

Letters on Warren Buffett's philanthropy

30 June 2006

The following is a selection of letters sent to the World Socialist Web Site in response to the article, "The philanthropy of Warren Buffett".

I thought that was an excellent reading of the situation. The entire situation specifically points to inequalities in the economic system and the reliance on "noblesse oblige" should have been buried long ago. I work for a philanthropic organization, and I think that your comment—"There is, in any event, something intrinsically degrading and demeaning about philanthropy"—really makes the point. Why should any society rely on philanthropy? What role does philanthropy play in society? Societies with such great inequities cry out for reform, particularly in the United States. Capital accumulation is a perversion in a society where workers can barely survive. A society dependent on exploitation of cheap labor is indeed an immoral one. While we praise those who give, why not reserve our efforts for true reforms of the social and economic system and eliminate the notion of "noblesse oblige"?

RC

Thank you for your enlightening article, which lists a number of the crimes behind Mr. Buffett's fortune. I realize that space limits you from giving a more complete list of Mr. Buffett's crimes against workers, but I now appreciate the dangers of benign capitalism more clearly.

LL

Whitehall, Pennsylvania

I thank you for your excellent article on private philanthropy, via Buffett, and it enables readers like me to understand contemporary events like these and confront apologists of capitalism. I teach English in a college to students coming from very, very disadvantaged sections of the Indian society, to unsuspecting students on whom the literature of a language they will take years to learn is thrust. Capitalist greed for profit has bestowed on the likes of me very intimidating classrooms and we are battling against heavy odds. And India is a land known to extol private philanthropy. The Gandhian tradition has taught India that the rich should consider themselves as the custodians of the wealth of the poor. It is in this backdrop that your article draws its particular relevance for India. The Shakespearean "From him shall be taken and given unto them who have not" simply does not work. However a few lines from Marx and Lenin on this topic would have reinforced what you want to say, especially because this thing began even before Marx with Owen. Thanks for writing promptly.

MR

Chennai, India

In the UK it is unheard of that the rich are given to philanthropic acts. Charities find it easier to raise funds from the poor than the rich. At least the spirit of generous giving exists in America even though the gains are ill-gotten. Strange paradoxes exist in people. George Soros, for example, is a very interesting person to listen to even though he is a currency speculator who nearly completely wrecked the UK economy. He too is given to acts of philanthropy. Try getting a pound out of the British Royal Family!

PA

You write, "There is no reason to demonize Buffett, as an individual, on account of his great wealth." I disagree. He is an individual who had accumulated by the mid-1980s an amount of money that, when compared to the average individual, gave him almost absolute choice over the course of his life. A full quarter of a century ago he could have gone on a sumptuous gardening leave forever, or gone on a smaller charitable binge and still lived without working a single day more, or even have retired and started using his cash and evident analytical powers to help formulate the bases of movement towards, at least, a marginally less corrupt and exploitative society. Furthermore, he is apparently someone who, reportedly unlike Gates, is aware of what you guys tend to refer to as "the contradictions" of his milieu. He didn't. He was a capitalist who, at the very least, could afford to step out of that stream and cease actively contributing towards the exacerbation of such contradictions, but refrained. Buffett is a "decent man" who persists in promoting large-scale capitalism? Then the bigger lie is the "charity" spin and the more culpable is he in the rape of both the actual generators of the surplus value that he has stolen *and* the putative beneficiaries he then "gives" it to. No need to demonize him, he's there already.

MH

Well said Mr. Walsh! Buffett is to be commended for his record philanthropy, but we know it came from "dirty deeds, done dirt cheap"! These "Kapitans" of industry operate in their own interest completely, always have and always will under the ruthless American system. How many good, solid workers have died and been maimed in wars abroad and at home for the personal wealth of these swine. On the good side, however, it is my belief that when their disgusting lives here come to a close, their souls will have been totally used up, and worthless. I

despise such people! Thanks for your writings and for viewing my rant!

