

Families devastated by Dresden flood forced to shift for themselves

A reporting team
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In the second week of August large areas of Europe were hit by the severest floods to affect the continent in 150 years. Reporters from the WSWS visited the southern German city of Dresden on the Elbe River on August 21 to speak to those affected.

At the high point of the flood crisis, the inhabitants of Dresden were largely left to their own devices. The authorities were not prepared for the catastrophe, and the selfless intervention by thousands of volunteers stood in stark contrast to the lack of coordination on the part of officials at all levels of government.

A week after the apex of the flooding, the main tourist area in the centre of Dresden had been largely restored to normal. However, just a few hundred metres from the centre, parts of streets were covered by ankle-deep, stinking mud. Heaps of rubbish had gathered in front of doorways—bicycles caked with mud, broken furniture, cushions, shelves, foodstuffs, mattresses, coverings torn up from floors—all of it mouldy and rotten.

Everywhere groups of men and women in rubber boots were busy clearing and tidying their flooded cellars. Sandbags lay everywhere and, because the normal electricity supply had only just been restored, emergency generators were still humming in some streets.

Yvonne lives in a small old house in Friedrichstraße which is shared by a group of young people who collect and repair motorbikes. She was busy cleaning tools crusted with dried mud. She told the WSWS:

“The tourist areas were immediately tidied up and cleaned. But nobody cares about what happens here in the suburbs. The guys here have lost all their motorbikes. If there had been a warning, even at a later hour, they could have been saved. It was only yesterday that the water receded from this street. Meanwhile, the people here have done a lot of work cleaning up.

“Personally, I think that the Meisseritz flooded because the dams had not been emptied even one bit—the authorities didn’t want to waste any drinking water because it means money. And the straightening of the river made it worse.

“I believe that the piling up of the sandbags, with people working like mad, didn’t make any sense. While the entrances of the houses were blocked with sandbags, the ground water rose into the basements, which it wouldn’t have done if the cellars had simply been flooded. When I went to school in the GDR [former East Germany], there were certain exercises and instructions how to behave in such a situation, and there were plans how to evacuate. But today nobody knows what to do and everybody is just running around in a complete mess.

“I feel sorry for the small businesses. Many of them were just breaking even, but now they are bankrupt.

“I don’t like any of the politicians—neither [Social Democratic Party Chancellor Gerhard] Schröder nor Stoiber [CSU—Christian Social Union and the main opposition candidate in forthcoming elections]—nor Georg Milbradt (the minister president of Saxony, Christian Democratic Union).”

With every day that passes, the danger of infection grows. Dresden’s only sewage plant was flooded on August 16 and 110,000 cubic metres of dirty water gushed into the Elbe. Since then the sewage of more than half a million inhabitants has flowed untreated into the river.

Up to now there have been no reports of infection. But the retreating water, combined with warm weather, brings its own dangers. Carcasses of animals, rotten foodstuffs, chemicals and leaked heating oil are building up. Experts have warned of the danger of heavy metals contaminating the water, but precise analyses of the situation are lacking.

In Friedrichstadt, which borders the city centre on the south bank of the Elbe, inhabitants we questioned reported unanimously that they were completely unprepared for the flood waters. They had not been warned, although their part of town was flooded on two occasions—on Monday, August 12 when the river Weisseritz swelled to a storming torrent and spread across various parts of Dresden’s city centre, and again from Monday to Tuesday when the Elbe broke over its banks.

The swollen Weisseritz left a path of unimaginable devastation stretching from the suburb of Freital to the city centre of Dresden. The rush of water was so powerful that whole houses caved in or were so badly damaged that they had to be demolished. The extent of the damage in terms of individual and material losses remains unclear.

Along the Elbe, many suburbs of Dresden—Laubegast, Loschwitz, Übigau, Cossebaude—were largely flooded. Numerous other towns along the Elbe—Bad Schandau, Wehlen, Pirna, Meißen, Radebeul, Riesa—have suffered similar damage, with maintenance services collapsing under the strain.

Even after the worst of the floods subsided, neighbours, friends and complete strangers assisted one another in cleaning up. Often there are more volunteers available than could be put to work.

On the other hand, according to reports in the local press and from those affected, the reaction to the catastrophe by state and national authorities could only be described as chaotic. The most basic safety devices were lacking.

The river Wesseritz rose in the region of the Erzgebirge mountains, pressing against the dams at Malter and Klingenberg. These were erected some 90 years ago as drinking water reservoirs. They can absorb a total of 8.8 million cubic metres of water.

When the rains began, the dams were full to the brim. On August 11, dam workers began to release water. After a rainfall in a period of 48 hours equivalent to the total normal rainfall for a period of five months, the water overran both dams, with levels rising dramatically—139,000

litres per second at the Klingenberg dam, 175,000 litres per second at the Malter dam.

The *Sächsische Zeitung* quoted a worker at the Klingenberg dam who said it was fortunate that heavy rains forecast for the following Wednesday did not materialise: “If they had come, there would have been many dead.... Nobody would have been able to stop it, nobody.”

