

Wealth of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos surpasses \$200 billion

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On August 26, the wealth of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, the world's richest man, crossed over \$200 billion (\$200,000,000,000).

The net worth of this individual human being is now roughly equivalent to the annual gross domestic product of the entire nation of Greece (\$218 billion), which in turn represents the collective labor of millions of workers over an entire year. For comparison, the Ukraine has a GDP of \$131 billion, Hungary has a GDP of \$157 billion, and Sri Lanka has a GDP of \$89 billion.

The personal wealth of Bezos is also higher than the entire government budgets of Austria (\$201.9 billion, according to 2017 figures), Turkey (\$190.4 billion), Argentina (\$161 billion), Israel (\$102 billion), and Poland (\$102 billion).

The scale of Bezos's wealth is not even the most startling fact—what is most striking is the speed with which he has accumulated it. Since the start of the year, in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, Bezos has increased his wealth by about \$87 billion, according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index. By comparison, this is on the scale of the entire national budgets of Iran (\$86 billion), Iraq (\$76 billion), New Zealand (\$72 billion), and Egypt (\$63 billion).

The wealth that Bezos has appropriated in eight months—\$87 billion—exceeds the *total combined annual national budgets* of Libya (roughly \$22.3 billion), Armenia (\$2.9 billion), North Korea (\$3.3 billion), Afghanistan (\$6.6 billion), Georgia (\$4.8 billion), El Salvador (\$6.8 billion), Honduras (\$5.1 billion), Turkmenistan (\$4.7 billion), Zimbabwe (\$4.8 billion), Nicaragua (\$4.1 billion), Uganda (\$5.3 billion), and Cambodia (\$4.7 billion), and Jordan (\$11.8 billion).

With wealth on this scale, Bezos has taken a large bite out of the total resources available to human civilization on Planet Earth. He is not just a country unto himself—he is many countries. The sum of \$202 billion is the equivalent of the *combined* national budgets of 118 *entire countries*. This is a personal fortune unprecedented in modern history.

The comedian John Oliver once described the wealth accumulated by Bezos as a “computer glitch in capitalism.” In one sense, this quip captures the irrationality associated with the incomprehensible number of zeros that have been added to his account, as if by some sort of programming error at the

bank. But it is not the case that the Bezos's wealth is developing outside or in opposition to the foreseeable operation of capitalism in the current epoch. On the contrary, his obscene levels of wealth are a particularly concentrated expression of those processes.

According to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index, the world's 500 richest people have accumulated an additional \$809 billion so far this year, increasing their total wealth by around 14 percent. This includes Silicon Valley mogul Elon Musk, whose worth topped \$100 billion on Friday. By comparison, the entire military budget of Russia, which is so often accused of “meddling” and “interfering” with US interests, is around \$50 billion.

“The enormous growth of industry and the remarkably rapid concentration of production in ever-larger enterprises are one of the most characteristic features of capitalism,” Lenin wrote in *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), at a time when the revenues of the giant conglomerates were measured in the mere millions of dollars. Amazon's total market capitalization is now \$1.703 trillion.

Analyzing the latest statistics on the emergence and concentration of monopolies in 1916, Lenin wrote that “a very important feature of capitalism in its highest stage of development is so-called *combination* of production, that is to say, the grouping in a single enterprise of different branches of industry, which either represent the consecutive stages in the processing of raw materials (for example, the smelting of iron ore into pig-iron, the conversion of pig-iron into steel, and then, perhaps, the manufacture of steel goods)—or are auxiliary to one another (for example, the utilisation of scrap, or of by-products, the manufacture of packing materials, etc.).”

Amazon is an expression of this process of “combination” on a scale unimaginable in Lenin's time. “Amazon has been obsessed with vertical integration since its inception,” wrote Enrique Dans, professor at the IE Business School in Madrid, in a blog post. “After establishing very high levels of operational efficiency in its warehouses, Amazon then offered companies the chance to store their products there, as well as using the company's picking and packing services. Finally, Amazon began...developing its own fleets of vans and personnel. Offering its own logistics services is simply another

logical step in Amazon's vertical integration process." As of December 2019, Amazon Logistics was already set to surpass delivery volume of FedEx and UPS by 2022.

