The robber barons era of the late nineteenth century and the robber baron era today have much in common. Both are marked by rapacious greed, devastating inequality, and callous disregard for the life of the working person. But there is a new factor in the equation. Today, the activities of some of the most powerful robber barons are jeopardizing the very fate of the planet.

Take ExxonMobil. With $420 billion in revenue in 2013, it is the largest fossil fuel company on the planet. Its extraordinary revenues and profits are subsidized by the U.S. taxpayer to a massive degree—$600 million dollars annually, says the Center for American Progress. Yet Exxon’s CEO, Rex W. Tillerson, considers himself the head of a “global” company, not an American company. Tillerson, whose compensation package is worth some $28 million, thinks climate change is “overblown.” “It’s an engineering problem with an engineering solution,” he says, and people will just have to adapt.

Exxon has long been a leader in the effort to sow doubt in the minds of the public about climate change and climate science. Exxon has bankrolled trade associations like the American Petroleum Institute, think tanks like the Heartland Institute, and PR firms and political operations like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) that are denying the problem, discrediting scientists, and derailing any legislative action to address the crisis. In 2013, federal regulators fined Exxon $2.6 million for its lousy pipeline construction that resulted in a major oil spill in an Arkansas suburb.

Piggybacking on the extraordinary profits and revenues of the big oil firms are the creatures of Wall Street, those hedge fund managers and big banks that engage in little productive activity but fuel reckless high-speed trading and speculation in the profitable energy sector. Goldman Sachs and JPMorgan Chase, for instance, are among the biggest players in the energy futures markets. Both firms played a huge role in collapsing the world economy in 2008, were bailed out by U.S. taxpayers with tens of billions of dollars and hundreds of billions in loans. They paid historic fines, but Lloyd Blankfein and Jamie Dimon are still calling the shots. Blankfein made $21 million in 2013. Dimon’s salary topped $20 million even after having to pay $23 billion that same year to settle charges with the federal government that his firm peddled crap mortgage securities, enabled Bernie Madoff, and botched derivatives trades.

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Dimon once predicted there will be a financial crisis once every seven years. By his count, another one is right around the corner.

The Tillersons, Dimons, and Blankfeins of the world have gotten a lot of attention over the past decade and rightly so. But there are many robber barons that are less well known. The Progressive decided to ask some of our friends to provide us with their nominees for America’s most rapacious firms and CEOs. We hope you will check them out below and join us on Facebook to share your favorite candidates.

Shaun McCutcheon, Coalmont Electrical Development

by Annie Leonard

Shaun McCutcheon’s fortune comes from coal, and after profiting from polluting our air, now he is polluting our democracy. McCutcheon’s recent lawsuit against the U.S. Federal Election Commission was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, allowing McCutcheon and exceptionally rich Americans to dump more money directly into political elections. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, only 591 people stand to benefit from this ruling. Following the Citizens United and the McCutcheon cases, the health of our democracy is imperiled. Big Money holds political priorities hostage to people like McCutcheon at the expense of working families that can’t afford to force politicians to cater to their needs. This affects everything from health care to living wages to climate change. McCutcheon, by the way, says it is a “waste of money” to try to solve climate change. He ignores enormous costs to communities from droughts, rising sea levels, and superstorms.

Annie Leonard is the executive director of Greenpeace, USA.

The Waltons and Walmart

by Richard Trumka

Two brothers and a sister of the Walton family—Alice, Jim, and Rob—are the controlling shareholders of Walmart, the largest private employer in the United States. Together with the remaining heirs to the Walmart fortune, they are worth more than $150 billion, making them the richest family on Earth. If Sam Walton’s dependents actually worked for their Walmart dividend checks this year, they would make $1.5 million every hour. Actual Walmart workers get an average of $8.81 per hour. Tens of thousands of Walmart employees get Medicaid and food stamps—each Walmart store costs taxpayers an estimated $1 million per year. But Walmart workers are rising up and demanding to be paid a minimum of $25,000 a year. Walmart’s response is to break the law. The National Labor Relations Board is pursuing charges against Walmart for violating federal law by firing workers for going on strike. What’s at stake is nothing less than the future of all America’s workers. Learn more at walmartpercent.org.

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