

UK's Sunday Times Rich List records massive increase in wealth

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The latest *Sunday Times* Rich List recorded a massive increase in wealth for the super-rich in the United Kingdom.

The numbers of billionaires stands at a record 88—up from 77 last year. The combined wealth of the richest 1,000 UK residents has reached £450 billion, a total increase of £35 billion on the previous year. The wealth of the top 200 richest residents in Britain and Ireland amounts to an incredible £320 billion.

The degree to which London in particular has been turned into a playground for the international financial oligarchy and an on-shore tax haven is reflected in the dominance of those born outside the UK, mainly from Russia and India, in the top ten places. The seven richest, according to the *Sunday Times*, were born outside the UK, with the Duke of Westminster the highest ranking Briton at number eight, who has amassed almost £8 billion.

Head of the list is Russian oligarch Alisher Usmanov of iron ore producer Metalloinvest and part-owner of Arsenal football club, with a fortune of £13.3 billion.

He is followed by fellow Russian, Len Blavatnik of Warner Music, with £11 billion.

Russia's Roman Abramovich fell by two places into fifth place with £9.3 billion. Third and fourth place are taken by Indian multi-billionaires Sri and Gopi Hinduja (Hinduja Group) and steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal on £10.6 billion and £10 billion respectively.

This is the 25th anniversary of the Rich List. It was first launched in 1989, during the dying days of Margaret Thatcher's period as prime minister.

The publication came just after all the political parties and the media had joined together in a period of national mourning for Thatcher, who died aged 87 on April 3. For more than a week, there was unending praise for the "Iron Lady" who supposedly "rescued"

Britain from recession and "union power."

To underscore why she was so feted in death by the ruling class and its representatives, it is only necessary to note that the very richest have enjoyed an increase in their wealth by a factor of nine since then. Given that Labour was in office for 13 of those 24 years, the list also confirms the degree to which Thatcher's economic and political nostrums were not only continued but deepened under the premierships of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

The result, even after the financial crash of 2008, is the continued enrichment of the global financial oligarchy.

The BBC headlined that the Rich List showed "The Changing Face of Wealth". When the list was first published, it was headed by the Queen. She has now dropped out of the top 200 as the result of a decision not to count palaces and art collections as part of her personal wealth.

The list's author, Philip Beresford, explained, "When I first started 25 years ago about two-thirds of the rich list were people who had inherited their wealth.

"Today, approaching 80 percent are self-made and that's really a legacy of the Thatcher years."

Market researcher Peter York told the BBC, "The very richest people on the list are what most people would call foreign". York said the list had been distorted because "London has become the city of choice for the global super-rich," in no small part due to its lax tax laws.

"Self-made" is hardly the adjective that springs to mind when dealing with Russian oligarchs who grew rich primarily by looting state assets following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, or the Hinduja brothers and Mittal, all born into wealth.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has pointed out, all

the sycophantic tributes to Thatcher could not hide the fact that she was buried amidst the wreckage of the political and economic perspective she helped to initiate. There was a large element of wish fulfilment in the celebrations of Thatcher's life. Having literally gorged themselves on the opportunities opened up to a tiny elite, the reality today is one of enormous and growing social inequality between the working class and the super-rich.

Capitalism is in its gravest crisis since the 1930s, with British capitalism on the verge of a "triple dip recession." Just days after Thatcher's funeral, the Fitch rating agency downgraded Britain's triple A rating. The country is now five years into an economic recession that threatens to slide into depression, with food banks proliferating and a government dismantling the final remains of social rights of the working class. Worldwide, the same crisis poses the return of open class conflict.

The relatively modest tone adopted by the media regarding this year's list is possibly a reflection of the nervousness that pervades the ruling elite over such immense and growing wealth amid growing hardship for most everyone else. Rather than trumpeting another bumper year for the UK's international super rich, the front page of the *Sunday Times* itself somewhat incongruously led with the news that Conservative Lord Ashcroft, who virtually owns the state of Belize in Central America, intends to give away half his £1.2 billion fortune. Its News Review section was given over to an article entitled "Broke" by David Boyle, an economist and author, who is set to publish a book entitled, *Broke: Who killed the Middle Classes*.

As the newspaper noted on its inside pages, "The rich are accelerating away from the rest of us: the top 1,000 have added £35.4 billion to their wealth in a single year, a gain of 8.5 percent since last year, while many of us are being squeezed...While political talk is of the deserving and undeserving poor, the public has become conscious of the deserving and undeserving rich, such as FTSE 100 bosses rewarded for failure."

This is the reason for the attempt to cloak the parasitism of the elite in the blanket of philanthropy. Taking a leaf from the American bourgeoisie, Britain's multi-billionaires indulge in highly public acts of charity only so as to obscure and legitimise gargantuan social inequality.

Apparently the Tory peer and billionaire Ashcroft is not alone. Others who have made their fortune from the exploitation of the world's workforce, like Sir Richard Branson, have signed up to the "Giving Pledge" whereby they make a public pledge to give away some of their wealth. Massive disparities between the workers and the bourgeoisie are just fine, so long as the pretence can be maintained that a few crumbs of the wealth are being brushed back.

One of the charities favoured by Ashcroft is the "Crimestoppers" organisation he established 25 years ago. It allows for people to anonymously report crimes and suspicious behaviour. The Crimestoppers web site even has a section called "Fearless," devoted to encouraging children to inform on their friends and family for even the most minor law infringements.

Needless to say, there will be no anonymous phone calls to Crimestoppers reporting shadowy rich individuals with hideaways in foreign climes and friends in high places, moving heaven and earth to avoid paying tax, and funding pernicious anti-social government policies aimed at further redistributing wealth in favour of themselves.



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