda (true so far) and not even a candidate—just a desire to get rid of Kirkland. As part of an exchange of letters, Kirkland and his defenders charged that Sweeney, AFSCME President Gerald McEntee—the chief spokesman of the challengers—and other opponents have failed to take advantage of opportunities they had on the federation's executive council to suggest new policies.

Sweeney recently came under attack after suggesting that unions had become "irrelevant" to American workers and many of their members—even though he was simply summarizing the results of a study commissioned by the AFL-CIO. Sweeney suggested raising AFL-CIO organizing expenditures to a third of the program budget, bolstering the Organizing Institute (an underfunded effort that has succeeded mainly by keeping itself free of AFL-CIO bureaucrats), and developing new organizing strategies. Kirkland attacked his proposal as Gingrich-style budgeting that "smacks of the tactics of the right-wingers in Congress," and suggested that organizing should be the responsibility of individual unions, not AFL-CIO leaders.

The labor movement should demand that Democrats be a "party that speaks and works on behalf of working people," Sweeney also argued, or "we'll form something else." Kirkland responded that the Democrats could best succeed by demonstrating their independence from labor—a peculiar suggestion from labor's chief.

If Sweeney runs, some liberal union leaders would like feisty and articulate Mineworkers President Richard Trumka as secretary-treasurer. But there is strong pressure within both camps to name slates—perhaps with expanded executive slots—that include minorities or women, who are grossly underrepresented at all levels of labor leadership.

Despite the nasty tone and disingenuous arguments in some of the early exchanges, there is a chance that some real issues will emerge in the election debate. If that debate continues within the broader ranks of union members after October, the election battle could help catalyze a much-needed union resurgence.

—David Moberg

ROUGH CUTS

By JA Reid



Some find Stephen boring, but I prefer to think of him as ambient.