

24 world leaders issue bogus call for pandemic treaty

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In an act of breathtaking hypocrisy, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron have led a call by 24 world leaders for nations to “work together towards a new international treaty for pandemic preparedness”.

World Health Organisation (WHO) director-general Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus is also a signatory.

The letter begins by invoking the post-Second World War period: “At that time, following the devastation of two world wars, political leaders came together to forge the multilateral system. The aims were clear—to bring countries together, to dispel the temptations of isolationism and nationalism and to address the challenges that could only be achieved together in the spirit of solidarity and co-operation, namely peace, prosperity, health and security.”

Warning, “There will be other pandemics and other major health emergencies”, the letter continues, “We are, therefore, committed to ensuring universal and equitable access to safe, efficacious and affordable vaccines, medicines and diagnostics for this and future pandemics.”

The letter concludes with the need for world governments to be “guided by solidarity, fairness, transparency, inclusiveness and equity.”

If this were not such a naked example of political showmanship, it would be necessary to ask on what planet these government leaders have been living this past year. The global response to the pandemic has been defined by the utterly destructive influence of geostrategic tensions and the selfish pursuit of national interests. All of which has found its most grotesque expression in the governments of Johnson, Merkel and Macron!

Since December, Britain and the European Union (EU) have been trading blows in a vicious conflict over the supply of vaccines.

After the UK stole a march on the EU in securing vaccine contracts, the EU briefly declared a ban of the export of vaccines to Northern Ireland, jeopardising the recently agreed Northern Ireland Protocol of the Brexit agreement. The ban was hurriedly withdrawn over the international

consequences, but efforts to prevent exports from Europe have continued.

In recent weeks, the European Commission has updated its export powers to ban vaccine exports to countries with high vaccine coverage rates, or which restrict exports through law or contracts with suppliers. Although many European leaders were hesitant to endorse the new powers at a summit last Thursday, Macron declared afterwards, “I support the fact that we must block all exports for as long as some drug companies don’t respect their commitments with Europeans.”

On Sunday, Thierry Breton, the EU’s internal markets commissioner, threatened, “As long as AstraZeneca doesn’t make good on its obligations, everything that’s produced on European soil is distributed to Europeans.”

Merkel summed up the nationalist, protectionist framework for the distribution of vaccines in a statement to the Bundestag: “The problem at the moment with the vaccine supply isn’t so much due to the question how much was ordered, but more about how much can be manufactured on European soil.”

“Because we can clearly see: British manufacturing plants manufacture for Great Britain, the US aren’t exporting anything, and therefore we rely on what can be produced in Europe”.

One day before the letter was released, Johnson announced plans for GlaxoSmithKline to “fill and finish” 60 million doses of Novavax vaccine in the UK—work previously done in Germany. The *Telegraph* reports, “A Downing Street source said the move was motivated in part by a desire to pour investment into the UK’s domestic vaccine manufacturing capability, while also making the nation’s vaccine supplies ‘more secure’.”

The conflict with Britain in no way implies unity within the EU, with other signatories to the call including António Luís Santos da Costa, prime minister of Portugal; Klaus Iohannis, president of Romania; Kyriakos Mitsotakis, prime minister of Greece; Mark Rutte, prime minister of the Netherlands; and Pedro Sánchez, Prime Minister of Spain.

When the pandemic first hit the continent and overwhelmed Italy's healthcare system, the Italian government passed an urgent message to the European Commission's headquarters and logged its needs in the EU's Common Emergency Communication and Information System. As Janez Lenarčič, the European commissioner responsible for crisis management, later told the *Guardian*, "No member state responded to Italy's request and to the commission's call for help."

Each country is now in a desperate race to reopen its economy, amid a surge of the virus and at the cost of thousands of lives, to seek competitive advantage over its rivals.

The other signatories and the countries they represent provide a picture not of international collaboration, but of a vaccine rollout undermined at every stage by imperialist rivalries, global inequality, and the profit motive.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky refused available doses of the Sputnik vaccine in line with his government's ferociously anti-Russian foreign policy and had to resort to begging the EU for vaccines in January. So far, less than 1 percent of the population has received even one dose.

Cyril Ramaphosa, President of South Africa, is overseeing a catastrophe in the continent's most developed country. His government has vaccinated just over 125,000 people—a tenth of its planned first phase of the rollout—due to a shortage of supply and critical infrastructure. The second phase is due to start in April.

Kenya, Rwanda, Tunisia and Senegal, whose leaders all signed the call, are dependent on the underfunded COVAX scheme, run by the WHO for low and middle-income countries. Senegal, population 16.3 million, is due to receive just 1.1 million doses by the end of May through COVAX. Rwanda (12.6 million) is due to receive around 800,000 and Kenya (52.6 million) is due 3.5 million.

In an earlier WHO statement, Ghebreyesus labelled the growing gap between vaccination rates in rich and poor countries "grotesque" and a "moral outrage". Private pharmaceutical companies have refused to waive patents or share technologies to allow poorer countries to begin manufacturing their own vaccines. However, government leaders enshrined this criminal subordination of human life to corporate profit in a treaty, pledging to "work with heads of state and governments globally, and all stakeholders including civil society and the private sector."

The signatories have the gall to promise "solidarity" the next time around, even as the current disaster is still unfolding. There is not a word about the massive increase in cases all over the world in the last month or measures to address this dire threat—only a stated belief "that nations

should work together towards a new international treaty".

The comparison drawn with the 1940s says something about the fears animating this piece of cynical propaganda. As in the aftermath of the Second World War, capitalism stands drenched in blood, thoroughly discredited and facing an upsurge of the class struggle. The government leaders hope that empty promises of a new start will stall the revolutionary consequences of this situation.

Unlike the 1940s, however, there is no power able to play the role of American imperialism in the post-war period, underwriting the capitalist world with its overwhelming economic and military strength. The order of the day is not stabilisation but escalating trade and military conflict, spearheaded by the US and directed above all against China.

This jingoistic agenda is reflected in the letter, which states that a pandemic treaty "should lead to more mutual accountability and shared responsibility, transparency and co-operation within the international system and with its rules and norms." As the *Telegraph*, which ran the leaders' letter as an exclusive in the UK, comments, Johnson called on the G7 to back a new pandemic agreement last month, emphasising the need for health data-sharing following "concerns about China withholding information and access from global health inspectors as they examined the origins and progression of Covid."

The purpose of this narrative placing responsibility for the pandemic at China's door is to whip up xenophobia in preparation for war.

The only call for international collaboration which has any meaning today is one directed to the world working class, which shares a common enemy in the ruling capitalist elites of each country. Resolving the pandemic and all other major social problems, all of which demand global solutions, requires the struggle to unify workers internationally in the struggle against capitalism and for socialism.



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