

For the 9th Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections

WHY IS BILL GATES GIVING AWAY BILLIONS?

by John Spritzler

Bill Gates, the richest man on earth and our conference's keynote speaker, is now the poster child of capitalism. Newsweek put Bill and his wife Melinda on its cover with the headline: "They've Given Away \$24 Billion. Here's Why." Inside we're told they want to "bridge the most fundamental gap separating the poor countries of the world from the rich ones: the gap in human health." Is this really true?

Or is Bill Gates trying to ensure that the capitalist system, which makes his enormous wealth and power possible, maintains enough moral legitimacy in the eyes of people around the world to survive? The morality of capitalism **B** self-interest, inequality and competition **B** rules in corporate-controlled institutions, but not in the hearts of ordinary people including most scientists like ourselves. Most people are not trying to monopolize an industry and become a billionaire. Despite all of the pressure from capitalism to put self-interest first, most people try, sometimes with greater and sometimes with less success, to create relations with their family, friends, neighbors and co-workers based on equality, trust and commitment to each other. Apologists for capitalist inequality, who say it's the profit motive that creates wealth and scientific progress, are wrong. Jonas Salk didn't do it to get rich, nor do the creators of free linux software, or the millions of ordinary people who create all the wealth and positive human relations in society. People resist capitalist values implicitly. Were this not so, society would indeed be a jungle of selfishness and distrust, which is clearly not the case.

"IT'S A VERY DANGEROUS SITUATION"

The world's elite know their grip on power is fragile. Earlier this month Gates told his fellow elite at the

World Economic Forum, "People who feel the world is tilted against them will spawn the kind of hatred that is very dangerous for us all." Last year our celebrity keynote speaker, Harvard professor of international trade Jeffrey Sachs, warned us about "a circumstance where millions of people are dying before our eyes from conditions that could be treatable with new products and pharmaceuticals that could save their lives, *and they know it. It's a very dangerous situation* that we're in from all aspects **B** ethical, public health, *economic and political...* We have recognition among our national intelligence council, Central Intelligence Agency...that this pandemic fundamentally threatens U.S. interests...The pharmaceutical companies themselves I think are beginning to understand the *risks...* They are the target of a growing amount of activism..."

Those who worry about capitalism's survival are alarmed at growing numbers of people around the world realizing that capitalism **B** like communism **B** offers nothing but a grim and bleak future to most people; that it is a system by which elites pit working people against each other in dog-eat-dog competition to control them; that it attacks ordinary people's efforts to make a more equal and democratic world where people help **B** not compete against **B** each other; and that it celebrates the inequality that Bill Gates embodies. They are afraid of people rising up against this inhumane system.

Like Bill Gates, Sachs called for more money to be spent on AIDS for Africans. But his career makes it clear that his concern is protecting capitalism. Sachs achieved fame when he served as the chief economic advisor to Russia's President Boris Yeltsin from 1991 to 1994, where he advocated "shock therapy" to create market capitalism in Russia by making the

mines and factories the personal property of former high ranking communists and other businessmen, while employees went unpaid and starvation conditions emerged for the first time since World War II. An article in *Harvard Magazine*, 1996, reported that, "Russians are dying at an unprecedented rate. Between 1990 and 1994 the country's death rate increased by 40 percent, from 11.2 to 15.7 deaths per 1,000 people. Male life expectancy fell from 63.8 years to 57.7 years, and female life expectancy from 74.3 to 71.3 years." Sachs is so callously pro-capitalist that he could write in the January 13, 1990 *The Economist*, while "advising" the Polish government, "Western observers should not over-dramatize lay-offs and bankruptcies. Poland, like the rest of Eastern Europe, now has too little unemployment, not too much."

LUDLOW COLORADO AND ROCKEFELLER'S PHILANTHROPY

Bill Gates' high profile philanthropy follows the precedent set by the first robber baron, John D. Rockefeller, Sr. Rockefeller owned the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (C.F.&I.) which produced 75% of Colorado's coal by 1892, in notoriously unsafe mines that killed 1,708 miners between 1884-1912, twice the national average. In 1913 the miners went on strike. The owners evicted them from their housing and forced them into "tent cities," the largest of which was in the town of Ludlow with 1,200 miners and their families. Rockefeller brought in the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency to break the strike with a campaign of harassment against the strikers which included murders, beatings, and an armored car that sprayed the miners with machine-gun fire, all designed to goad the strikers into violent action, which would provide a pretext for the Colorado Governor to call out the National Guard. On April 20, 1914, in Ludlow, the state militia opened fire on the miners and their families. Fifty-three people including thirteen women and children were killed in the massacre.

The events in "bloody Ludlow" aroused widespread public sympathy for the strikers and provoked outrage at the Rockefeller family. In response to inflamed public opinion, the Rockefellers hired the father of

modern public relations, Ivy Lee, to change the public perception of their family. Lee had Rockefeller make heavily publicized trips to the Colorado mine site, saw to it that Rockefeller's philanthropy was prominently showcased and that newsreel footage showed him in appealing settings such as handing out Christmas presents. In the early years of the twentieth century Rockefeller had a reputation as a callous villain. Wisconsin progressive Robert LaFollette, for example, had called him "the greatest criminal of the age." By the time of his death in 1937 the tycoon's transformation from villain to civic benefactor in the public view was virtually complete.¹

Unlike Rockefeller, Bill Gates has succeeded in distancing himself personally from the violence that capitalism relies on to preserve elite power. He is not personally reviled (except when our PCs crash.) But the system of inequality and privilege that he relies on is increasingly reviled around the world, and that is why he, like Rockefeller before him, is engaging in high profile philanthropy. The philanthropy is meant to neutralize the critics of corporate power and weaken people's efforts to fight against it. This is why Gates does not give money to organizations that challenge the root cause of poverty and inequality: corporate power. How we respond to Bill Gates, whether we treat him and the capitalist system he defends, as a positive or a negative force in the world, is far more important than how much money he may or may not give to charity.