

COVID pandemic spawns vaccine billionaires amid global mass death

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Profits reaped from the production of COVID-19 vaccines have spawned nine new billionaires with a combined wealth of \$19.3 billion. They have likewise fattened the portfolios of eight existing billionaires with fortunes tied to corporations involved in vaccine production by \$32 billion.

These staggering figures, exposing an obscene accumulation of private wealth in the midst of global mass death and immiseration, were released in a report produced by an alliance of aid organizations in advance of a G20 Global Health Summit.

The report estimates that the newly minted fortunes of Moderna and Pfizer CEOs and investors-turned-billionaires could pay to vaccinate all 780 million people in the so-called “low-income countries” 1.3 times over.

The \$32 billion raked in by the pre-existing billionaires over the past year would pay for the full vaccination of all 1.4 billion people in India. The country is the new epicenter of the COVID-19 catastrophe, where infections have doubled in the past two months. Recorded daily deaths have risen to 4,000, overwhelming the health care system and overflowing crematoriums and burial grounds with bodies.

The new vaccine billionaires include Stéphane Bancel, Moderna’s CEO (\$4.3 billion); Ugur Sahin, CEO and co-founder of BioNTech (\$4 billion); Timothy Springer, an immunologist and founding investor of Moderna (\$2.2 billion), and Noubar Afeyan, Moderna’s chairman (\$1.9 billion).

The foundation for the immense wealth amassed by these individuals was laid by government-funded research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and university laboratories, along with the outlay of some \$10.5 billion in public funding for the development and production of vaccines.

The private appropriation of socially produced scientific achievements has allowed Moderna, Pfizer-BioNTech and

other corporations to jack up the price of the vaccines at least 20 percent over their production costs and secure monopoly control that bars countries desperately needing vaccines from making cheaper generics.

On top of that, the fortunes of the big pharma-biotech billionaires have been swelled by a soaring stock market underpinned by huge government cash infusions. Moderna’s share prices, for example, have quadrupled over the past year.

The Moderna and Pfizer CEOs and investors may be among the most direct, but are hardly the only, “pandemic profiteers.” As the annual report by *Forbes* magazine spelled out last month, the collective wealth of the world’s billionaires surged by more than 60 percent last year, from \$8 trillion to \$13.1 trillion. This, as the pandemic and its socio-economic effects have wiped out at least 255 million full-time jobs globally over the past year and will, according to the World Bank, push another 150 million people into extreme poverty in 2021.

While the production of vaccines has yielded immense fortunes for a tiny layer within the ruling oligarchy, the vast majority of the world’s population have been denied access to vaccinations. Distribution of vaccines has been hobbled by nationalism, profiteering and the outright sabotage by the major imperialist powers of any coordinated international campaign to combat the pandemic.

The corporations and finance capital have ferociously resisted calls for the World Trade Organization to waive patents on COVID-19 vaccines, effectively breaking the production monopolies. The companies and their lobbyists have insisted that the waiver would be ineffective because it would take months to transfer technology and develop manufacturing capacity in other countries. They have been making this argument for months, while the people of these countries are dying, deprived of the vaccines that could save their lives.

At the opening of the World Health Organization's 74th World Health Assembly on Monday, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus noted that the number of coronavirus cases so far this year has surpassed those for all of 2020 and that, given existing trends, the number of COVID-19 deaths will outstrip 2020's total death toll within the next three weeks.

In a report released last week, the WHO estimated that three times more people may have died from the pandemic than is reflected in official figures. This would put the real global death toll at over 10 million.

Pointing to the vast inequality in global vaccine distribution, Ghebreyesus declared that "the ongoing vaccine crisis is a scandalous inequity that is perpetuating the pandemic." He noted that 75 percent of the world's vaccines have been administered in just 10 countries.

"There is no diplomatic way to say it. A small group of countries that make and buy the majority of the world's vaccines control the fate of the rest of the world," he said, while pointing to the "vastly inadequate" doses supplied to COVAX, the global agency created to supposedly assure equitable vaccine distribution.

The stated aim of COVAX was to distribute two billion doses by the end of 2021. As of early this month, it had managed to distribute just 70 million doses to 125 countries, less than enough to vaccinate 1 percent of their combined populations even once.

Africa, with 17 percent of the world's population, accounts for just 1.5 percent of vaccinations worldwide. COVAX has been able to distribute just 300,000 doses for the 15 million people of Somalia, 355,000 doses for 23 million in Niger and 175,000 for 6.8 million in Libya. In the Middle East, just 336,000 have been provided for 39 million Iraqis, 364,800 for 43 million Algerians and 164,000 for 4.7 million Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Similar figures prevail in impoverished countries in Latin America, where Bolivia, for example, has received just 421,000 doses for its 12 million people; and in Asia, where the Philippines has gotten just 2.6 million doses for a population of 108 million.

COVAX was deprived of vaccines from the outset, and its mission of equitable distribution was sabotaged as the major imperialist powers, with Washington in the lead, signed deals with Pfizer, Moderna and other companies bypassing the international agency to buy up the lion's share of vaccines for themselves.

The dire effects of this vaccine nationalism have been exacerbated further as the Indian government has responded to the uncontrolled surge of the pandemic that

its own policies fueled by ordering the country's Serum Institute (SII), the world's largest vaccine manufacturer, to halt all exports. As a result, tens of millions of health care workers in the world's poorest countries who had received a first dose of the vaccine will not be getting a second.

The US and the European imperialist powers have responded to the crisis with promises of vaccines that amount to less than a drop in the ocean. The Biden administration has pledged 80 million doses, and the European Union 100 million.

With new records of global infections and deaths being set daily, this response appears not only heartless, but irrational and indeed lunatic. There will be no end to the global coronavirus pandemic on a national basis. As the WHO's Ghebreyesus warned Monday, "No country should assume it is out of the woods, no matter its vaccination rate." With the virus spreading uncontrollably in India, Brazil and other countries, the threat remains that new vaccine-resistant variants will emerge.

The criminal indifference of capitalist governments and ruling classes to the burning need for a global vaccination campaign is in sync with their entire homicidal response to the pandemic. From the outset, they have subordinated the defense of human life to the profit interests of the banks and corporations and a ruling oligarchy that has concentrated unfathomable wealth in its hands.

The pandemic has laid bare the necessity of abolishing the capitalist nation-state system, expropriating the wealth accumulated by the financial oligarchy and ending private ownership of the means of production as the preconditions for defending the rights and interests of working people, including life itself.

Workers all over the world are entering into struggles fueled by the social catastrophe created by capitalism's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These struggles must be armed with a socialist and internationalist program, uniting workers across national boundaries in a common fight for a society that places human needs over the profits and wealth of the oligarchs and advances the international unity of the working class against capitalism's drive to war.



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