

WILL THE REAL POPULISTS



MATT WEURKER

BY RONNIE DUGGER

We are ruled by Big Business and Big Government as its paid hireling, and we know it. Corporate money is wrecking popular government in the United States. The big corporations and the centimillionaires and billionaires have taken daily control of our work, our pay, our housing, our health, our pension funds, our bank and savings deposits, our public lands, our airwaves, our elections and our very government. It is as if American democracy has been bombed. Will we be able to recover ourselves and overcome the bombers? Or will they continue to divide us and will we continue to divide ourselves, according to our wounds and our alarms, until they have taken the country away from us for good?

Senate Democratic majority leader George Mitchell exclaimed late in 1994, shortly before he abandoned Congress in disgust: "This system stinks. This system is money." The law of life among us now is what Jefferson called "the general prey of the rich on the poor." The moment is dangerous. Democracy is not guaranteed God's protection; systems and nations end. If we do anything serious now we might make things worse; if we do nothing serious now we are done for.

The challenge of 1776 was one thing; the challenge of 1995 is another. The northern Europeans who were our country's founders exterminated or confined millions of Native Americans whose ancestors had been living here for 30,000 years. African-Americans were enslaved until the Civil War; women were not allowed to vote for 131 years, until 1920. But after the abolition-ist, women's suffrage, farmers', union, progressive, civil rights, environmentalist, feminist and gay and lesbian liberation move-ments, and much more immigration, the question now is whether we can found the first genuinely international democracy. If we cannot, the corporations have us.

Why is there no longer any mass democratic organization we can trust and through which we can act together? Where is the strong national movement that is advancing working Americans' interests, values and hopes? Where is the party of the common person? It's no coincidence that within the same historical moment we have lost both our self-governance and the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party, on which many millions of ordinary people have relied to represent them since the 1930s, has been hollowed out and rebuilt from the inside by corporate money. What was once 'the party of the common man' is now the second party of the corporate mannequin. In national politics ordinary people no longer exist. We simply aren't there. No wonder only 75 million of us eligible to vote in 1994 did so, while 108 million more of us, also eligible, did not.

What is government about? As a worker told reporter Barry Bearak last spring about the U.A.W. strike against the Caterpillar corporation, government is about "control, you know, who controls who." Ernesto Cortes Jr., the exceptionally important organizer who helps people in communities in the Southwest to act together in their own interests, once exclaimed: "Power! Power comes in two forms: organized people and organized money." To govern ourselves, power is what we need. To get it we must want it and organize for it.

This is a call to hope and action, a call to reclaim and reinvent democracy, a call to the hard work or reorganizing ourselves into a broad national coalition, a call to populists, workers, progressives and liberals to reconstitute ourselves into a smashing new national force to end corporate rule.

This is a call that we pick up the banner where the People's Party dropped it on July 25, 1896, and form ourselves into a broad progressive coalition, a new American alliance to take power so that, in the words of John Quincy Adams, "self-love and social may be made the same." I would suggest for a name, tentatively, the Citizen's Alliance or (on a cue from a similar project in New Zealand) the American Alliance.

But we will have to start small, "to begin humbly." When only a few come that is enough. The women's movement for the right to vote started when five women sat down around a table in a parlor in Waterloo, New York, six miles north of Seneca Falls. The Populists' National Farmers Alliance and Industrial Union started with a meeting of seven people in a farmhouse in Lampasas County, Texas.

I propose the emphasis on populism because the 19th century Populists denied the legitimacy of corporate domination

of a democracy, whereas in this century the progressives, the unions and the liberals gave up on and forgot about that organic and controlling issue. I propose that we seize the word Populism back from its many highjackers, its misusers -- the George Wallaces, David Dukes, Irving Kristols, Newt Gingriches -- and restore its original meaning in American history, that of the anti-corporate Populist movement of the 1880s and 1890s. Our point, our purpose, is the well-being and enhancement of the person. We are all those who believe the corporations are becoming our masters and do not want to vote for candidates of any party dependent on them. We are all those who are tired of winning elections some of the time but losing our rights and interests all of the time.

As Lawrence Goodwyn wrote in his definitive work, *The Populist Moment*, the Populists were "attempting to construct within the framework of American capitalism, come variety of cooperative commonwealth." That was, as he wrote, "the last substantial effort at structural alteration of hierarchical economic forms in modern America," and when Populism died out what was lost was "cultural acceptance of a democratic politics open to serious structural evolution of society." Well, like the Populists of that era we are ready again to resume the cool eyeing of the corporations with a collective will to take back the powers they have seized from us, the power of farm or no farm, job or no job, living wage or no living wage, store or no store, medical care or no medical care, home or no home, pension or no pension.

