

The floods in Europe and the bankruptcy of capitalism

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Measured by the number of fatalities, the current floods in Germany constitute the worst flooding catastrophe since the storm flood along the North Sea coast in 1962. Officially, more than 180 people have died so far, with at least 156 in Germany and 31 in Belgium. Thousands of people remain unaccounted for.

People around the world are horrified by the devastation wrought by the floods. Drone video and before-and-after pictures reveal the extent of the destruction. The high waters had an especially horrific impact in the Eifel region. Villages along normally small rivers like the Ahr, Erft and Ruhr, as well as their tributaries, were largely destroyed.

Entire roads were consumed by the water and partially washed away. Paths, sections of railways and bridges were rendered impassible, and some were destroyed. Hundreds of thousands of people temporarily lost power after several distribution plants were flooded. In some regions, the mobile phone networks and drinking water were interrupted for a time.

The most dramatic consequence of the floods, however, is the number of deaths, which continues to grow.

In the district of Ahrweiler alone, there have been 110 deaths, including at least 28 in the community of Schuld (660 residents) and the small city of Sinzig (17,642 residents). It is difficult to find words to describe the fates of the individuals. People lost their parents, brothers, sisters and children. Among the deaths in Sinzig were 12 residents of a home for disabled people, which was not evacuated in time.

Similarly dramatic scenes are now threatening to be repeated in parts of Bavaria, Saxony and Austria. Since Saturday night, the heavy rain has shifted to the southeast, pushing up water levels on the Danube, Isar, Inn and tributaries of the Elbe. In Bavaria, the inner cities of Passau and Beerchtesgaden were flooded, and in Saxony, villages including Bad Schandau and Krippen.

The flood disaster exposes in numerous ways the bankruptcy of capitalism and its political representatives.

First, it is the direct product of the climate crisis produced by the capitalist profit system, which is leading to ever more extreme weather events. “Already over thirty years ago, climate models predicted that extreme precipitation would occur more often, while days with light rain would be less frequent,” commented Stefan Rahnstorf, professor at the Potsdam Institute for Research into the Consequences of Climate Change. For every degree of warming, “the air [can] absorb 7 percent more water vapour and then rain it down.”

The consequences of climate change fuel events like the current flood disaster and ultimately threaten the very survival of the planet and all of humanity. These consequences have been understood for a long time. However, the ruling class is incapable of and unwilling to adopt serious climate protection measures, because this would undermine its economic and geostrategic interests. The regular agreements and treaties on climate change are not worth the paper they are written on.

Second, the deadly effects of climate change are the product of decades of underfunding and cuts to infrastructure, including flood barriers, a working early warning system and a disaster prevention system. International experts have pointed out that the high death toll is directly bound up with inadequacies in these areas.

“In 2021, we should not experience this number of fatalities from floods. This is just unacceptable,” stated Hannah Cloke, professor of hydrology at the University of Reading in the UK.

The professor told the ZDF television channel about problems with early warning systems. “Already, several days in advance, it was possible to see what was coming,” she said. All the necessary warnings were issued by the weather services,” commented Cloke, who was involved in the construction of the European flood alert system

EFAS. “But this chain of warnings broke down somewhere so that they never reached the people.”

This account is confirmed by reports from flood victims given to the WSWS. A resident in Ahrweiler explained that he and his family were only warned about flooding in the local area two hours ahead of time. The sandbags they then received were not filled. Due to the approaching mass of water, the family no longer had any time to locate sand. Within a short period of time, the cellar and lower parts of the house were totally flooded.

It is “incredibly frustrating,” continued Cloke. In Germany, there were failures at every level, she said. First, there is “no unified nationwide approach to flood risks,” even though “different flood plans for various scenarios” are needed. Second, “local authorities often don’t have the resources necessary to prepare appropriately.”

In fact, numerous municipalities are bankrupt due to the debt brake in Germany’s Basic Law. Deep cuts were made to budgets for disaster protection over recent years. This applies to the building of emergency hospitals, the training and provision of equipment for tens of thousands of volunteer civil protection forces, and the maintenance of national stores of equipment and medical supplies. The network of warning sirens was also largely dismantled.

The Federal Office for Population Protection and Disaster Assistance, which is part of the Federal Interior Ministry, has only 344 employees and a pathetic annual budget of less than €250 million.

Necessary spending for flood protection was not undertaken. “The implementation of flood-related measures” was “restricted due to a lack of allocated financial resources,” notes a report from the European Accounting Agency from 2018 on the implementation of the European Flood Guidelines. Member states are often “not in a position” to “calculate the impact of climate change on the extent, frequency, and location of the appearance of floods.”

The same politicians who now shed crocodile tears in the disaster zones and incessantly pledge “rapid and unbureaucratic emergency help” are responsible for this situation. Over recent years, they have provided the banks and corporations with hundreds of billions of euros with no strings attached and repeatedly increased military spending. At the same time, they have carried out spending cuts that have plunged millions of workers and their families into poverty.

The ruling class exploited the pandemic to intensify its policy of redistribution from the bottom to the top. Within

the framework of the so-called coronavirus emergency bailout, all parties in the German federal parliament supported the pumping of billions of euros into the major corporations and banks. All parties in government are allowing the virus to spread so as to guarantee the profits of the financial oligarchy, while rejecting all scientific measures to protect the population. The result is over 4 million dead around the world, including more than 1 million in Europe and over 91,000 in Germany.

The same indifference to human life and the wellbeing of the population is being repeated in the current flood disaster. The joking and laughter captured on video in one of the disaster zones by North-Rhine Westphalia’s Minister President and Christian Democratic candidate for Chancellor, Armin Laschet, are merely the most disgusting examples of this.

After the initial shock, workers and young people will begin to draw far-reaching lessons from these experiences.

The struggle against climate change—like the struggle against the pandemic, and the danger of fascism and war—is a political one. It requires the revolutionary mobilisation of the working class against capitalism. The working population around the world bears the chief burden of the consequences of global warming. At the same time, it is being forced into struggle and is objectively defining itself as an international class whose elementary interests are irreconcilable with the capitalists’ private ownership of the means of production.

“No social problem can be resolved without expropriating the banks and corporations, and placing them under the democratic control of the working class,” states the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei’s election statement. “Their profits and wealth must be confiscated and the billions they received last year returned to the public purse. The world economy must be reorganised on the basis of a scientific and rational plan.”

This is the decisive lesson of the past few days. Only the socialist reorganisation of society can secure victory for the struggle against climate change, and a safe and just future for all.



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