

Pfizer announces windfall profits as low-income countries denied vaccines

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Five months after the United States first granted emergency use authorization to the first COVID-19 vaccine, the vaccination drive throughout the developing world is a disaster.

Wealthy countries have received more than 87 percent of COVID-19 vaccines distributed worldwide, while the “low-income” former colonial countries have received less than 1 percent, according to the World Health Organization.

In Africa, less than 1 percent of the population has received even a single dose of the vaccine. In India, the epicenter of the global pandemic, where crematoria are running nonstop, and people are dying in the streets, less than 10 percent of the population has received a single dose.

Despite the global vaccination disaster, the vaccine rollout has been a bonanza for US drug maker Pfizer, which announced Tuesday it had beat its revenue forecast by 73 percent.

By pricing the vaccine approximately 20 percent above the cost to develop and produce it, the company logged nearly a billion dollars in profits from the vaccine in the first quarter alone. Pfizer expects to sell \$26 billion worth of vaccines this year, bringing in about \$5 billion in profit.

Pfizer’s stock price has surged nearly 50 percent since last year, while its German partner BioNTech went from a startup to a multibillion-dollar company in just months, generating billions of dollars in earnings for wealthy shareholders.

The stock price of Pfizer’s competitor Moderna has more than quadrupled over the past 12 months, and its CEO Stéphane Bancel is now worth nearly \$5 billion.

The vast enrichment of these private corporations and their shareholders is made possible through massive investments by governments, particularly that of the

United States, which spent over \$10 billion helping to develop the vaccines monetized by Pfizer and Moderna.

The mRNA vaccines developed by these two companies are based on a key discovery of the National Institute of Health’s (NIH) Vaccine Research Center, which holds the patent for how the virus’s spike protein is stabilized in the vaccine.

While several companies have licensed the NIH’s patent, Moderna makes use of the NIH discovery without paying any royalties.

In other words, without the NIH’s patent, there would be no Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. Yet the US government has declined to use what scientists have called a vast amount of leverage over vaccine makers to ensure an equitable global distribution.

“For NIH to not have ensured global access is a dereliction of their duty to protect the public health of the United States,” James Krellenstein, executive director and co-founder of PrEP4All, told the *Washington Post*.

Commenting on how “Rich Countries Signed Away a Chance to Vaccinate the World,” the *New York Times* wrote: “By partnering with drug companies, Western leaders bought their way to the front of the line. But they also ignored years of warnings—and explicit calls from the World Health Organization—to include contract language that would have guaranteed doses for poor countries or encouraged companies to share their knowledge and the patents they control.”

The World Health Organization has called on governments to waive vaccine patents, allowing all global pharmaceutical manufacturing capacity to be used to put an end to the pandemic. As WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus wrote:

Of the 225 million vaccine doses that have been administered so far, the vast majority have been in a handful of rich and vaccine producing countries, while most low- and middle-income countries watch and wait. A me-first approach might serve short-term political interests, but it is self-defeating.

Waiving patent rights would allow any manufacturer in the world to make cheap, generic copies of existing vaccines, which are desperately needed throughout the world.

But this move has so far been blocked by the United States, Britain and the European Union.

The US media has waged a hysterical campaign against attacks on the “intellectual property” rights of the drug makers. On Monday the *Washington Post* published an editorial entitled, “A patent-free ‘people’s vaccine’ is not the best way to help poor countries,” opposing any inroads on the profit prerogatives of the pharmaceutical giants.

Making vaccines more freely and equally available by “stripping away their intellectual property now could discourage future innovation.”

The *Post* obviously takes its readers for fools. The “innovations” monetized by these companies were made by public laboratories and public researchers. The only thing “private” about them is the profits and the rights to manufacture and distribute the vaccines. According to the *Post*, the US must maintain absolute control over the production and distribution of a medically necessary vaccine against a global pandemic, which has now killed more than 3.2 million people worldwide.

The Biden administration has thus far refused to take any measures to waive patents for COVID-19 vaccines. Anthony Fauci, the president’s chief medical advisor, said in an interview Monday that he “respect[s] the needs of the companies to protect their interests to keep them in business.”

This is an absurdity. What is called “intellectual property” is just a euphemism for endangering the lives of the world’s population for the enrichment of the capitalist oligarchy. Millions of lives are in danger! All of society’s resources must be mobilized to save as many lives as possible. The profits of the oligarchs be

damned!

On March 13, 2020, the *World Socialist Web Site* published a perspective entitled, “Capitalism is at war with society.” Nothing demonstrates this reality so much as the enrichment of the pharmaceutical giants as the masses of India gasp for air.

The total indifference to the majority of the world’s population by the capitalist governments is a microcosm of the capitalist social order, which subordinates the needs of society to the enrichment of the financial oligarchy and the predatory interests of imperialism. This is why the fight to contain the COVID-19 pandemic is inseparable from the fight to put an end to the capitalist social order and replace it with socialism.



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