

The Billionaire Space Race

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7 July 2021

This month, the world is watching with bated breath as Amazon's Jeff Bezos and Virgin's Richard Branson dash toward the finish line in the space race of the 21st century. Since the dawn of time, man has looked to the sky and wondered: Who will be the first billionaire in space? The wait is now over.

Never mind the fact that 250 million more people live in extreme poverty than in early 2020, according to the World Bank, or that 1.5 *billion* informal workers living on the margins of society lost most or all of their income last year. This week, in some unknown hospital located somewhere on this planet, the 4 millionth person died of the coronavirus.

The pandemic has shown that the capitalist class is hostile to harnessing scientific advancement to meet the needs of the human race here on Earth. What better time for two men to pour billions of dollars into plans to launch themselves into space (actually, sub-orbital flight) to impress shareholders and have a bit of fun?

A substantial layer of the financial aristocracy unironically agrees. The same Scrooges who hoard their wealth in offshore tax havens so they don't have to chip in for social programs were desperate to outbid one another for a seat on an upcoming billionaire space flight. At a recent auction, one poor sucker paid \$29.7 million for a ticket aboard Bezos's Blue Origin flight.

The *Wall Street Journal* described a gripping, absolutely ripping moment at the auction house: "Bidding opened at \$4.9 million and rose quickly to \$10 million before four participants competed to ultimately raise the price to \$28 million. A 6 percent buyer's commission is added to the winning bid, taking the final cost to \$29.7 million. Blue Origin said 7,600 bidders from 159 countries registered for the event."

Team Bezos and Team Branson are engaged in petty sniping over who will be the "real" first billionaire out of the atmosphere. It isn't exactly Kennedy and Khrushchev.

Branson brags that he will depart sooner, but Bezos claims that Branson is too chicken to travel as far out as he. A Bezos spokesman told the *New York Times*, "We wish [Branson] a great and safe flight, but they're not flying above the Karman line and it's a very different experience." The Karman line is located 62 miles above Earth and is used by scientists to mark the line between Earth's atmosphere and outer space.

Amazon workers have many guesses as to why Bezos is so eager to make it into space. There are no taxes out there, surely, and since a day on the Moon is the equivalent of 27 here on Earth, that means a worker's 14-hour shift would be the equivalent of 380 hours of labor, and try making *that* without a bathroom break! Or maybe Bezos figures if he sets up shop on the far side of the Moon no pesky reporters will be able to expose the sweat shop conditions that exist inside.

On the other hand, what is not for Bezos to like here on Earth? Democratic and Republican politicians line up to hand him billions in subsidies, and there are hundreds of administrative judges and doctors ready to help deny workers' compensation claims.

Actually, Bezos himself explained what the venture is really about in a 2019 interview with CNBC:

We send things up into space, but they are all made on Earth. Eventually it will be much cheaper and simpler to make really complicated things, like microprocessors and everything, in space and then send those highly complex manufactured objects back down to Earth, so that we don't have the big factories and pollution generating industries that make those things now on Earth. And Earth can be zoned residential.

In other words, Bezos' *actual* desire is factories on the Moon and on Mars, where presumably all the workers will be forced to live, since nobody working at Amazon is going to have the time or the energy to make the commute back to Earth.

It seems that all Earthlings are happy about Bezos and Branson leaving the planet. Over 150,000 people signed a petition on change.org titled "To the proletariat: Do not allow Jeff Bezos to return to Earth." The petitioners explain, "Billionaires should not exist ... on earth, or in space, but should they decide the latter, they should stay there."

We at the *World Socialist Web Site* wish only that there was extra room in those space pods for Henry Kissinger.

The fantastic scientific gains of recent years, as expressed in such "giant leaps" as the 2012 Mars rover, only show the potential for harnessing the technological and intellectual capacities of mankind to meet human need. The rover, "Curiosity," is still rolling across the surface of Mars, gathering data and samples that promise to open up new pathways to the understanding of our Solar System. It is an insult to humanity's remarkable drive for scientific development that such advances are now used, under capitalism, to satisfy the megalomania of two individuals who pass on what they learn to the weapons manufacturers and intelligence agencies.

But there is something more than megalomania in Bezos' and Branson's strange desire to personally travel into space. In his 2016 novel *Zero K*, Don DeLillo captures something of the instability of an aristocratic layer that knows it is destroying the planet and sitting on a social powder keg.

The novel features an aging hedge fund manager who joins an elite group of billionaires and statesmen who cryogenically freeze themselves, clinging to the possibility of eternal life. One group member explains to the oligarchs that burying their frozen bodies deep down in the Earth will make them safe from revolution, war or climate disaster, and allow them to live until a time when they can rule again:

Your situation, those few of you on the verge of the journey toward rebirth. You are completely outside the narrative of what we

refer to as ~~his~~ history. You are about to become, each of you, a single life in touch only with yourself. That world, the one above, is being lost to the systems. To the transparent networks that slowly occlude the flow of all those aspects of nature and character that distinguish humans from elevator buttons and doorbells.

Like the French and Russian aristocracies swept away by the revolutions of 1789 and 1917, an entire social layer comprised of Bezoses and Bransons see itself as belonging to a class of people who are "out of this world." Their interests are directly hostile to those of the broad masses of the world's population, who comprise the working class, whom they exploit to acquire astronomical wealth. If Jeff Bezos makes it into space, it will only be on the backs of the Amazon workers he exploited and ground up to make profit.

Only a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism can sweep social parasites and exploiters like these from atop the commanding heights of the economy and harness the immense technological advances of humankind to serve the interests of billions of people.



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