

Flood disaster in Germany: massive damage and growing anger

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Over recent days, southern Germany, Saxony and Berlin have seen further heavy rainfall and flooding. Heavy flooding was likewise reported in Belgium, the city of Dinant near Namur being particularly hard-hit.

In the parts of Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia hardest hit by floods last week, residents continue to wrestle with the great number of fatalities, injuries and the immense damage caused to homes, businesses, stores, restaurants, hotels, roads, bridges and the entire infrastructure system.

Over 131 people lost their lives in the Ahr Valley of Rhineland-Palatinate. The dead drowned in their houses and apartments or were swept away by the masses of water. The normally tranquil Ahr River became a raging torrent, in places rising eight meters (26 feet) within a few hours. At least 149 people are still missing.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, officials have confirmed 47 deaths from the storm. Here, too, houses, roads and basic infrastructure were destroyed. Belgium has suffered at least 36 fatalities.

Deutsche Bahn, the German railway company, estimates that the damage to tracks, stations and rolling stock in Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia totals around 1.3 billion euro. By its figures, 600 kilometres of track, 50 bridges, dozens of stations and stops were affected.

Many areas hit by the floods still lack drinking water and electricity. Mobile phone networks remain widely disrupted. The damage to regional housing and infrastructure runs into the billions.

The emergency aid pledged so far by the federal and state governments, totalling 400 million euro, is but a drop in the bucket. This amounts to 1500 euro for a head of household and 500 euro for each additional family member, up to a maximum of 3500 euro.

Many of those affected doubt this aid will reach them promptly. Based on recent experience, notably the repercussions of the pandemic, residents fear that they will walk away entirely empty-handed, left to figure out how to recover on their own.

Of the approximately 50,000 people living along the Ahr River, more than 40,000 have been impacted by the flood. Emergency shelters for the newly homeless are often in deplorable condition. Mutual help and solidarity among residents has been tremendous; help from the state, on the other hand, is all but naught, as people from Ahrweiler told a team of reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* last Thursday.

As explained by the WSW in previous articles and statements, the disaster is not the outcome of an unavoidable natural occurrence. That the flood killed so many people and caused such devastation is a direct result of criminal inaction by federal and state governments over many years.

By the time residents were swept away by the deadly torrents, the government and authorities had long been warned but remained inactive, refusing to initiate evacuations and other protective measures. They did not even inform the population about the approaching danger.

The British *Sunday Times* reported that the first signs of the impending catastrophe had been indicated by satellite nine days before the flood occurred. Then, four days before the flood disaster, the European Flood Warning System (Efas) directly warned the German government. Further warnings, a full 24 hours before the event, predicted with pin-point precision which districts would be worst affected.

In its current cover story, entitled “Schutzlos: Mehr als 170 Tote - Chronik einer vermeidbaren Katastrophe,” [“Defenceless: More than 170

dead—Chronicle of an avoidable catastrophe”] the weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* explores some aspects of the government’s failure to take adequate precautions and warn the population.

Regarding warnings issued by the German Weather Service, meteorologists and scientists about the severe storms and attendant danger, *Der Spiegel* concludes: “So it could have been anticipated. In fact, it must have been anticipated.”

The magazine describes how roads were not closed despite the approaching deluge, warning systems were either non-existent or did not work, authorities underestimated the danger and existing disaster control structures did not interact.

The *Spiegel* report quotes a number of local politicians, among them Hubertus Kunz, the mayor of the small town of Mayschoss on the Ahr, who says he could not have imagined the water rising so high. When suddenly “a level of more than five meters was predicted,” he said he thought, “they’re crazy, that can’t possibly be right.” At least one in four of the town’s residents lost their homes in the flood and at least five people died. “Knowing what we know today, we should have evacuated,” Kunz said.

Der Spiegel also quotes local residents. They confirm that the warnings came too late and that authorities dramatically underestimated the impending disaster. Achim Lorenz, from the district of Ahrweiler, reports that the water level was already over 5.70 meters in the evening, far above previous flood levels.

“All the alarm bells should have been ringing,” Lorenz said. But it was not until much later, around midnight, that the fire department issued its first warning by loudspeaker. They simply asked people not to go into cellars and to stay on the upper floors. On this basis, “really no one” believed “that a historic catastrophe was imminent.”

For Lorenz, like many others, it is clear that governments and authorities are responsible for the fatalities. “There was enough time to adequately warn and save people,” he said, venting his anger. If “those responsible had acted properly, probably not as many people would have died.”

The *Spiegel* authors expressed concern about the growing anger and opposition among the population. Something “has shifted in Germany,” they note. It is “the question of how safe people can still feel here.

Whether citizens have the impression that the state protects them, whether they can rely on it when things get dangerous, life-threatening.”

During the pandemic it became clear that Germany “doesn’t function nearly as well as assumed.” The flood disaster now multiplies “this unease: it proves how ill-prepared this country is for extreme situations.”

Der Spiegel attributes the “problems” to “gaps, omissions and a tussle over competencies between the federal government, the states, and the municipalities,” as a result of which “expertise is not called upon.” This is nothing but diversion and an attempt to conceal the real causes. In both the flood and the pandemic, capitalism and its political representatives are responsible for the suffering and destruction.

In the pandemic, all governing parties deliberately allow the virus to spread and refuse to take the necessary measures to protect the population. Their main concern is to ensure the profits of the financial oligarchy, which enriched itself enormously over the last year. The consequence is over 91,000 deaths in Germany and more than four million, at least, worldwide.

The same inhuman indifference to the safety and lives of the population was again revealed in the flood disaster. Despite decades of warnings from scientists, nothing was done to address climate change. Disaster protection was bled dry, and investments urged by experts, such as a robust nationwide warning system, were ignored. Instead, billions were handed over to banks and corporations and flowed into military armament.

The ruling class is correctly concerned. “After the initial shock, workers and youth will begin to draw far-reaching consequences from the experience,” the WSWS writes in a recent comment. “The struggle against climate change, like the struggle against the pandemic and the danger of fascism and war, is a political question, a question of revolutionary mobilization of the working class against capitalism.”



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