

German federal and state governments did nothing despite warnings of flood catastrophe

Elisabeth Zimmermann
20 July 2021

The number of confirmed fatalities in the floods in Germany and Belgium has risen to over 200. In Ahrweiler district in the German state of Rhineland-Palatinate, at least 122 people lost their lives. Many remain missing. In the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, at least 48 people died. In Belgium, the number of dead stands at 31. Hundreds of people remain unaccounted for.

The extent of the devastation produced by the worst flooding disaster in Germany since the storm flood on the North Sea coast in 1962 is horrendous. Since the weekend, areas in Bavaria, Saxony, and Austria have also been hit by serious flooding.

Leading politicians who have visited the disaster zones over recent days have hypocritically declared their sympathy. They repeatedly state that the extent of the disaster and the speed with which relatively small rivers like the Ahr and Erft were transformed into raging torrents could not have been foreseen.

These claims are being exposed as lies by internationally-renowned scientists. The high number of fatalities is a direct product of the criminal inaction of governments at the federal and state levels. Although they were informed in advance, they did nothing to warn the people and save lives.

The British *Sunday Times* newspaper reported that the first indications of the approaching catastrophe were provided nine days in advance by images from a satellite. A team of scientists sent “the German authorities a series of forecasts so accurate that they now read like a macabre prophecy: the Rhineland was about to be hit by ‘extreme’ flooding, particularly along the Erft and Ahr rivers, and in towns such as Hagen and Altena,” noted the newspaper.

Four days prior to the floods, the European Flooding Alert System (EFAS) then warned the German and

Belgian governments about floods on the Rhine and Meuse rivers. Although these warnings stated quite precisely more than 24 hours in advance which districts would be affected, nothing happened.

The warnings of extreme rain storms were simply not transmitted to the people in the relevant areas by the responsible governments, authorities, and media outlets. Virtually no precautionary or protective measures were taken, and no evacuations of the worst-affected areas were ordered.

Germany got its preparations “badly wrong,” Hannah Cloke, a professor for hydrology at the University of Reading in the UK, told the *Sunday Times*. “A monumental failure of the system” led to one of the deadliest disasters in Germany’s post-war history.

“When I woke up [on Thursday] morning and saw how many people had died, I just thought: you can do better than this,” said Cloke. “I’m disappointed that particularly in the cities you had people washed away. That suggests that lots of things are going badly wrong.”

There was “certainly time” to have warned larger cities and communities and prepared evacuations. “People should have been receiving warnings; people should have understood the warnings.”

“We should not be seeing this number of deaths from floods in 2021,” Cloke said in an earlier interview. “It’s just unacceptable. There’s something going wrong with the system.”

The former president of the German Firefighters Association, Hartmut Ziebs, levelled serious accusations at the federal government. The government failed to sufficiently involve the population in national disaster protection plans, because they did not want to “burden” the people.

In an open letter cited by the *Bild* newspaper, he

stated, “The federal government has carried out exercises under the name ‘Lükex’ for years. The unthinkable was played out and analysed. Lists of recommendations were prepared. Results? Virtually nil! Can’t happen, won’t happen, we can’t explain it to the population, costs too much money, the list of reasons for rejection was almost never-ending.”

Similar comments were made by Wolfgang Clemen, professor of information systems at the Institute of Applied Sciences in Hamburg. As a member of the so-called protection commission, Clemen advised the federal government for many years on matters of national security and disaster prevention.

“Almost all exercises and scenarios ended with us putting our heads in our hands,” he said, according to *Der Spiegel*. “When it really comes down to it in Germany, the population is left to fend for itself.” Infrastructure to provide warnings has been dismantled, while warnings and reform proposals from experts have been ignored.

The *World Socialist Web Site* pointed out in a previous article that the resources for disaster protection were cut back severely over recent years. Neither the necessary measures to tackle climate change nor flood protection systems were financed, even though serious flooding has repeatedly occurred. Instead, hundreds of billions of euros were made available to the banks and corporations, and military spending was increased dramatically.

Social media is full of comments condemning a class that is prepared to sacrifice human lives to secure its class interests. Under the hashtag #Laschetwusstees (Laschet knew it, Armin Laschet is Minister President of North-Rhine Westphalia) and #Dreyerwusstees (Dreyer knew it, Manuela Dreyer is Minister President of Rhineland-Palatinate), people have vented their outrage against the heads of the two worst-affected states.

“Imagine how many people could have been saved if the warnings had been listened to, the population immediately informed, warned, and evacuated. Unfortunately, what we have here is a monumental system failure,” wrote one user. Another with the Twitter handle ShadowFax added, “Not a single warning system worked. Not one. This incredible ignorance towards science runs through all levels of political decision-making. Monumental system failure

at all levels.”

The ruling elite has already demonstrated its indifference towards human life during the coronavirus pandemic. In Germany alone, more than 91,000 people have fallen victim to their “profits before lives” policy. The same criminally irresponsible behavior is shown with regard to climate and disaster protection. Scientists and their warnings are ignored. Thousands of workers and their families pay the price for this with their health and even their lives.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact