

European Union summit retreats from vaccine export ban

Robert Stevens
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The European Union's (EU) two-day summit was dominated Thursday by growing tensions over its failed vaccine rollout. But having threatened an export ban on vaccines, EU leaders issued a joint statement late Thursday backing away.

"We underline the importance of transparency as well as of the use of export authorisations," the statement said. In a reference to UK-Swedish manufacturer AstraZeneca—which is expected to only fulfil about of a quarter of the 120 million doses ordered by Brussels this quarter—it continued, "We recognise the importance of global value chains and reaffirm that companies must ensure predictability of their vaccine production and respect contractual delivery deadlines."

Tensions between the EU and Boris Johnson's UK government reached boiling point ahead of the summit over the supply and distribution of vaccines from AstraZeneca.

Britain and the EU have both signed deals to receive millions of doses, but only a small proportion have been delivered with the company citing production difficulties. The UK insists that its deal was signed three months earlier than the EU's and must receive priority, including doses made at a plant in the Netherlands. Britain exited the EU last year and cut its own deal with corporations manufacturing vaccines.

Total vaccinations within the EU are catastrophically low and by March 22 stood at just 12.9 per 100 people. In contrast the UK has vaccinated 44.7 per 100. Just 88 million vaccine doses have been distributed within the EU to constituent states with a total population of nearly 450 million.

In response the European Commission, the executive arm of the EU, threatened to ban exports of vaccines. On Wednesday, European Commission Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis announced plans that all shipments of vaccines from the EU be assessed in relation to the destination country's rate of vaccinations and vaccine exports. The tightening of EU policy was aimed at the UK, which has not exported any vaccines to the EU, with officials and senior political figures queuing up to denounce Downing Street ahead of the summit. Dombrovskis complained that the EU "continues to export vaccines to countries that have production capacities of their own, but when these countries do not export to the EU there is no reciprocity".

To stem a crisis with the summit imminent, Johnson phoned

EU heads of state and the EC this week, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron. No solution was reached.

Johnson threatened that if the EU issued an export ban, this would fuel trade conflicts that the UK would seize on to its advantage. "I would just gently point out to anybody considering a blockade or interruption of supply chains that companies may look at such actions and draw conclusions about whether or not it is sensible to make future investments in countries where arbitrary blockades are imposed," he said.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock told the *Financial Times* Wednesday, "I believe that free trading nations follow the law of contracts." He ridiculed the EU's contract with AstraZeneca declaring, "They have a 'best efforts' contract and we have an exclusivity deal." While stating that ongoing talks were "co-operative, practical and collaborative," he added, "Our contract trumps theirs."

Thierry Breton, the EU's internal market commissioner told the newspaper, "We have a feeling that the vaccine nationalism is really on the other side of the Channel."

By late Wednesday all that could be achieved was an EU/UK joint holding statement that "We are all facing the same pandemic and the third wave makes co-operation between the EU and UK even more important."

Claims that peace had broken out were belied by the recriminations hurled as the talks began. An official said that the EU had sent 21 million vaccines to the UK but received none in return. Among these were about 1 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine. France's EU affairs minister, Clément Beaune, said, "We want to avoid that AstraZeneca doses produced in Europe go to Britain when we are not receiving anything... AstraZeneca says: 'I am experiencing delays'. We say: 'mobilise your plants for us and if you don't, we will block exports to the UK.'"

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen tweeted that the "EU has exported 77 million doses of vaccines to 33 countries since 1 December 2020" and that the EU summit needs to 'ensure that Europeans get their fair share of vaccines'.

Tensions reached such a peak that last weekend an elite unit of Italian military police, acting on EU orders, raided the

Catalent plant in Anagni, near Rome, where the AstraZeneca vaccine is put into vials and labelled. The unit was reported in *La Stampa* to have found a stockpile of 29 million doses being “hoarded”. The Italian media initially said that the vaccines—roughly half AstraZeneca's delivery shortfall to the EU—were being readied for delivery to the UK. This claim was false, with the UK saying they had no order coming from the plant. Within hours the EU was forced to acknowledge that the vials were in fact being sent in two separate batches onto AstraZeneca's Belgium plant for onward distribution around the EU.

Only a few weeks previously, Italy's Prime Minister Mario Draghi blocked the export of 250,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine to Australia.

Prior to the summit Pfizer stepped in to warn the EU that the UK could retaliate against an export ban by withholding raw materials for its vaccine that are shipped from Yorkshire. On Thursday, Reuters reported that “US biotech Novavax is delaying signing a contract to supply its vaccine to the bloc,” with an EU official citing problems it had “sourcing some raw materials.”

Every major capitalist power is engaged in the same beggar thy neighbour policy, with catastrophic consequences that only aids the spread of the virus. President Joe Biden's US administration does not export to any other country, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel making the barbed remark this week, “We can see clearly that British facilities are producing for Great Britain. The United States isn't exporting, and therefore we are dependent upon what can be produced in Europe.”

After Thursday's meeting, Merkel commented, “Regarding the export regime we said we had absolutely no desire to disturb the global supply chain, but also that we of course have an interest in ensuring that the companies that have made contracts with us remain truly loyal to those contracts.

“We are, as the EU, the part of the world that is not only supplying itself but also exporting to the wider world—unlike the US, unlike Britain.”

The EU's retreat does nothing to prevent further crisis. The day before the EU summit, India, one of the world's biggest vaccine producers, announced that it would not export any more until further notice after a surge in infections. On Thursday it reported 53,000 new infections over the previous 24 hours, a level not recorded since October and heading to the peak of nearly 100,000 new infections a day last September. The UK has already been hit by a delayed shipment of five million AstraZeneca doses from India's Serum Institute, with Johnson's government warning that its vaccine rollout will soon start to be scaled back as a result.

The vaccine rollout has exposed not only tensions between the EU and UK, but between EU states. Austria's Chancellor Sebastian Kurz demanded to know how an extra 10 million doses of the BioNTech/Pfizer vaccine would be distributed.

Countries including the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Croatia and Estonia have not received the AstraZeneca jabs they ordered and are demanding they receive the BioNTech/Pfizer first. Speaking before the event, Kurz said, “If no solution is found here it could cause damage to the European Union the likes of which we have not seen in a long time.” He was insisting he would veto any distribution deal that does not include Austria. Austria's demands were rejected.

The row over the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines has nothing to do with concern by the major powers for their “own” citizens. The mass distribution of vaccines is being used to justify a homicidal policy of reopening economies globally, with schools at the forefront. Every government lyingly claims that this can be done without a significant threat to the lives of millions of people thanks to vaccination. But their justifications collapse in the face of a calamitous rollout.

More fundamental still, as the world's leading epidemiologists make clear this is a global pandemic and the failure to combat the virus on that basis is already leading to a resurgence of COVID-19. In Europe alone, 19 EU states are recording a rise in infections. The UK variant of the virus that is significantly more infectious is now dominant in many countries, including Germany, and Spain has said it accounts for half of all new cases.

Other mutations are associated with South Africa, Brazil and the US. It is feared that the surge in India could be due to the emergence of new mutations.

The vaccination of the world's population must be taken out of the hands of the capitalist class. What is required is a scientific approach centred on the globally planned distribution of vaccines, with the pharmaceutical conglomerates taken into social ownership. The working class must act independently to spearhead an international fight against COVID-19 by uniting its struggles and directing them against capitalism.



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