

Global billionaire wealth tops \$10 trillion as COVID-19 deaths mount

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The collective wealth of the world's 2,189 billionaires has risen to \$10.2 trillion, an increase of nearly \$1.3 trillion in the past three years, according to a new report by the Swiss bank UBS and PricewaterhouseCoopers. The unprecedented surge in wealth takes place amidst a global pandemic that has killed more than one million people worldwide, including more than 215,000 in the United States alone.

The report, "Riding the Storm," is based on data from 43 markets, including interviews with 60 billionaires, accounting for around 98 percent of global billionaire wealth. It sums up the results: "Most of the decade was a time of exceptional prosperity for billionaires regardless of sector..."

The US continues to have the largest concentration of billionaire wealth, accounting for 36 percent of the world's total, or \$3.6 trillion. China ranked second with \$1.6 trillion and saw the largest growth over the decade, by 1,146 percent.

Third was Germany, where billionaire wealth totaled \$594.9 billion, an increase of 175 percent from 2009's \$216.1 billion. While fourth in terms of billionaire wealth at \$467.6 billion, Russia saw the smallest growth by percentage, 80 percent, from \$260.2 billion in 2009 to \$467.6 billion in 2020.

The \$10.2 trillion amassed by less than .0003 percent of the global population is more than the estimated 2020 Gross Domestic Product of every country on the planet except for the US and China. The staggering total hoarded by less than 2,200 people, or about the number of COVID-19 deaths in the US within the last 72 hours, surpasses the previous high of \$8.9 trillion recorded in 2017.

For a household earning the average US median income, it would take over 16 million years to accumulate \$1 trillion, not even enough to cover what

has been collectively usurped from global society in less than three years. Joel Berg, CEO of Hunger Free America, has calculated the cost of ending hunger in the US at \$25 billion, which could be done 400 times over with \$1 trillion.

The billionaires who have increased their wealth the most, according to the authors, are in the "technology, healthcare and industrial sectors," including Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, Tesla CEO Elon Musk, and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg. The report states: "During 2018, 2019 and the first seven months of 2020, technology billionaires' total wealth rose by 42.5% to USD 1.8 trillion, supported by the surge in tech shares."

The surge in technology and medical shares was buoyed by unlimited cash from the Federal Reserve, included as part of the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act passed at the end of March in a near-unanimous vote by both Democrats and Republicans.

This financial bailout made a "big difference" in the fortunes of billionaires, with the authors writing: "Billionaire wealth is loosely correlated with equity markets, due to holdings in listed companies, and a few weeks makes a big difference. From the end of March, governments' huge fiscal and quantitative easing packages drove a recovery in financial markets. By the end of July 2020, billionaire wealth was back above its 2019 level."

Particularly obscene is the surge in wealth of billionaires in the health care industry, in the midst of a deadly global pandemic. The authors write, "Healthcare billionaires' total wealth increased by 50.3% to \$658.6 billion, boosted by a new age of drug discovery and innovations in diagnostics and medical technology, as well as latterly COVID-19 treatments and equipment."

The report adds: "The number of tech billionaires

grew from 68 in 2009 to 234 in 2020, while the number of healthcare billionaires grew from 48 to 167. Tech and healthcare billionaires' total wealth both multiplied by four times – from \$321.3 billion to \$1.3 trillion for tech and from \$120.8 billion to \$482.9 billion for healthcare."

And what are these "pandemic profiteers" spending their fortunes on? To get some idea, Christie's auction house in New York held its latest online auction, "20th Century Evening Sale" live-streamed from the Rockefeller Center in New York on October 6. In one night, the world's wealthiest spent over \$340 million on 59 different 20th and 21st century art pieces. The auction also featured the most expensive dinosaur skeleton ever sold, a fossilized *Tyrannosaurus rex*, for \$27.5 million.

The massive concentration of wealth is a decades' long and bipartisan policy of redistribution to the rich. The Institute for Policy Studies measured the tax obligations of America's billionaires as a percentage of their wealth between 1980 and 2018 and found that it had decreased 79 percent. Over the last 20 years, the growth in US billionaire wealth has been 200 times greater than the growth in median wealth.

While the billionaires are richer than ever, the response of the ruling class to the pandemic has produced a massive social catastrophe for the working class. In the United States, tens of millions are unemployed and being cut off of all benefits, facing poverty, homelessness and hunger.

Earlier reports found that the 643 wealthiest Americans increased their wealth by a staggering \$845 billion between March 18 and September 15. During that same time, over 62 million people in the US applied for unemployment benefits. An estimated 10.5 million jobs were eliminated, with major companies such as Disney, United Airlines, and Cineworld announcing tens of thousands additional layoffs in the last week.



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