Sunday Times Rich Listers receive billions in UK government handouts

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The publication of the 2020 *Sunday Times Rich List* was a more muted affair than usual. Amidst the pandemic lockdown and tens of thousands of deaths in the UK, there was little of the usual glorification of obscene wealth.

Instead, the *Sunday Times* felt it appropriate to issue an editorial reminding the ruling elite that the vast majority--who live a million miles removed from those on the list--know that "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark."

For the last three decades, it read, the purpose of the Rich List has "been to record that the rich have been getting richer." This year, for the first time since the 2008/2009 global financial crash, the wealth of the richest 1,000 people in the UK fell. While claiming that the vast majority "have made it onto the list through their own endeavours," it notes, "Despite this, there will be few tears shed over the news that Britain's super-rich have seen £54 billion wiped off their combined wealth in the past two months. At a time when the economy is diving into its deepest recession in three centuries, the fact that the coffers of the rich are not overflowing as much as they were will elicit little sympathy. It comes at a time when 7.5 million people are on the government's job furlough scheme and are hugely uncertain about what the future will bring. There have also been a record 2.5 million claims for universal credit."

The robbery of the public purse by the oligarchy via Chancellor Rishi Sunak's £350 billion bailout scheme has not gone unnoticed, the *Times* warns. "This is even more the case when, as we report today, 63 of the UK's richest people—including 20 billionaires—have turned to the government for help during the COVID-19 crisis by putting workers on the furlough scheme under which the Treasury pays 80 percent of their wages."

Robert Watts, the compiler of the list, wrote, "Some might feel that examining the finances...of Britain's wealthiest people is obtuse—insensitive, even—at a time when tens of thousands of people are losing their lives and millions of us are worrying about our livelihoods, which directly or indirectly often depend on the businesses these people run."

But even while making these points, the *Sunday Times* can't help but crassly declare, "COVID-19 has claimed thousands of lives, locked the British public indoors for two months and taken an unprecedented chunk out of the economy, so it should come as no surprise that it has taken a swipe at the *Sunday Times Rich List* too. Had the list been compiled in February, the combined wealth of the richest 1,000 would have risen for the 11th straight year to just under £800bn."

The newspaper only records known assets of its listed 1,000, and while there may have been a fall in declared wealth, it is not by much. Overall wealth is down 3.7 percent to £742.6 billion, while the minimum wealth needed to enter this year's list has stayed at the 2019 level of £120 million. This year's list witnessed the billionaire count fall by 4 to 147.

Five of the country's 20 richest people own companies that have furloughed workers through the Tory scheme. The Office for Budget Responsibility suggests the furlough scheme would cost the taxpayer approximately £63 billion gross by June and it has recently been extended to October.

The *Sunday Times* identified at least 63 names who have a significant financial stake in companies receiving publicly funded furlough financial support. The true figure is likely to be much higher because there is no public list of furloughed companies, and some claims will have gone unreported.

The pandemic has exposed how these buccaneers of the "free market" are happy to claim government welfare. The maxim "profits are private, losses public" was never more appropriate.

Those with their cap out for public funds include Gopi

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and Sri Hinduja, who topped last year's list with £22 billion. They are down £6 billion this year and off the top of the list. The brothers have furloughed some of their 360 employees at Optare, their North Yorkshire-based bus-making firm.

Sir Jim Ratcliffe, a tax exile in Monaco and top of the 2018 Rich List, is chairman and chief executive officer of the Ineos chemicals group—estimated to have a turnover of $80 billion. The pandemic lockdown has reduced Ratcliffe's wealth, to £12.15 billion. He co-owns the Pig hotel chain, which has furloughed most of its staff. Ratcliffe is demanding an emergency government-funded loan of approximately £500 million to bail out Petroineos—a joint venture with state-owned PetroChina.

Another major beneficiary of the furlough operation is Tim Martin, owner of the Wetherspoons pub chain. Worth £311 million, Martin told his staff to go and get work in a supermarket during the pandemic.

The Weston family—with some £10.53 billion and owners of Selfridges, Fortnum & Mason, Primark and Heal's—have risen from number 13 to 8 in the list. They have tens of thousands of staff on the taxpayer's payroll.

Billionaires who have met public opprobrium for availing themselves of taxpayer funds include Sir Richard Branson, who has a personal fortune of £3.625 billion. Branson has paid no personal tax in the UK for 14 years. He placed 8,000 Virgin Atlantic staff on furlough and is seeking an additional £500 million in public funds. After his first request was knocked back, Virgin Atlantic announced plans to cut 3,150 jobs and cease operations at Gatwick Airport.

Sir Philip Green, lampooned recently by Steve Coogan in the movie *Greed*, has £930 million. He has furloughed 14,500 of the 16,000 staff from his Arcadia retail empire.

Mike Ashley is worth £1.949 billion. As the pandemic took hold, he claimed that his discount sportswear shops were an essential public service and should remain open during the lockdown. His Frasers Group has 18,000 employees, with the majority furloughed. Ashley owns Newcastle United, the first Premier League soccer club to use the furlough scheme for all non-first-team staff.

The owners of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club, Joe Lewis, worth £3.992 billion, and Daniel Levy, worth £329 million, furloughed the club's staff, before buckling as public anger mounted and reversing their decision.

Other super-wealthy employers simply sent employees to the dole queue. Hundreds of workers at Wren Kitchens, owned by the Healey brothers, Eddie and Malcolm—collectively worth £2 billion—were dismissed because they were "underperforming" just as the pandemic lockdown began. Workers were subsequently unable to claim government furlough support.

Coverage of the *Sunday Times Rich List* made much of how diverse the multimillionaires and billionaires are. The *Guardian* was embarrassing, writing a profile of pop star Rihanna headlined, "The new queen bee: Rihanna is crowned Britain's wealthiest female musician." Breathlessly it exclaimed, "The megastar enters the Sunday Times UK Rich List musician category at No 3 with a £468m fortune, beating Adele, Ed Sheeran and Mick Jagger." Rihanna's wealth could be properly celebrated at last now she was "[e]ligible for inclusion in the newspaper's annual list since she moved to London over a year ago."

The *Sunday Times* main editorial pointed out that some Rich Listers "have responded to the crisis by pouring money into communities that need help and by increasing their philanthropic contributions." But it warned, "The UK's richest need to do a lot more, though, to avoid a backlash … in the period of enhanced inequality that is likely to follow this crisis. Recessions always hit the poorest hardest, and this one will be no exception. The rich have to demonstrate their willingness to put much more back than they have taken out."

Almost identical statements were made by the *Times* after 2008. But all the super-rich did was continue to pile up gargantuan wealth, while tens of millions of workers suffered a decade of savage austerity to pay for the bailout of the banks and corporations.

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