Sincerely,

CG Hawthorne, Florida, US

I have to confess I had never heard of W. Buffett until a few years ago and then I confused him for a while with Jimmy Buffett. Gosh, it just shows how ignorant the hoi polloi are! I gather from your article that he is a Prince of a Fellow who weeps and weeps for the poor while continuing his predatory practices because, poor guy, he can't help himself. Is he a robot? And where is all this philanthropy going to? Will I ever see it? (We common folk are so greedy!) Will he endow colleges for the promulgation of Marxism-Leninism, support governments who wish to nationalise the oil and energy industry, promote socialised medicine in the United States, provide endowment funds for striking workers, or even build a few more national highways? Guess not.

Golly, it is not enough that these guys and gals are rapacious on a grand scale and feed off the multitude? Now the multitude is supposed to acknowledge their moral greatness. May we please be allowed to worship our own God or gods?

Finally, Philanthropy on a Grand Scale is deeply antidemocratic, and not merely because the way it has been acquired. It promotes the notion of the individual Savior or a Mr. Fix-It, who will straighten out society for its people, and more practically, perverts the infrastructure it feeds on and which supports it. We don't need it.

Yours sincerely,

JHR

I had to grimace just a little when I read the article about W. Buffett's millions going to charity and how he and Harry Bottle got his start in moneymaking. It was all too familiar as I have just finished reading *See you in Hell*, a book about how Carnegie and his familiar reduced the steelworkers to peons and destroyed the steel union the same time the railroad workers union was being taken down by big money industrialist Rockefeller. Socialist movements in this country have been maneuvered out of the running from the beginning. The lone do-gooder was the 'Captain' who was the foreman at the Springstead mill and who ages before the rest of the country agitated for the 8-hour day and instituted it successfully by arguing that the men would work better if rested. It lasted a few months before Carnegie decided it was costing him money. The 'Captain,' who tried his best behind the scenes, shortly thereafter was the victim of an accident in which he fell into a vat of molten steel. Carnegie didn't have to worry about anymore untoward socialist movements in his factory so he could carry on with the rhetoric about 'fairness in men striking for fair wage' as he had his familiar to carry out his dirty work while seeming a backer of the common man.

One wonders why these titans of industry get a conscience late in life. So little of what they do then matters to the people they made their money off of. Our social commentators say that

the way children find a better financial future is to be raised in a family that is financially stable. Thanks Mr. Buffett. Carnegie's ghost toasts you.

KS

David Walsh's humane treatment of Warren Buffett sheds some light on how the system itself treats its subordinates, regardless of their position or opinion. In this context, the capitalist social machine seemingly animates itself in order to command the same subordinates to lubricate its more squeaky parts.

Buffett's efforts of giving away 'hard, cold cash' can be seen in this context, too. Whether he himself is conscious of it or not, it happens to lubricate the machine at a time when expensive projects of imperialism begin to dry the system to the bone. Unlike some more desperate variety (such as members of the Australian ruling class) who have to appeal to Churches to take more social responsibility in order to free resources for their pitiful imperialist projects, the likes of Buffett are in a position to fund it straight away without begging lower creatures. So, why not! It is not so different than German government sending troops to Afghanistan in order to free the US forces there to go to Iraq.

Notwithstanding the cheap political impacts of this move (buying sympathy, etc.), it highlights not the strength but the desperation of this parasitic class in trying to steer a global market economy that got so massive and so complex that it began crushing the bones of millions while ruthlessly attempting to stuff the ears, eyes and mouths of countless others with familiar dirt of trickery and lies.

Unfortunately, the machine is now far too complex and the blood and flesh on which it operates are far more integral to each other: far more than it was in previous times of workers revolutions. This factor alone is a huge amplifier for workers power as well as for the innate solidarity it possesses. Provided the consciousness catches up, any glitch in the system will spell disaster for all parties involved in the driving seat.

Maybe, Buffett has some inkling to this end.

Best regards,

KK

Melbourne, Australia

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