Social inequality in Germany: Number of billionaires rises to 249

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Rarely has social polarisation been so tangible. While poverty is growing, at the top end of the scale the number of super-rich is on the rise. The annual ranking by *Manager Magazin* shows that the number of billionaires in Germany has recently risen by 23 to 249.

Manager Magazin has published a list of the 500 richest Germans and calculated that their private assets and wealth in 2023 amounted to a record €1.1 trillion, an increase of €53 billion compared to the previous year.

This sum, €1.1 trillion, is almost two-and-a-half times the federal budget for the same year. This sum could be used to build thousands of schools and hospitals, renovate the country's ailing rail network and balance the nursing care insurance deficit. It could also raise the wages of railway workers, nursing staff and other public employees who are continually forced to work for low wages.

In addition to the 249 billionaires in the country, there are over half a million millionaires, almost 3,000 of whom have now increased their financial wealth to over $100 million, as the Global Wealth Report 2022 has shown. This layer, a tiny minority of about 0.6 percent of the population, own 45 percent of the country's total wealth.

For workers, on the other hand, the situation in Germany, is becoming increasingly precarious, as is the case worldwide. More and more people are slipping into low-wage work and poverty, while inflation is rising once again. One in five children and more than one in four young people live in poverty. While the government is intent on escalating its policy of imperialist war, it is allowing civil infrastructure to fall into disrepair and is arrogantly attacking the most socially vulnerable. In its 2024 war budget, the basic income allowances for the poor was cut by €5.5 billion.

Manager Magazin's list of the super-rich is revealing. Among the top 10 are heirs and major shareholders of the same corporations that are currently enforcing mass layoffs, wage cuts and plant closures.

The Porsche family, for example, is ranked eighth richest with €19.3 billion, while mass layoffs and the closure of entire plants have been announced at Volkswagen and many contract workers have already been laid off. The continuity of the rich since the fascist era is also telling. Several of the richest families—Porsche, Klatten/Quandt, Schaeffler, Reimann, etc.—owe their wealth to the involvement of their ancestors in the Nazi regime.

The richest German is Dieter Schwarz, founder of the supermarket chains Lidl and Kaufland, with €43.7 billion. In second place are Susanne Klatten and Stefan Quandt, the BMW heirs, with €34.4 billion, followed by the Merck family, who possess €33.8 billion. The Reimann family (€31.3 billion) is followed by Klaus Michael Kühne, logistics entrepreneur and hotelier, with €29 billion. The Albrecht/Heister families of Aldi Süd (€27 billion), Henkel (€24.6 billion), Porsche, and Albrecht of Aldi Nord (€18.9 billion) come in 6th to 10th place. The 10 richest have a combined fortune of €262 billion.

The Würth family, with €13 billion, is also among the super-rich. Würth Elektronik, which is one of the most important auto suppliers, is in the process of closing its site in Schopfheim, with 300 employees.

Other auto suppliers that have been enforcing layoffs, short-time work and plant closures for many years include Schaeffler and Continental, which are largely owned by the Schaeffler family. With €7.7 billion, it ranks 25th. It is closely followed by the Thiele family from Knorr Bremse (€7.5 billion), the major shareholder in Lufthansa. During the coronavirus

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lockdown, the Lufthansa Group summarily cut thousands of pilots, flight attendants and ground staff and cut wages.

Other super-rich persons are so-called tech billionaires, above all the founders and owners of SAP, Hasso Plattner (€16.9 billion), Dietmar Hopp (€15.1 billion) and the Klaus Tschira family's inherited fortune (€5.5 billion). The SAP group is also in the process of cutting 10,000 jobs.

At the same time, low-wage work is spreading, and poverty is rampant. Shortly after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the government—then still under Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and Finance Minister Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party, SPD)—sent workers back to their workplaces despite the risk of infection. At the same time, it stuffed the pockets of the rich with its multi-billion coronavirus emergency package. Scholz is now chancellor, and the coronavirus crisis was followed by the war in Ukraine and, most recently, the war in the Middle East.

Immediately after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the coalition government in Berlin decided to put all its eggs in the war basket. Chancellor Scholz launched a €100 billion special fund for the German armed forces. Finance Minister Christian Lindner (Free Democratic Party, FDP) presented the government's austerity and war budget, and Economics Minister Robert Habeck (Greens) appointed himself "armaments industry minister."

The immediate consequence of the war policy was a severe energy crisis and a trade war which has put massive pressure on German industry. Extensive wage cuts are being negotiated with the help of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB), which is firmly in the camp of imperialism, based on its nationalist "Standort" policy. Layoffs are being enforced and factories closed. In the automotive and supplier industry alone, this affects hundreds of thousands of workers.

The working class faces the dual threat of social devastation and the danger of world war. The only party that represents and fights for a viable socialist perspective against this threat is the Socialist Equality Party (SGP), which belongs to the Fourth International. In a few days, the SGP will explain its perspective at a meeting at the Frankfurt Book Fair. Under the slogan "Back to the Future: War, Fascism and Class Struggle in the 21st Century," David North will speak at 4:00 p.m. on October 19 at the Gallus House in Frankfurt.

In 2018, before the outbreak of the pandemic and current wars, David North wrote the following:

> All the contradictions exposed by Marx now manifest themselves with unprecedented intensity. The accumulation of wealth is accompanied by an extraordinary degree of social inequality. A few dozen people in the world control and dispose of more wealth than three-quarters of the planet's entire population. The real state of capitalist society exceeds in its injustices, its fixation with the mindless accumulation of personal riches, the clumsiest of populist caricatures. In every critical social sphere—education, health care, housing, and a secure old age—capitalist society is moving backward, renouncing even the limited reforms of the past century.

These words are fully confirmed by the deepening social polarisation, the growth of the super-rich and the widening gap between rich and poor.

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