People in Freital complain that they were not even warned after the water had already overrun the dam and was heading toward their homes. A state of emergency was declared only later, and there was no aid available during the first stages of the flood.

The *Sächsische Zeitung* quoted the expert Wolf Dombrovsky from the University of Kiel: “Catastrophe prevention for local authorities is a secondary concern ... there are as many types of catastrophe prevention in Germany as there are local authorities. Nothing fits together.”

Flood water precautions on the Elbe are also deficient. The existing system of protection, according to the city authorities, is not adequate for a “century flood” such as that which swamped the city 150 years previously. Their general position was that nothing could have been done. One could only observe the situation and prepare for evacuation.

On Wednesday, August 14, at the highpoint of the flood, the initiative “Aid for Dresden” was finally launched. The initial press report put out by the organisation the same evening announced that a “contact telephone for those seeking aid” would be set up for Thursday morning, because the telephone exchange at the town hall was “unstable.”

A further report was issued the next day, August 15: “The citizens’ initiative for Dresden and the cultural office of Saxony have declared their readiness to assume coordination for those offering and seeking help. At the current time countless people have rung up to offer their assistance. Because no one knows currently how the floodwater situation will develop, we have established assembly points where those offering and those seeking help can gather...

“The assembly points must organise themselves. There is no one at the assembly points responsible for coordination. The catastrophe prevention unit will report soon to deploy those willing to help. We thank all those committed people from Dresden and Saxony and their institutions for their readiness to make themselves available at the collection points.”

In other words: there was no advance planning. The intervention during the floods was improvised under the pressure of immediate circumstances and with measures that often expressed a sense of helplessness. According to a leaflet issued by “Initiative for Dresden” one week after the onset of the flood: “Essentially, helpers must organise themselves.”

It is hardly possible to estimate the long-term consequences of the floods. Along with inevitable environmental problems caused by contamination of water and land, numerous houses are threatened and may have to be demolished.

The assistance promised to flood victims as of now is minimal and is bound up with all sorts of bureaucratic obstacles. Those who are able to demonstrate damage totalling 5,000 euros will be paid 500 euros per person from the aid fund of the city of Dresden, with an upper limit of 2,000 euros per household.

In front of several blocks of rented flats lining the Grüne Straße the WSWs spoke to Mrs. Helas, who was clearing out her cellar together with some neighbours.

“This street was flooded twice, as was a substantial part of the inner city,” she said. “There was never any warning given. The whole street was under water up to the first floor. Our apartments are very small, so people store a lot of things in the basement. Now everything has been destroyed.

“The authorities have told us to clear out our cellars. But how to do it—that’s left up to us. They have not even provided us with containers for the rubble yet, and many of us are not exactly young any more. I’m lucky because I have a son who helps me. He is unemployed, and lost his car in

the flood.

“I was born in 1935 and as 10-year-old I witnessed the destruction of Dresden by the bombing in 1945. This was a result of the crimes of the Hitler regime. We rebuilt everything then, and we are doing it now.

“Nothing can be expected from politicians like Schröder, who come for a quick visit, all puffed up, with their mobile telephones and coats blowing in the wind. I’m not going to vote anyway.”

Her neighbour, Mrs. Krippahl, had to clear her apartment on the ground floor. She commented:

“We were totally taken by surprise. First came the Messeritz. The water rose to the ceiling of the basements. We scooped it out but then came the Elbe. It all happened so quickly, the water rose up to the first floor, and we were trapped. On Tuesday afternoon, rubber boats came and we were told to evacuate. By that time, there was no more electricity or running water. Still, many people did not want to leave their apartments, but we did, because I have to look after my 91-year-old mother who is living with us. By boat they took us to the Postplatz (postal square) and from there to a school. But we did not have to stay there, because I rang my children and they picked us up. So we were among the lucky ones.

“A little later, people had to evacuate on official orders. While the water did not directly flow into our apartments, everything there is damp. The blocks have to be thoroughly renovated. The cooperative which owns these houses has offered to move us to other renovated apartments.

“The tenants who kept their insurance policies from the time of the GDR [they were taken over by a West German insurance agency] are lucky, because their contracts cover damage caused by the elements. But our family changed to a different agency after reunification, and so we cannot make any claims. We’ll just have to manage—if I didn’t have such a big family with four children who help me, I wouldn’t know what to do.”

The Environmental Centre of Dresden, located next to the College of Music, hosts an alliance of various environmental groups. We spoke to its president, who told us: “The state authorities had announced a water level gage of 8.50 meters, the city authorities then prepared for 9 meters, but in the event the water rose even higher. The plan for such a situation is to evacuate one threatened district after the other. As the Elbe rises relatively slowly, there is enough time to do that.

“When the Wesseritz burst its banks, it in fact simply returned into its former riverbed. It was diverted when the railway line was built in 1890. The tracks were laid into the old riverbed. This is why the Dresden main station was so badly flooded. The river simply went down the canyon directly into the station.

“Once the catastrophe starts, there is nothing much you can do. These problems can only be solved by long-term planning and town development. Houses and railways should not be built in riverbeds and river meadows. The only real solution would be to tear down whole parts of the city.”



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