



DRAWING BY MATT MAHURN

# WHITHER AMERICAN DEMOCRACY?

BY BERNARD SANDERS

As the only Independent in the U.S. Congress, I have the responsibility to raise issues that my Democratic and Republican colleagues choose not to deal with. Let me briefly touch upon three issues of enormous consequence which, while ignored in Congress, must be addressed by the American people.

*~ The United States of America is, increasingly, an oligarchy.*

The richest 1% of our population now owns 37% of the wealth, more than the 90% of the people. The CEOs of the Forbes 500 corporations earn 157 times more than their average worker. The gap between the rich and the poor is wider than at any time since the 1920s. During 1983 to 1989, 55% of the increase in family wealth accrued to the richest half of 1% of families, while the lower-middle and lower classes lost over \$250 billion of wealth.

Oligarchy refers not just to the unfair distribution of wealth, but to the fact that the *decisions* that shape our consciousness and affect our lives are made by a very small and powerful group of people.

The mass media (television, radio, newspapers, magazines, publishers, movie and video companies), for example, are largely controlled by a few multinational corporations that determine the news and programming we see, hear and read — and, ultimately, what we believe. While violence, scandal, horror, sports, and Rush Limbaugh are given much attention, we are provided with virtually no in-depth analysis of the problems facing working people, or their possible solutions.

Economic decisions that wreck the lives of millions of American families are made by a handful of CEOs. While these corporate leaders bemoan the breakdown of "morality" and "law and order," they close down profitable companies, cut wages and benefits, deny retired workers their pensions and transport our jobs to Third World countries. American workers, who have often given decades of their lives to these companies, have absolutely no say as to what happens to them on the job. They are powerless and expendable, which is what oligarchy is all about.

*~ The United States is becoming a Third World economy.*

The standard of living of the average American worker continues to decline. The real wages of American production workers have dropped by 20% during the last 20 years, as millions of decent paying jobs have disappeared. The new jobs that are being created are largely temporary, part-time, low-wage and with few benefits.

Twenty years ago the United States led the world in terms of the wages and benefits our workers received. Today, we are in 12th place. Our wages, health care, vacation time, parental leave and educational opportunity lag behind much of the industrialized world. Much of our economic and social life is more and more resembling that of the desperate Third World.

Twenty-two percent of our children live in poverty. Five million kids go hungry. About two million Americans now lack permanent shelter or sleep out in the streets — many of them mentally ill. One in every 10 American families now puts food on the table only with the aid of food stamps. Tens of millions more survive, on bare subsistence, from paycheck to paycheck.

In more and more abandoned neighborhoods in America, a lack of jobs, income, education and hope has created an extraordinary climate of savagery and violence surpassing that of many communities in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

The suffering and desperation in the Third World that we have distantly observed is now coming home — as we become a Third World economy.

*~ The United States is fast becoming a non-democratic country.*

We have the lowest voter turnout of any major industrialized country on earth — 55% in the 1992 presidential election. It is expected that the 1994 off-year election turnout will be about 36%. In local elections the turnout is often far lower.

The simple fact is that the majority of Americans, and the vast majority of poor and working people, no longer believe that their government is relevant to their lives. They understand very clearly that *real* power rests with a wealthy elite, and that voting for Tweedle-dee or Tweedle-dum is not going to change that reality or improve their lives.

If democracy is going to survive in this country, tens of millions of poor and working people are going to have to see the connection between their economic condition and the political process. They must vote not for the lesser of two evils, but for jobs, income, health care and the dignity to which they, as human beings, are entitled. Only when that occurs will American democracy become revitalized.

Bernard Sanders, an Independent, is Vermont's lone member of the U.S. House of Representatives.