

Gunboats dispatched to Jersey in UK/French fishing rights conflict

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A degrading jingoistic spectacle played out this week between the UK and France over fishing rights in the waters around Jersey.

Up to 60 French fishing vessels blockaded the island's St Helier's port for several hours Thursday, overseen by two Royal Navy gunboats and two French military vessels.

Jersey is the largest of the Channel Islands and home to just over 100,000 people. Located 14 miles from the French Normandy coast and 85 miles south of the UK, it was brought under the English/British crown with the conquest of England by William the Conqueror in 1066, remaining so when King John surrendered his claim to the Duchy of Normandy in 1259.

The island is not formally part of the UK but a self-governing Crown Dependency whose defence is the UK's responsibility. Like the other Channel Islands, Jersey uses its strange constitutional status to operate as a tax haven, with a zero percent default corporation tax rate and flat 20 percent income tax rate. The Corporate Tax Haven Index gave the island a "haven score" of 100 out of 100 in 2020, ranking eighth worst in the world.

Following Brexit, European Union (EU) fishing boats wanting to fish within 12 miles of the UK coast, including Jersey, need to receive a license and must prove that they have fished in those waters previously—for at least 10 days over a 12-month period within the last three years. Seventeen out of the 41 larger French boats who applied have not received licenses, with British authorities claiming they have not been able to provide the necessary details. UK Conservative government Environment Secretary George Eustice blamed the European Commission and said licenses would be issued "as soon as they have provided that data".

Those who have received licenses also say that the UK has introduced additional conditions on how they are allowed to fish, which they claim will drive two-thirds of them out of business.

The French fisheries ministry said it considered these conditions "null and void", commenting, "If the United Kingdom wants to introduce new measures, it must notify the European Commission". Commission spokeswoman Vivian Loonela said it had indicated to the UK "that we see that the provisions of the EU/UK Trade and Co-operation Agreement, that we recently agreed... have not been respected."

Late last month, French fishermen protested by setting up burning barricades blocking lorries laden with UK fish, unloaded in France, from reaching seafood markets. They threatened to "blockade" Jersey to prevent it receiving supplies. A freight ship, the *Commodore Goodwill*, was briefly trapped in the harbour before being allowed to leave.

The British and French governments responded by escalating the situation, using it as a platform to strut their nationalist credentials. Britain despatched HMS *Severn* and HMS *Tamar* to the scene, each equipped with heavy weaponry. A Ministry of Defence spokesperson said they were being deployed "to conduct maritime security patrols". France sent the *Athos* and the *Themis* on a "patrol mission" to "guarantee the safety" of the French flotilla.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson spoke with Jersey officials yesterday morning to reiterate "his unequivocal support for Jersey", according to a Downing Street spokesperson. Rear Admiral Chris Parry told the *Daily Mail*, "If they don't like something locally in Normandy or Brittany they always go and blockade something or somebody. I think they're forgetting the Royal Navy is the group that's really

good at blockading people.”

Former head of the Royal Navy Lord West told *Times Radio*, “If they wanted to move a couple of fishing boats, you would no doubt be boarded by Marines and you would arrest the people involved and then hand them over to the local police to be dealt with.

“After you have arrested some, their boats are impounded and that’s normally the thing that makes fishermen be very careful.”

The Labour Party lent support to this militarist posturing. Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey commented, “The threats on Jersey are completely unreasonable. The Navy’s experience in sensitive situations will help reassure residents and protect Britain’s broader national interests.”

In France, Europe Minister Clement Beaune has declared, “We won’t be intimidated by these manoeuvres.” David Sellam, head of the Normandy-Brittany sea authority, threatened, “We’re ready for war. We can bring Jersey to its knees if necessary.”

Earlier this week, Maritime Minister Annick Girardin told the French parliament, “In the (Brexit) deal there are retaliatory measures. Well, we’re ready to use them. Regarding Jersey, I remind you of the delivery of electricity along underwater cables. Even if it would be regrettable if we had to do it, we’ll do it if we have to.”

Ninety-five percent of Jersey’s electricity is provided by France via undersea cables.

This provoked hysterical comparisons in the British government to the Nazi occupation of the Channel Islands during the Second World War. “At least the Nazis kept the lights on”, wailed the *Telegraph*, paraphrasing a government source. Whitehall claims to be reviewing the UK’s energy links with France in response to the threats, considering routing undersea cables through the Netherlands instead.

The British media revelled in the nationalist filth spewing out from both sides of the Channel. The *Daily Mail* issued the headlines, quoting fishermen on either side, “We’re ready for war”, “Our new Trafalgar”, and “This is an invasion”. It was joined by the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mirror* in publishing variations of “Boris sends gunboats to Jersey” on yesterday’s front page.

Lord Daniel Hannan, a leading figure in Brexiteer Conservative circles, pushed a war on two fronts in his piece in the *Mail*, “Emmanuel Macron, the new

Napoleon? No, he’s a Poundland Putin”.

Michael Hookem, former deputy leader of the UK Independence Party, wrote in the *Express*, “EU thought we’d cave on fish but Brexit is about standing up and fighting back”. The *Telegraph* warned of future conflicts in its editorial, “French belligerence is only the start of the fishing industry’s worries”.

The immediate turn to threats, denunciations and the deployment of the military in a minor dispute over fishing is a product of the imperialist powers’ ever-deeper descent into nationalist reaction.

Brexit expressed and advanced a sharp nationalist turn in world politics, with the Brexiteers, led by Johnson, leading the way to a bullish championing of the national interest, into which all class divisions were supposedly dissolved. This campaign has only intensified, as the Conservative government attempts to consolidate a patriotic political front at home in support of an increasingly aggressive trade and military policy abroad—aided every step of the way by the Labour Party.

France’s tit-for tat response over Jersey shows the European powers can offer no progressive response, with each aggressively pursuing their national agenda within the framework of the EU.

With geostrategic competition and class tensions massively intensified by the pandemic, outbursts of chauvinism will become routine.

The working class has no dog in these fights, which aim to set workers of different countries against each other in a struggle to increase the fortunes of “their” respective ruling billionaires. Workers’ interests can only be defended through a unified international struggle, against the British, French and European ruling class, for workers’ power and the United Socialist States of Europe.



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