

After space flight, “Moneybags” Bezos acknowledges workers “paid for all this”

David Walsh
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On Tuesday, Jeff Bezos of Amazon fame, the world’s richest individual, flew briefly into space, along with three other companions.

The American media establishment, by and large, swooned at the vision, celebrating the “historic space trip.” The various pundits, sycophants in the pay of the oligarchy, would congratulate Bezos were he to prove that one and one equaled two (“How innovative!” “What a breakthrough!”).

Unremarkably, the *Washington Post*, which Bezos owns, ran an opinion piece Monday headlined, “The billionaires’ space efforts may seem tone-deaf, but they’re important milestones.” The column argued, “You may not love them, but the billionaires behind these private-sector efforts have both the resources and the impatience with government bureaucracy to put Americans back in space—where they belong.”

The WSWs has thoroughly debunked this false and self-serving argument, pointing out that “far from the plutocrats advancing the exploration of space, their activities represent a significant backward step compared even to the scientific, technical and social achievements of 60 years ago, let alone the colossal society-wide effort that led to the Moon landings in 1969–72.”

Right-wing commentators, meanwhile, attempted defensively, nervously to make the case that the flight of NS-16 represented the triumph of “American individualism, ambition, perseverance, technology, creativity and entrepreneurship.” Veteran reactionary John Podhoretz, former speechwriter for Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, asserted ominously in the *New York Post* (the personal property of another billionaire, Rupert Murdoch) that “Bezos’ flight has now solidified a future that will feature private-sector exploration of the universe beyond the Earth and sea.”

However, by and large, the vision of Bezos buying his way just outside the stratosphere inspired widespread indifference or open revulsion. These comments in response to a video of the brief flight were typical: “It’s a shame they had to bring him back,” “Amazon goes to space but my

package still takes a month,” “Watch as the man that is destroying the business world spends more in a personal extravagance in 10 minutes than massive numbers of his employees will make in their entire lives together!,” “Just give your workers better wages and working conditions, I’ll be more impressed.”

Without a trace of sincerity, on the other hand, various Democratic Party politicians attempted to capitalize on the general public hostility to Bezos’s exploit by offering meaningless criticisms. The gist of the comments was summed up in Massachusetts Rep. Katherine Clark’s suggestion that it was “time for billionaires to pay their fair share.”

Predictably, Senators Bernie Sanders (Vermont) and Elizabeth Warren (Massachusetts) and New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez chimed in along the same lines. All these individuals are defenders of the profit system that has produced the malignant social inequality and allowed Bezos to pile up more than \$200 billion in wealth at a time of massive human suffering. Their comments, as they were intended to do, committed these cheap demagogues to absolutely nothing.

Bezos is a financial and social parasite of the first order. In May, the media reported that he was purchasing “a 417-foot long yacht that spans several decks and boasts three enormous masts.” The vessel also boasts a “support yacht” complete with a helipad. “The vessel, known only as Project 271, reportedly costs roughly \$500 million.” In February 2020, Bezos bought the Warner estate in Beverly Hills for \$165 million, “the most expensive home sale in [California] state history.” Some months later, Bezos bought “a \$10 million home that shares a hedge line with the Warner estate.”

According to Bezos, Blue Origin, the aerospace manufacturer and suborbital spaceflight services company he founded, has already sold nearly \$100 million worth of tickets for future passenger flights. In a public auction, a seat on the first flight fetched \$28 million.

One commentator (at *Mic*) noted that, taking Amazon

workers median pay into account, the average worker earned about \$2.75 “during the 11 minutes that their former CEO left Earth,” while the latter increased his wealth by as much as \$1.57 million.

The claims that the Amazon founder’s space flight was pioneering, and that he is obsessed with climate change and “saving the world” need to be seen in their rightful context.

Nonetheless, something revealing did emerge out of the sordid excursion July 20. After Bezos’s return to Earth on Tuesday, at a press conference, Bezos explained that he wanted “to thank a few people.” The former Amazon CEO first paid tribute to the engineers at Blue Origin and the residents of Van Horn, Texas, where he owns hundreds of thousands of acres.

Bezos then observed, “I also want to thank every Amazon employee and every Amazon customer because you guys paid for all this. So seriously, for every Amazon customer out there and every Amazon employee, thank you from the bottom of my heart very much. It’s very appreciated.”

The words drew criticism, even in the subservient American media, for their bizarre inappropriateness and provocative character. In 1682, when the Palace of Versailles was sufficiently commodious (with some of its furniture made of solid silver) so that Louis XIV and his family could move in, did the king express gratitude to the French citizenry in similar fashion: “After all, you paid for all this”?

Bezos’s comment conjured up a picture of Amazon employees, in an act of collective generosity, contentedly pitching in to send their chief into space. However, there is very little that is genuinely voluntary about going to work for Amazon. That more than one million people labor for the giant firm is more a commentary on their economic desperation than anything else. “I work for Amazon” is something that company employees in the US and elsewhere often angrily, bitterly spit out, occasionally interrupted by an expletive, as though protesting a jail sentence.

The WSWS has extensively documented the backbreaking conditions at Amazon facilities. A comment at RevealNews in 2019 reported on injury records amassed “from 23 of the company’s 110 fulfillment centers nationwide. Taken together, the rate of serious injuries for those facilities was more than double the national average for the warehousing industry: 9.6 serious injuries per 100 full-time workers in 2018, compared with an industry average that year of 4.”

The report noted that “several former workers said they had to break the safety rules to keep up. They would jump or stretch to reach a top rack instead of using a stepladder. They would twist and bend over to grab boxes instead of taking time to squat and lift with their legs. They would hoist extra-heavy items alone to avoid wasting time getting

help. They had to, they said, or they would lose their jobs. So they took the risk.”

“Then, if they got hurt,” the report continued, “they would lose their jobs anyway. Even some workers who loved the pace, camaraderie and compensation at Amazon’s fulfillment centers told Reveal that they were quickly replaced as soon as their bodies broke down.”

Bezos was speaking the truth when he referred to Amazon workers being responsible for his entire fortune. They wear out their bodies and destroy their health to generate his wealth. Or, as another critic (at *Vice*) argued graphically, “Bezos was able to go to space because Amazon pushes workers so hard that they miscarry, pass out in heat waves, work ten-and-a-half-hour graveyard shifts called ‘megacycles,’ piss in bottles and defecate in bags, and much more.”

Everything here is a confirmation of Karl Marx’s analysis of the capitalist system, made more than a century and a half ago. In *Capital, Volume One*, Marx explained that in order “to be able to extract value from the consumption of a commodity, our friend, Moneybags, must be so lucky as to find, within the sphere of circulation, in the market, a commodity, whose use-value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption, therefore, is itself an embodiment of labour, and, consequently, a creation of value. The possessor of money does find on the market such a special commodity in capacity for labour or labour-power.”

“Moneybags” Bezos and the rest of the American elite are confirming Marx’s analysis all the way down the line. Through their brutality and exploitation, along with their obscene consumption and antics, they are teaching workers to hate capitalism and the capitalists, thus hastening the end of their own system. In the workers, explained the founders of socialism, Marx and Friedrich Engels, “What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own gravediggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.”



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