

Billionaires' wealth grows faster in France than in any other country

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As President Emmanuel Macron slashes wages and conditions in workplaces across France, the country's 13 wealthiest people have become \$27.6 billion richer since the start of 2018. This has made France the country in the world where billionaires are increasing their wealth the fastest, according to a report published by Bloomberg last week.

Since January alone, the wealth of French billionaires has increased by a whopping 12.2 percent. This compares to 7.1 percent growth for Japanese billionaires, 6.3 percent for Chinese billionaires and 1.2 percent for American billionaires.

The class divide revealed by the figures in the Bloomberg report could not be more stark. On the one hand, Macron arrogantly denounces workers opposed to his policies as "lazy" because they earn €9.88 per hour (€7.83 after tax) and criticize his cuts to social spending and income taxes for the rich. On the other hand, he is overseeing the transfer of more than \$900,000 every hour into the pockets of this tiny group of financial parasites, corporate raiders and fashion heiresses.

The two richest individuals in France, Bernard Arnault and François Pinault, have raked in an additional \$22.3 billion during this calendar year. Arnault, the chairman of luxury products conglomerate LVMH Moët Louis Vuitton SE, is the richest person in Europe and the fourth richest person in the world, with an estimated fortune of \$76.4 billion.

Pinault, who has a fortune of \$35.5 billion, is the founder of luxury conglomerate Kering, the owner of brands such as Gucci and Yves Saint Laurent, and of the financial holding company Artemis.

As Macron eliminates the Tax on Large Fortunes (ISF) and slashes corporate tax, the surge in the stock market values for LVMH and Kering is going directly into Arnault's and Pinault's pockets. Bloomberg wrote, "Renewed demand for luxury goods from China and a

growing presence in e-commerce have lifted sales and propelled both holding groups into the ranks of France's most valuable companies. A surge in art sales at Pinault's auction house Christie's has also contributed."

Similarly, l'Oréal heiress Françoise Bettencourt-Meyers added \$3.7 billion to her net worth, and the brothers Alain and Gerard Wertheimer, the owners of Chanel, added \$2.4 billion to their fortunes.

These figures make clear that the policies of the Macron administration are based on lies. Masses of people are being told they must accept cuts to wages and salaries, the evisceration of unemployment benefits, a broad expansion of temporary work, planned cuts to health care and pensions, and the end of lifetime employment in the public sector because there is no money. But this is a political fraud.

In fact, there is plenty of money. The problem—in France as around the rest of the world—is that it is being diverted into the bank accounts of a parasitic and money-mad ruling elite.

In the run-up to the 2012 French presidential elections, economist Thomas Piketty published a report on wealth inequality in France based on 2010 statistics. It showed that the top 10 percent of French society held 62 percent of the wealth, and the top 1 percent held 24 percent of the wealth. The bottom half of French society, in contrast, held only 4 percent of the wealth. After eight years of economic crisis and social austerity, the class divide is doubtless even more blatant today.

The social inequality revealed in such reports is a condemnation of the capitalist system. Last year, the world was shocked by news that just eight billionaires owned as much wealth as the bottom half of humanity. The Bloomberg report underscores that French capitalism—despite its pretensions to be a kinder, gentler and more regulated social order—is riven by the same insoluble social contradictions as world capitalism as a

whole.

There is little in terms of social physiognomy and outlook to distinguish the billionaires who dominate French society and economic life from their US or British counterparts.

Arnault, whose family ran a local construction firm, used his political connections and availability of state subsidies to restructure and downsize the textile industry, vastly increase his fortune, and ultimately acquire LVMH in the 1980s. He left in his wake a trail of shuttered factories and devastated communities across northern France, which is now an electoral base of the neo-fascist National Front. He has become fabulously wealthy by strategically acquiring ever more fashion and luxury brands to add to his conglomerate. He endorsed Macron last year.

Similarly, Pinault came to prominence in the 1980s as a financier and corporate raider, making vast sums by restructuring and downsizing bankrupt wood and paper companies while pocketing state subsidies designed to help distressed firms. Like Arnault, he used this initial fortune to acquire an empire of luxury, finance and retail firms through which he became one of France's wealthiest billionaires.

As for Bettencourt-Meyers, she inherited her wealth last year from her mother, the late Liliane Bettencourt. Bettencourt's holding company owned a massive stake in L'Oréal, the cosmetics firm of Bettencourt-Meyers' grandfather Eugène Schueller, a leading Nazi-collaborationist and financier of French fascist groups in World War II.

A financial aristocracy has emerged in France that is no less entrenched, arrogant and sclerotic than the feudal aristocracy overthrown by the French revolution two centuries ago. As Macron seeks to remove all barriers to their enrichment by liquidating the social rights won by the working class in France over decades of struggle in the 20th century, the only appropriate response of the working class is to fight for the expropriation of their ill-gotten wealth.



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