

France, Britain threaten trade war over Brexit fishing dispute

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Paris and London are threatening each other with large-scale trade war measures starting next week, amid a mounting post-Brexit dispute over how to assign fishing rights in the English Channel.

On Wednesday, French police vessels stopped two British fishing boats off the French coast, detaining one at the Le Havre port. They said the ship detained in Le Havre “was not on the list of fishing licenses granted to the United Kingdom” by French and European Union (EU) authorities. They threatened both “the confiscation of the fisherman’s catch” and to criminally prosecute the ship’s captain.

It was an act of retaliation against British authorities, who have granted only 15 of 47 French requests for fishing licenses in British waters. Jersey island, a UK dependency off the French coast, has also granted only 66 of 170 French fishing license requests. While British officials claimed they granted around 1,700 EU vessels fishing licenses or 97 percent of the total requested, French Fisheries Minister Annick Girardin replied that only 90.3 percent of license requests were granted, and that UK refusals almost exclusively target French ships.

As Paris and London mount these attacks against fishermen on both sides of the Channel, relations between the European powers are unraveling. Tensions over Brexit are becoming entangled with French hostility to the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) alliance against China, which led Australia to suddenly repudiate a €56 billion French submarine contract. Moreover, both French and British imperialism are stoking nationalism to try to distract from the pandemic and a rising tide of COVID-19 deaths across Europe.

Yesterday, Girardin went on RTL radio to threaten Britain with large-scale retaliatory measures if London does not grant French vessels fishing licenses before November 2. These are:

*intensified health screening of all British seafood products in France;

*banning British fishing vessels from docking at French ports where their catch is processed;

*imposing security checks on all British vessels in French waters;

*intensified security and customs screening of all British truck freight arriving in France.

The French measures are intended to make it virtually impossible in practice for Britain to export goods to France, and for British ships to sail in French waters. Referring to the British government’s sudden scrapping last year of the Brexit treaty negotiated in 2019 with the EU, Girardin told RTL, “It has been nine months that French fishermen have no longer been able to work. The British are not respecting treaties they signed. We have had enough.”

French officials have made other bellicose threats, including to cut off electricity exports to Britain and also to Jersey, which relies on France for 90 percent of its electricity supply. This would likely shut down hospitals and schools on the island.

“Now we must speak the language of force because I believe unfortunately that this British government understands nothing else,” France’s European Affairs Minister Clément Beaune told the far-right TV channel CNews. “We will have no tolerance and make no exceptions,” he continued, adding: “We cannot act as if we have climate of trust with a partner who does not respect the rules.”

The British government issued a statement calling the French threats “disappointing” and promised to retaliate in kind if they were imposed. Yesterday Foreign Secretary Liz Truss summoned France’s ambassador Catherine Colonna to the Foreign Office to face questions today about “disproportionate” threats.

Environment Secretary George Eustice told *Sky News*, “We don’t know what they’ll do, they said they wouldn’t introduce these measures until Tuesday probably at the earliest so we will see what they do. But if they do bring these into place, well, two can play at that game and we reserve the ability to respond in a proportionate way.”

The escalating tit-for-tat attack on key economic activity and international trade, on which millions of jobs depend, testifies to the irrationality of the capitalist nation-state system. It is a vindication of the principled position taken by the Socialist Equality Party of Britain on the Brexit referendum in 2016. Calling for an active boycott of the referendum, mobilizing the working class in Britain and across Europe against both the nationalism of the Brexiteers and the EU, a brutal tool of European finance capital.

The Brexit referendum triggered the fight over the division of fishing rights after Britain left the EU, but EU policies and French trade war threats are a deepening expression of the same reactionary nationalist tendencies. This emerges very starkly from the COVID-19 pandemic. London and the EU capitals pursued a virtually identical policy of “living with the virus,” leading to over a quarter-million COVID-19 deaths in Britain and France, and 1.3 million across Europe.

With the highly advanced state of breakdown of international relations in Europe, the danger of a military clash is growing rapidly. Already in May, a previous Franco-British fishery dispute off Jersey led to a tense naval standoff, as London and Paris dispatched warships to the disputed waters.

Now, the fishing dispute is taking on the character of an all-European diplomatic crisis, as French President Emmanuel Macron meets today with Biden to try to repair US-French relations after the AUKUS treaty in the lead-up to this weekend’s G-20 summit in Rome.

Earlier this month, French Prime Minister Jean Castex had spoken on the fisheries dispute at the French National Assembly, demanding “firmer support” from the EU against London. Calling on the EU to “ensure Britain respects the terms of the Brexit accord,” he threatened to veto the execution of Brexit accords and also “place in question... our bilateral relations with Britain.”

Yesterday morning, Germany, Italy, Spain, the

Netherlands, Belgium and Ireland alongside Cyprus, Greece, Portugal, and Sweden issued a joint statement demanding a British response to French fishing license requests that respects Brexit accords. It concludes, “We call on the United Kingdom to provide a response as soon as possible and to engage in further technical work in accordance with the spirit and the letter of the Agreement.”

British officials for their part are announcing plans to build an alliance with the so-called Visegrad group (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) targeting France. The right-wing UK *DailyExpress* wrote that London aims to build an “alliance with ‘sympathetic’ nations against anti-UK France,” cited a senior source close to British Foreign Minister Truss. The source said Truss “is talking a lot to the Baltics [Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia] and the Visegrad 4.”

The source added that “the EU basically is France,” and dismissed it with the statement that Truss is “fairly relaxed about what they think.” The source suggested that Britain encourage Poland and other Visegrad group countries to follow the example of Brexit: “Perhaps we should set up an advisory unit on leaving the EU.”

These statements are warnings to the working class on the explosive tensions wracking European and world capitalism. It is critical for workers to reject protectionist attacks on fishermen and working people in other industries, whether from Paris or London. Preventing a new escalation of diplomatic and military conflict in Europe, and halting capitalist governments’ deadly policies on the COVID-19 pandemic, depends on unifying workers in Britain and across Europe in a struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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