In addition to Amazon Logistics, the Bezos-Amazon conglomerate, via numerous subsidiaries, has already extended its tentacles into maritime shipping, comic books, the *Washington Post*, voice-recognizing appliances, fitness watches, cloud storage, health care, banking, communications satellites, home automation, video games, and grocery stores.

Amazon has also been integrating itself into the state apparatus, accepting a \$600 million contract from the Central Intelligence Agency, a \$10 billion contract from the Department of Defense, and supplying facial recognition software (Amazon Rekognition) to police.

This process of monopolization and "combination" has placed Amazon in a position to leverage huge gains from the overall devastation wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. The huge increase in Bezos's wealth during the pandemic is bound up with the surge in the value of Amazon stock, of which he owns around 54 million shares. At the end of July, in particular, Amazon's stock skyrocketed after the company reported second quarter results showing soaring cash flow, sales, and income.

During the second quarter of 2020—representing April, May, and June—Amazon reported an increase of net sales of 40 percent, to \$88.9 billion in the second quarter, compared with \$63.4 billion in second quarter 2019.

The company's operating income swelled to \$5.8 billion, compared with operating income of \$3.1 billion over the same period in 2019, and net income increased to \$5.2 billion (\$10.30 per share), compared with net income of \$2.6 billion (\$5.22 per share) the same period in 2019.

This is the same period—April, May, and June 2020—that corresponded to a historic catastrophe in the United States and around the world, as work ground to a halt amid the pandemic, hundreds of thousands became ill and tens of thousands lost their lives. Meanwhile, tens of millions lost their jobs, and countless small enterprises were bankrupted. As a primary means of safely obtaining essential goods during the pandemic as they sheltered in their homes, tens of millions of people turned to Amazon.

While many workplaces closed their doors during the pandemic, Amazon insisted on operating at full speed without regard for the pandemic. When it came to personal protective and safety equipment, Bezos told Amazon workers they would have to "wait our turn." When tens of thousands of workers refused to show up to the warehouses and risk infection, Amazon announced it would simply hire 175,000 more workers (upon which Bezos congratulated himself as a "job creator").

As of June 22, as the close of the immensely profitably second quarter approached, former Amazon worker Jana Jump had counted 1,573 reported COVID-19 cases among Amazon workers. However, since Amazon refused to disclose the actual

number of infections, she told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "I think this is just the tip of the iceberg."

It is now clearer than ever why Amazon kept workers at their stations during the pandemic without adequate safety measures, even while workers became seriously ill and lost their lives, and even as workers' anger exploded in protests and walkouts.

Amazon's CEO, and all of the Wall Street elites whose fingers were in the pie, made a lot of money. Moreover, amid the smoking ruins of the world economy, Amazon now surveys the scene and sees boundless opportunities for further profit. Opportunities loom in every direction. Bloated with cash, it is poised to conquer new territory, crushing weakened and smaller competitors under its weight.

This state of affairs is not lost on Wall Street, as investors swarm to buy Amazon stock, driving the price (and Bezos's own personal wealth) higher and higher. The dizzying rise in the stock price took it from just over \$3,000 a share by the end of July up to \$3,400 by the end of August.

This is not some kind of aberration within an otherwise healthy capitalist system; it is capitalism itself, in its final period of decline. Or as Lenin put it: "Monopolies, oligarchy, the striving for domination and not for freedom, the exploitation of an increasing number of small or weak nations by a handful of the richest or most powerful nations—all these have given birth to those distinctive characteristics of imperialism which compel us to define it as parasitic or decaying capitalism."

The Democratic Party—one of the twin parties of the financial oligarchy that promotes militarism and war—is not a vehicle for opposition to capitalism or its particular expression in Amazon and Bezos. Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, to cite just one example, raised significant sums for his campaign at a fundraiser in Seattle in November of last year co-hosted by Amazon general counsel David Zapolsky. Tickets ranged between \$1,000 and \$2,800 per person.

The piling up of obscene fortunes by the world's top 500 billionaires in the midst of a global pandemic is a prelude to the social revolution of the proletariat around the world, who will not tolerate indefinitely the homicidal and incompetent policies of the financial oligarchy. Workers in every workplace, school, and industry must form squads and battalions of the rank-and-file, including at Amazon itself, to resist deadly working conditions, fight for collective workers' control, and carry forward the struggle against capitalism and for socialism.

For help setting up a safety committee at your own site, contact the World Socialist Web Site's International Amazon Workers Voice.



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