**Rising income inequality**

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Monday, Jan 24, 2022

Reports on rising inequality, exploitation, poverty and hunger point to the fact that we live in a world dominated by the super-rich and big businesses. The latest Oxfam report on inequality tells us the same.

We are living in a world of billionaires where the likes of Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Warren Buffet and the Ambanis own more wealth than the world’s poorest four billion people; a world where corporations like Apple are worth more than the GDP of countries like India, Brazil, Russia, Indonesia and Nigeria – the US-based asset management firm ‘Blackstone’ now manages assets worth more than $10 trillion; and a world where the rich are getting richer at an unprecedented pace with a simultaneous increase in poverty and hunger. The divide between the rich and the poor is increasing at a shocking pace.

The staggering wealth amassed by the super-rich is the result of the unbridled exploitation of the working class and natural resources. This wealth has been created through low wages, worse working and living conditions, social spending cuts, and the concentration of the factors of production in the hands of the capitalist class.

Oxfam’s Executive Director Gabriela Bucher correctly pointed out, following the release of the report on rising global inequality, that “billionaires have had a terrific pandemic. Central banks pumped trillions of dollars into financial markets to save the economy, yet much of that has ended up lining the pockets of billionaires riding a stock market boom.

“Inequality at such pace and scale is happening by choice, not chance. Not only have our economic structures made all of us less safe against this pandemic, they are actively enabling those who are already extremely rich and powerful to exploit this crisis for their own profit.”

Inequality has already risen to unprecedented levels as a result of neoliberal economic policies, and it has become a new normal in 21st century capitalism. It seems that capitalist ruling classes around the world have accepted rising inequality as a norm. They find it impossibly hard to address the issue of rising inequality due to staunch resistance and opposition by the elite and billionaires to the measures necessary to bring down or eliminate this inequality.

These measures and policies include increasing taxes on the rich, the imposition of a wealth tax, wage increases and social spending to address the issue of inequality and falling living standards. They oppose the role of the state in the redistribution of wealth in society. Any state intervention in the economy and the redistribution of wealth through progressive taxation and a social security net is vehemently opposed.

In the last four decades, the global elite and ruling class have structured the economy in such a way that it favours capital over labour. They have created conditions which aggressively support capital whenever it faces resistance from wage labourers and sections of society. This is ‘structural inequality’ and it needs structural changes in the economy to make it more favourable for wage labourers and make our world more equal, fair and just.

Oxfam releases its annual report on inequality every year in January just days before the meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland. The WEF is an annual gathering of capitalist leaders, billionaires, government officials and representatives of ruling classes around the world to discuss the challenges faced by the capitalist system. World leaders make speeches to express their concerns regarding rising inequality, falling living standards, climate change and other issues. But they hardly follow their words with actions to address these key issues facing humanity.

Every year, the Oxfam report reveals how our world has become more unfair, unjust and unequal compared to the previous year. This year’s report is no different, showing how billionaires added $5 trillion to their wealth during the Covid-19 pandemic. The report was released ahead of the World Economic Forum’s virtual event ‘The Davos Agenda 2022’.

The Oxfam report has once again revealed that the wealth of billionaires rose even more quickly during the pandemic than it did in the previous 14 years. The super-rich added $5 trillion to their wealth in the last two years of the Covid-19 pandemic. The world’s 10 richest men doubled their wealth from $700 billion to $1.5 trillion, at an average rate of $1.3 billion per day in the last two years.

The billionaire class amassed this wealth when millions lost their jobs and fell into poverty and hunger, and when unemployment increased to its highest level. During this period, wages also witnessed a sharp decline.

Oxfam has called this inequality ‘economic violence’ and added that this inequality is contributing to the death of 21,000 people every day due to lack of access to healthcare, gender-based violence, hunger, and climate change.

Oxfam says that the total wealth of billionaires jumped from $8.6 trillion in March 2020 to $13.8 trillion in November 2021 – a bigger increase than in the previous 14 years combined. It suggests that governments should tax the gains made by the super-rich during the pandemic and use the money to fund healthcare systems, pay for vaccines, fight discrimination and address the climate crisis.

Without a radical change in economic structures and policies, global inequality will continue to rise. Every year, we will find out that a handful of the super-rich has become wealthier at the expense of a vast majority of the world’s population. We need a progressive economic agenda to address rising inequality.

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