

Eye on Washington by Leo F. Scanlon

Mt. Pleasant riots jolt the capital

Behind the violence is the kind of budget crisis which has primed every major U.S. city for explosion.

Mayor Sharon Pratt Dixon reaped the benefit of her austerity policies, when the central area of the nation's capital erupted in the most serious riots the city has seen in over two decades. The chaos was precipitated by a shooting incident which occurred as a female police officer was arresting an Hispanic resident.

Crowds gathered, a rumor spread that the man had been shot while handcuffed, and rioting spread throughout the Adams-Morgan and Mt. Pleasant neighborhoods. On the night of May 6, stores were looted, buses overturned and burned, and police and firefighters were attacked. Youth of all races were involved in the disturbances.

Mayor Dixon imposed two nights of a dawn-to-dusk curfew, after which the neighborhood began to get back to normal.

The timing of the incident was a complicating factor, as the shooting occurred on the day of a traditional "Cinco de Mayo" festival which is held in the largely Hispanic Adams-Morgan and Mt. Pleasant districts. Tensions in the area have been high ever since the Dixon administration canceled, for budgetary reasons, the traditional city support to the street festival. The move was seen as a snub of the Hispanic community by the administration, and caused significant economic losses to merchants who depend on the crowds drawn by the festival.

In addition, there have been increasing complaints from Hispanic leaders that the D.C. police have been subjecting Hispanics to arbitrary harassment. Many of the victimized persons are refugees, especially from El

Salvador, and live as illegal aliens. With the destruction of the constituency-based political machine of the previous Marion Barry administration, these residents are the first victims of Mayor Dixon's austerity regime.

Dixon was elected on a platform of putting the District's house in order, and has announced tens of millions of dollars in cuts below city agency requests, and imposed broad new taxes. The cuts hit hard at basic services, including education.

The collapse of the regional construction industry has wiped out the low-wage laboring jobs by which these neighborhoods support themselves and in many cases, their families in Central America as well. An additional tragedy was imposed on the community early this year with the collapse of the Latin Investment Corp.—an illegal banking operation which attracted the savings of undocumented workers by providing bank accounts and facilitating the transfer of funds to the families of immigrants working illegally in the United States. The collapse of the institution wiped out years of hard work and savings, just as the job market disintegrated.

Cui bono? There has never been a riot in an American ghetto which has not ultimately been of direct benefit to the financial interests which use the events to camouflage austerity and cuts in basic city services. The recent riots are no exception, and there is still serious potential for trouble here, as in every city facing budget crises this summer.

One of the dirty secrets of the campaign to destroy former Mayor Marion

Barry is the fact that the fiscal crisis which engulfed his administration was in large part created by the Reagan and Bush administrations, which withheld real estate tax payments due from land occupied by federal buildings. While the Congress turned a blind eye to the scam, the tax arrears accumulated to eventually comprise more than two-thirds of the \$300 million deficit which ultimately swamped Barry. The mayor's substance abuse may have been his personal undoing, but his political doom was sealed once he was financially unable to deliver services to his constituency. Under these circumstances, the Justice Department sting operation against Barry, which spent tens of millions to entrap him, was the final straw.

Sharon Pratt Dixon, a former power company executive and black representative of the city's financial elite, was elected because she had no such encumbrances, and is being praised by congressmen who promise to restore part of the funds if she imposes the expected ruthless cuts in city services.

Dixon's first post-riot actions are only going to make matters worse, however. The mayor immediately called in officials of the Immigration and Naturalization Service to survey the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood, on the theory that the riots had been caused by Central American "outsiders." Deporting "illegal aliens," however, will only create an atmosphere of more tension in the community.

The threat of bringing Washington, D.C. under federal police control has been mooted for a couple of years now, due to the massive drug-related violence in the city. Mayor Barry consistently rejected this proposal, to the anger of federal authorities. Now that austerity has brought the city to new stages of unrest, advocates of such police state measures are a lot closer to their goal.