

NEWS from the Institute for Policy Studies

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Executive Excess 2023

New report finds the ‘Low-Wage 100’ large corporations have spent more than \$340 billion on stock buybacks since 2020

Washington, D.C. — A new Institute for Policy Studies [report](#) reveals staggering stats on the disparities within the 100 S&P 500 corporations that had the lowest median worker pay levels in 2022, a group we’ve dubbed the “Low-Wage 100.”

Key findings:

1. The CEO-worker pay gap at the Low-Wage 100 averaged 603 to 1 in 2022

- Chief executives in this group raked in **\$15.3 million** on average in 2022, while median worker pay averaged just **\$31,672**.
- **Live Nation Entertainment** had the fattest CEO paycheck *and* the widest pay gap. Michael Rapino hauled in \$139 million, 5,414 times as much as his firm’s median of \$25,673.

2. The Low-Wage 100 have spent more than \$340 billion on stock buybacks since 2020

- Between January 1, 2020 and May 31, 2023, 90 of the Low-Wage 100 reported combined stock buyback expenditures of \$341.2 billion. This maneuver artificially inflates executive stock-based pay and siphons funds from worker wages and other productive investments.
- **Lowe’s** led the buybacks list, spending \$34.9 billion on share repurchases over the past three and a half years. In 2022 alone, Lowe’s spent more than \$14.1 billion on buybacks — ***enough to give every one of its 301,000 U.S. employees a \$46,923 bonus.***
- **Home Depot** came in second, with \$28.9 billion in stock buybacks since January 2020, and Walmart ranks third, with \$23.9 billion.

3. During their stock buyback spree, Low-Wage 100 CEOs’ personal stock holdings increased more than three times as fast as their firms’ median worker pay

- The CEOs of the 90 low-wage S&P 500 companies that have spent funds on buybacks since 2020 have amassed approximately **\$14.9 billion** worth of their company stock.

- At the 65 buyback companies where the same person held the top job between 2019 and 2022, the CEOs' personal stock holdings **soared 33 percent** to an average of \$184.7 million. Median pay at these firms rose only 10 percent to an average of \$31,972. (not adjusted for inflation)
- **FedEx** CEO Frederick Smith has the largest stockpile in the Low-Wage 100. His personal holdings have grown 65 percent to more than \$5 billion since January 2000. By contrast, FedEx median worker pay fell by 20 percent to \$39,177 (including \$9,267 in health benefits) between 2019 and 2022.

4. Over half of the Low-Wage 100 receive taxpayer-funded federal contracts

- Of the 100 companies in our sample, **51 received federal contracts** worth a combined \$24.1 billion during fiscal years 2020-2023. These low-wage federal contractors spent nearly \$160 billion on stock buybacks over the course of these years.
- In 2022, the average CEO pay in this low-wage contractor group stood at \$12.7 million, 56 times as much as the salary of a Biden administration cabinet secretary. This group's CEOs averaged **438 times** their \$34,550 median worker pay.
- **Amazon** is the largest contractor in the Low-Wage 100, with at least \$10.4 billion in federal deals in the past few years, mostly from a National Security Agency web services contract.

This [29th edition](#) of the annual IPS *Executive Excess* series highlights recent Congressional and Biden administration actions to rein in CEO pay, including a new 1 percent excise tax on stock buybacks and semiconductor subsidy preferences for firms that forego all share repurchases.

“These are serious responses to public outrage over today’s extreme CEO-worker pay gaps,” says report author **Sarah Anderson**, director of the IPS Global Economy Project and co-editor of the IPS site [Inequality.org](#). “But policymakers could do much more to narrow the divides — including through executive action. President Biden should wield the power of the public purse to push *all* corporate recipients of taxpayer money to narrow their pay gaps, stop wasting money on buybacks, and respect worker rights.”

The full *Executive Excess 2023* report, including a table with detailed data on the Low-Wage 100 corporations, will be available online on **Thursday, August 24 at 12:01 AM ET** at: <https://ips-dc.org/report-executive-excess-2023>

About the author: Sarah Anderson directs the Global Economy Project at the Institute for Policy Studies and co-edits the IPS web site [Inequality.org](#). She has been the lead author on all 29 of the Institute’s annual *Executive Excess* reports and testified before the Senate Budget Committee on this issue in [2021](#) and [2012](#). Her executive compensation analysis has been featured recently in the [Wall Street Journal](#), [CNN](#), [ABC News](#), the [New York Times](#), and many other outlets.

The [Institute for Policy Studies](#) is a multi-issue research center that has conducted path-breaking research on executive compensation for more than 20 years. IPS also provides a constant stream of inequality analysis and solutions through our [Inequality.org](#) web site and weekly [newsletter](#).

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