So, as I would have it, we are Populists; but we are many other things. We are white, black, brown, every religion and none, young, middle-aged, old. We are people who work, for a corporation or a small business or a farm, for our families or for ourselves, or we're job creators, local merchants, small-business people in the towns or cities, or we're people who can't find work or have given up trying. We are ordinary people. Probably we would be no better than the rich if we were rich. But we are not haters or scapegoaters. We eschew violence; we believe in active citizenship and, when it is needed, civil disobedience. We are progressives; we are union workers, or nonunion ones who might be union if we weren't so afraid of the power and will of management to fire us if we organize or strike; we are liberals; we are the poorly educated, the untrained, the minimum-wagers harried from one job to another with no security and no health insurance or sunk on welfare, whose grammar might embarrass high-toned reformers, whose clothes might, too. We are femin-



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ists, environmentalists, peace and antinuclear people, civil libertarians, civil rightsers, radical democrats, democratic socialists, egalitarians; and we are moderates and conservatives who believe in family values, work, initiative and responsibility, but not cynics to whom the point of life is profit and power.

Some of us are Democrats, some independent, some are or were for Ross Perot, some follow Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, some of us are Green Party, some are libertarians about personal life, a thimbleful of us may be Republicans. This is not a call to get ready for 1996 politics, nor a call to citizens, Democrats or any other, to decide now whether or not to vote for any particular candidate or party in 1996. The presidential race next year could well become a four- or five-candidate November smashup of the two party system, and 1996, therefore, one of those rare years of historic party realignment. But the situation might also close back down into the usual choice between the two major-party nominees. Some or many of us may conclude in 1996 that we are trapped again. The return of ordinary citizens to national politics through the Alliance might move Democratic officeholders back toward the people or might provide a democratic group setting for a reasoned decision on 1996 in place of the ego-driven chaos we must now expect. But that is not the chief point. This is a call for the five- or ten-year, one-to-one hard work of organizing people and bringing together many disparate associations and efforts into one new national movement. Let's not even start unless we're in for that. If we are in for that, we might be trapped one more year, but not longer. What has happened to us?

Too much, too much.

In 1886 the Supreme Court decided, insanely, that corporations are "persons" with the rights our forebears meant only for people. The corporations -- mere legal fictions created by the democratic states that are their only source of legitimacy -- disposing of the Populists and slipping free from the states' leashes, have multiplied into the corrupters of our politics and the international networks of greed and power that we know today. Hierarchical, essentially totalitarian, and now gigantic and global, in effect the corporation is the government, here and elsewhere. The divine right of kings has been replaced by the divine rights of C.E.O.s.

Jefferson wrote that what distinguished our new country from the Old World was the absence among us then of the fatal concentration of private wealth that so deformed imperial Europe. Yet the gap between the very rich and the rest of us now is morally more obscene than anything Jefferson could have had in mind. One percent of the people among us own 40% of the national wealth. The after-tax income of the top 20% of U.S. families exceeds that of all other families combined. Between 1977 and 1989 the 1% of families with incomes over \$350,000 received 72% of the country's income gains while the bottom 60% lost ground. In 1992 half of our families had net financial assets under \$1,000. Debts exceeded assets of four out of ten of our families. In 1994, 70 American individuals and 59 American families collectively owned \$295 billion, an average of \$2.3 billion. The top 51 individuals and families owned \$197 billion, an average of \$3.9 billion. The two richest Americans, William Gates and Warren Buffett, and the richest American family, the DuPonts, owned a total of \$34 billion among them. The rate of child poverty in the United States is four times the rate in Western Europe.

Although no democracy can work without a strong union movement, U.S. unions have been reduced to shadows by employers' use of sophisticated unionbusters and by the corporations' government, whose labor-management apparatus chains down the right to form and maintain unions. Compared with about 1 in 3 of the work force at the peak, only 1 in 6 workers now belongs to a union -- if you exclude public employees, only 1 in 9.

Multinational corporations now employ about a fifth of the private American workforce and are getting bigger and more powerful by the hour. Workers are falling into paycheck poverty -- by the millions we are becoming expendable hired hands, interchangeable units of work, governed in what counts by entities that have abandoned the traditional quest for a loyal workforce, much less a happy one. Corporations are extracting cuts in wages and benefits from their experienced workers, low-balling new worker in 2-tier wage systems, requiring mandatory overtime and hiring temps to reduce the fringe benefits they have to pay, and letting hundreds of thousands of workers go while exporting their jobs to low-wage areas around the world. As a worker at Caterpillar said, "They use you up and throw you away." Young male workers with a high school education lost 30% of their real income in the twenty years ending in 1993, and the real wages of American production workers have dropped 20% in twenty years; average wage levels for men are now below the levels of the 1960s. As of 1993, 40% of women earned only about \$15,000 a year. Among Hispanics 46% and among African-Americans 36% of workers do not earn an hourly wage sufficient to lift them out of poverty.

Many millions of us hunger for serious discussion and debate on public affairs, but major corporations now control much of the access to our minds and the selection of the subjects we are encouraged to think about from day to day. Twenty corporations own and control more than 50% of American radio and TV stations, newspapers, magazines, book publishers and



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