

US military delivery of baby formula from Germany does little to stem supply crisis

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22 May 2022

A US military airplane transported 75,000 pounds of imported baby formula from Ramstein Air Base in Germany to Indianapolis, Indiana, on Sunday amid the catastrophic nationwide shortage crisis of infant food in America.

The batch of baby formula, which was trucked from Switzerland to Germany, is the first shipment flown into the US from Europe as part of the Biden administration's emergency Operation Fly Formula. The Department of Agriculture said on Saturday that "additional flights will be announced in the coming days."

The corporate media is doing its best to present the arrival of three brands of powdered formula that are hypoallergenic as a significant measure to address the crisis. For example, CNN has been broadcasting over and over again for hours its video footage of 132 pallets being taken off the military C-17 cargo plane by servicemen driving forklifts and loading them onto FedEx trucks.

However, the amount of formula in the shipment from Germany will make just 500,000 eight-ounce bottles of baby food and does not even begin to address the magnitude of the crisis. According to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, the Biden administration's Operation Fly Formula shipment will feed a few thousand children for just one week. Meanwhile, there are approximately 1.2 million babies that get their formula through the federal government's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).

The dire conditions facing families from the crisis are beginning to emerge in news reports. CNN reported that a doctor at Le Bonheur Children's Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, said that two young patients were admitted because the special formula they need is out

of stock, and they cannot tolerate replacements.

The CNN report also said that clinical dietitians at Medical University of South Carolina Shawn Jenkins Children's Hospital in Charleston "reported that at least four babies were recently hospitalized for complications related to the ongoing formula shortage." Three of the four babies were hospitalized due to intolerance to formula that they had been fed by parents because of the shortages. The other child became sick when a caregiver attempted to mix their own formula.

According to the data tracking firm Datasembly, nearly 45 percent of baby formula products were unavailable in the US for the week ending May 15, up from 43 percent the previous week. On Thursday, US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Commissioner Robert Califf told the House Appropriations Committee that families should get relief "soon" due to increased output from manufacturers and the military deliveries. When pressed, Califf said that the crisis would get better "gradually" and it "will be a few weeks before we are back to normal."

But formula manufacturers and retailers say that it could take months for supplies to recover because the reasons for the crisis remain unresolved. Baby formula shortages started as early as 2020 when the pandemic began, and supply chains were disrupted. Shipping delays and longer lead times for raw materials and packaging multiplied and compounded upon each other, causing limited supplies on retail shelves across the US over the past two years.

Then, in February of this year, Abbott Labs was forced to halt operations at its biggest factory in Sturgis, Michigan, which is responsible for one-fifth of all US baby formula production. The \$200 billion medical devices and health care company—which makes the popular Similac baby formula product—has

previously refused to acknowledge that its factory was contaminated with bacteria and responsible for illness and death among infants that were fed with its products.

On Saturday, the *Washington Post* published a perfunctory corporate-speak “apology” from Robert Ford, chairman and CEO of Abbott Labs, that said the FDA had found “a bacteria in our plant” but that there was not “any connection between our products and the four reported illness in children.”

Ford did reveal that “some children have been hospitalized because of the lack of EleCare, a specialized formula for children who cannot digest other formulas and milks.” Although he said that this is “tragic and heartbreaking,” Ford did not offer any immediate solutions to the catastrophic situation other than to say, “it is consuming my thoughts and those of my colleagues.”

Instead, Ford said, “we wish we could provide them the formula they need today and are working to identify ways to do so,” and “we will prioritize EleCare when manufacturing resumes.” The conclusion of Ford’s statement emphasized the consent decree between Abbott Labs and the Biden administration to reopen the Michigan production facility.

The consent decree issued by the US Justice Department on May 16 concludes the government investigation into the role of Abbott Labs in producing a contaminated product in exchange for the reopening of its baby formula factory. The agreement amounts to corporate blackmail in which Abbott Labs avoids prosecution and admission of guilt, even though FDA testing found *Cronobacter* bacteria at the Sturgis factory because of the supply shortage crisis.

Whatever the phony expressions of concern from CEO Ford, the fact is that Abbott Labs has been preoccupied with the megaprofits it has been earning from pandemic-related products and abandoned any investment or development of the less lucrative baby formula operations. John Wallingford, a former baby formula executive and now an industry consultant, told the *Wall Street Journal* that the largest baby food manufacturers also make higher profit medical devices and health care products.

Wallingford told the *Journal*, “Companies that manufacture infant formula have to struggle to get investment for upgrading or building a new facility

because they’re competing with dollars that will go to other, higher margin products.”

The baby formula supply crisis in the US and the government response to it are clear expressions of the breakdown of the capitalist system. Millions of families are struggling to feed their newborn babies, infants and toddlers because profits come before human life in America. As has been demonstrated throughout the coronavirus pandemic, in a society that is run by billionaire elites—such as those who control the \$35 billion international pediatric nutrition industry—their stock portfolios and wealth accumulation are more important than the lives of millions of working class people.



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