

European vaccine crisis worsens with EU set to vote on export ban

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Ferocious hostilities have broken out in Europe over the supply of COVID-19 vaccines.

For months, the European Union (EU) and the UK have been at loggerheads over the supply of vaccines from the UK-Swedish manufacturer AstraZeneca. Britain has insisted that its agreement with AstraZeneca was signed three months earlier than the EU's and that it receive priority over the EU for the vaccines on a "first come first serve" basis. At the end of January, the EU briefly announced a ban on vaccine exports to Northern Ireland, invoking Article 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol that is a component part of the Brexit agreement.

A nationalist frenzy is once again being whipped up on both sides, with mutual accusations hurled. In the last week, the conflict has reached fever pitch with the EU and UK trading threats and making conflicting demands on AstraZeneca.

The European Commission, the executive arm of the EU, plans to vote at its summit this Thursday on whether to block exports of vaccines to Britain.

Last week, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen told Germany's *Funke* media group, "We have the option of banning a planned export... That's the message to AstraZeneca: you must fulfil your contract with Europe first before you start delivering to other countries."

She warned, "We will reflect on whether exports to countries, who have higher vaccination rates than us, are still proportionate. In other words, we want reliable deliveries of vaccines, we want to see increases in the contracts, we want to see reciprocity and proportionality in exports. And we are ready to use whatever tool we need to deliver on that. This is about making sure that Europe gets its fair share."

According to reports von der Leyen could invoke emergency powers, including seizing factories and waiving patent rights to boost vaccine supplies to the EU.

Such draconian powers have only ever been used by the EU bloc on one previous occasion—at the height of the world oil crisis in the 1970s.

On Sunday, UK Defense Secretary Ben Wallace told *Sky*'s Sophy Ridge that the UK could retaliate, warning Brussels, "If contracts get broken ... that is a very damaging thing to happen for a trading bloc that prides itself on the rule of law." A more bellicose statement from a "senior UK insider" told *Politico* Sunday evening that the EU proceeding with an export ban would be "a terrible path for them to tread."

The crisis centres on a production plant in Leiden in the Netherlands, which along with a facility in Belgium produces ingredients for the AstraZeneca shot. The Netherlands plant is run by a Dutch sub-contractor, Halix, officially listed as a supplier of vaccines in contracts that AstraZeneca has signed with Britain and with the EU. Britain is demanding that Halix product first goes to the UK's vaccination programme, while the EU told Reuters, "What is produced in Halix has to go to the EU."

An as yet unknown quantity of vaccines have already been produced at Halix and are being stockpiled. Until recent days, AstraZeneca had not sought approval in the EU for the Halix facility. Without approval, any vaccines produced at Halix cannot be used in the EU. However, an approval request has been made and approval from the EU is expected Wednesday.

The EU has also made requests that two plants in the UK, run by Oxford Biomedica and Cobra Biologics, send vaccine shipments to Brussels for distribution. Both UK plants are listed as suppliers to the EU in its contract with AstraZeneca. The UK plants have shipped nothing to the EU.

Von der Leyen stressed that this is despite Brussels sending 10 million doses of vaccine from the EU to the UK—part of at least 41 million doses of coronavirus vaccines exported from the EU to 33 countries since

February 1.

Last week, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government warned that although 50 percent of Britain's population had received at least one vaccine dose, supply problems had emerged that would soon slow down the vaccination programme. This shortage appears to be the result of production bottlenecks at the manufacturers, primarily at AstraZeneca, and not a supply freeze by the EU. The main cause of the shortage, which is affecting the global rollout of the vaccine, is due to supply problems in India. More than 4 million doses due to be shipped from India to the UK next month are now blocked.

According to an analysis by the *Guardian* newspaper "Britain's Covid vaccine programme faces a two-month delay in the event of an EU export ban, derailing the government's plans to reopen the economy this summer." The *Guardian* commissioned data analytics company Airfinity who estimated that the banning the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine from export from Belgium and Germany to Britain would delay every adult receiving a first jab until August 5. The government intends to have reopened the economy fully on June 20.

In response, Johnson initiated frantic talks with individual EU leaders. Last week, he spoke to Netherlands Prime Minister Mark Rutte and Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo. On Sunday, he spoke to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron.

Speaking Monday, Boris Johnson said he had been "reassured" that EU leaders "don't want to see blockades" on the export of COVID vaccines. He said later that London was "getting on with our vaccination programme as fast as we can but a vaccination campaign and developing vaccines, rolling them out—these are international projects and they require international cooperation."

According to several sources, it was reported that Johnson, whose government has overseen around 150,000 Covid deaths and faces a growing number of strikes, would countenance a partial retreat. The *Daily Mail* reported Monday that the Dutch factory involved "is believed to have enough raw materials for 5 million vaccine doses... Senior Downing Street sources told *The Times* today the UK Government is willing to split the huge stockpile with the EU to avoid a full blown vaccine trade war."

Nothing is more disgusting than the sight of Johnson and von der Leyen competing for the moral high ground.

Both are implementing trade war policies, and are concerned not with the catastrophic impact on public health that refusing to share vaccines would have, but that halting the vaccine rollout could delay fully reopening the economy and ensuring the corporations can continue profiteering.

Leading EU figures openly advocate a vaccine ban on the basis that it will prove that the EU can be a major player in coming trade and military conflict. Speaking to *Der Spiegel*, Manfred Weber, a leading figure in Merkel's ruling Christian Democratic Union and the head of the conservative parliamentary group in the European Parliament, said, "The European Union should now consider a temporary export ban on all vaccines produced in the EU... We need a little more 'EU first'... We as Europeans, with our capabilities, still have a chance to be among the first to stop the pandemic. But if we don't change our approach, the economic consequences will not only be substantial, because the Europeans will then lose massive economic power, while China and the USA are taking off."

Whatever the immediate outcome of the European vaccine crisis, it lays the basis for future trade and military conflict and further preventable loss of life to a deadly disease. On the continent that includes some of the richest capitalist countries on the planet, the EU brags that it has 55 factories producing vaccines. Yet there has not been a trace of co-ordination to ensure that the population is vaccinated.

Due to their refusal to put into operation any scientifically based plan to produce and distribute vaccines, only 13 out of 100 persons have been inoculated with at least one dose. As the virus begins its spring surge across Europe, more than 20 million doses are still sitting unused throughout the EU.

The only solution to the pandemic is an international solution fought for by the working class in the interests of humanity. This struggle must be based on a socialist programme that prioritises the interests of society against the profit lust of the corporations and the division of the planet into competing nation-states.



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