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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Harvey Simpkins

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US infant formula shortage continues to surge, with 10 states 90 percent out-of-stock

The already-dire infant formula shortage in the United States continues to worsen, putting thousands of infants, children and those with special nutritional needs at risk of going hungry. Last week, the national out-of-stock rate climbed to 74 percent, up four percentage points from the prior week. Three weeks ago, the rate was 45 percent.



An aisle at a Target store in Chicago with sparsely stocked baby formula (WSWS Media)

Ten states, Arizona, Mississippi, California, Nevada, Tennessee, Rhode Island, Louisiana, Florida, Washington, and Georgia have reached out-of-stock rates above 90 percent. Colorado, the state with the most supply, has an out-of-stock rate of 44 percent. By comparison, this time last year, the average out-of-stock rate was about six percent.

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afgazad@gmail.com

In February, Abbott Nutrition voluntarily shut down its plant in Sturgis, Michigan after the FDA found hazardous bacteria in the plant and warned consumers not to use certain powdered infant formula manufactured there. Since September 20, 2021, at least four infants became ill and two died after being fed products from the Sturgis factory. In October 2021, the FDA received a whistleblower complaint detailing negligent cleaning practices and efforts by Abbott officials to prevent the FDA from learning about safety issues with the plant.

More than three months after its closure, the plant remains shut down, with FDA Commissioner Robert Califf telling Congress last week that the plant is still “several weeks” away from reopening, with further delay possible if Abbott does not meet safety requirements. According to Califf, the company has to complete “hundreds” of steps under an agreement with the FDA before reopening. “Abbott actually did start remediating the plant, but it was so bad,” Califf said.

On top of severe supply chain issues caused by the government’s reckless response to the pandemic, Abbott’s plant shutdown has caused a massive loss in production and supply of formula. Abbott controls over 40 percent of the baby formula market in the United States, with the Michigan facility producing half of its domestic production.

The Biden administration responded to the crisis far too late and with far too little assistance. To much media fanfare, Biden launched Operation Fly Formula last month with an initial planeload of 75,000 pounds of baby formula arriving by military plane from Germany on May 22.

On May 18 Biden invoked the Defense Production Act to increase supply of formula. His order under the act merely requires suppliers to fulfill orders from the formula companies before other customers. This has been far more an exercise in public relations and damage control than an actual solution: since Biden put these measures in place, the lack of formula in stores has only worsened.

Despite the clear danger to infant health represented by the Abbott plant shutdown, cutting off 20 percent of the total infant formula supply in the country, Biden said on Wednesday that he did not realize the seriousness until April.

“Once we learned of the extent” of the plant shutdown “and how broad it was, we kicked everything into gear,” he told reporters. “I became aware of this problem sometime in early April, about how intense it was,” Biden added. “We did everything in our power from that point on.”

According to Biden, “kicking everything into gear” and doing “everything in his power” includes taking nearly two months to summon even the smallest of measures, in the form of his meager Operation Fly Formula and invocation of the Defense Production Act.

With the crisis continuing to worsen, Biden announced on Wednesday that Bubs Australia will send approximately 4.6 million bottles worth of its infant formula from Melbourne to the United States on June 9 and 11. He also said that the US will import 3.7 million bottles worth of Kendamil formula from the United Kingdom, beginning June 9.

In contrast to Biden’s claims of ignorance, infant formula manufacturers knew immediately that the Abbott plant shutdown would cause major supply issues. At a meeting on Wednesday with the President, Robert Cleveland, a senior vice president with Reckitt Benckiser Group, another formula company, told Biden, “We knew from the very beginning that this would be a very serious event.” He added, “From the moment that that recall was announced we reached out immediately to retail partners like Target and Walmart to tell them this is what we think will happen.”

Murray Kessler, the CEO of another formula maker, Perrigo, similarly told Biden at Wednesday’s meeting that when his firm learned of the Abbott recall, the company “could foresee that this was going to create a tremendous shortage.”

In fact, back on November 16, 2021, well before the Abbott plant shutdown, Walgreens, with 9,000 locations across the country, reported that demand for infant formula was surging and that it was struggling to keep up.

To cope with the escalating formula crisis, desperate parents are traveling hundreds of miles in search of formula, only to find shelves empty wherever they go. Parents are also resorting to diluting formula in order to make supplies last longer. Dilution, however, offsets the electrolyte balance in infants, leading to low sodium, which, in turn leads to

low blood pressure and life-threateningly low levels of circulating oxygen. Fatal seizures can also result from such an imbalance.

“A formula is essentially regulated as closely as any prescribed medication when it comes to the ingredients in it to make sure a baby's kidneys are developing, their liver, their electrolytes—everything else is in a very fine balance,” Dr. Owais Durrani, an emergency room physician, told Business Insider.

The Biden administration's contrasting responses to the formula crisis and the Russian invasion of Ukraine starkly reveal the priorities of the American ruling class. On February 24, just a few days after the Abbott plant was shut down, Russia, instigated by the United States and NATO, invaded Ukraine. In the three months since, the Democratic-controlled Congress, including its so-called left wing, has approved \$53 billion to support Ukraine as it carries out a proxy war on behalf of the United States against Russia. By contrast, Biden took no meaningful measures to combat the infant formula crisis for more than three months after the Abbott plant shutdown.

While endless supplies of money are made immediately available for US imperialism to carry out its plans to weaken and ultimately carve up Russia, mere crumbs are provided, months late, to feed the most vulnerable.

The Biden administration's handling of the infant formula crisis is completely in line with its handling of the pandemic, where, despite the wide availability of vaccines and an understanding of the public health measures needed to stop the virus from spreading, it is responsible for more deaths than the gross buffoonery and callousness of the Trump administration. The American ruling class, through its political servants, has once again revealed its complete contempt for the lives of the working class.

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