

Flood victims in Germany criticise authorities for failure to provide warnings

Elisabeth Zimmermann
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It is becoming increasingly clear that the consequences of the flood catastrophe in Germany three weeks ago were not simply the result of a natural disaster of “unimaginable proportions,” but of the irresponsibility of politicians and authorities at the federal, state and local levels.

In Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia alone, 185 deaths have been confirmed so far. The destruction of houses, flats, businesses, roads, bridges and critical infrastructure such as water and electricity is devastating.

In Belgium, where from July 14 to 15 extreme amounts of heavy rain submerged parts of Wallonia, the flood disaster claimed at least 41 lives.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has in previous articles documented the fact that the disaster was not an unavoidable natural event. The fact that the floods killed so many people and caused such devastating damage is a direct result of the criminal inaction of government at all levels.

Well before people were caught in the deadly waters, governments and authorities had been warned. But they remained inactive and refused to initiate evacuations and protective measures. They did not even inform the population about the approaching danger.

In the Ahr valley in Rhineland-Palatinate, where the floods have claimed a particularly large number of lives, 138 people have died to date and 59 are still missing.

On Monday, the public prosecutor’s office in Koblenz announced that it had “initiated preliminary proceedings based on the suspicion of negligent homicide and negligent bodily harm.” Specifically, the case concerns the district of Ahrweiler: Were the responsible authorities too late in warning of the imminent but foreseeable floods, and did people come to harm and die as a result?

At the weekend, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported that the district of Ahrweiler had been directly warned about the flood. A level of almost seven metres was forecast for the Ahr—normally a small, peaceful river—for the night of July 14 to 15. The warnings came from the State Office for the Environment in Rhineland-Palatinate. Nevertheless, the district did not declare a disaster until late in the evening and did not initiate an evacuation of the threatened residential areas.

By the time an emergency was declared at 11 p.m., it was

already too late for evacuations. The rushing flood waters washed away numerous houses and deluged and killed many people, including 12 who drowned in their rooms on the ground floor of a facility for the severely disabled in Sinzig.

Crisis expert Frank Gottlieb told the *Rhein-Zeitung*, “Many deaths could have been prevented.”

Gottlieb holds the district administrator for Ahrweiler, Jürgen Pföhler (Christian Democratic Union--CDU), primarily responsible for the disaster-control failure and the lack of timely warning to the population.

Gottlieb does not accept the enormous scale of the flood as an excuse. “The dimensions of floods 200 years ago were even greater,” he said. “It was similar 100 years ago. Moreover, there were warnings at an early stage. Therefore, there is no reason not to have been prepared that evening.”

The crisis expert places the main responsibility on the district administrator. However, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of the Environment as well as the entire state government of Rhineland-Palatinate along with the federal government, cannot be exempted from their responsibility for the scale of death and destruction from the flood.

In an interview with business daily *Handelsblatt* shortly after the disaster, the climate and environment minister of Rhineland-Palatinate, Anna Spiegel of the Green Party, arrogantly stated that it was not possible to be protected from every extreme weather event.

Asked about flood prevention, Spiegel, who is deputy head of the state government, claimed, “But one must also say quite clearly: with the event we’ve had now, no flood prevention concept will help anymore.” In the interview, she repeatedly alluded to the financial limits of the state budget and demanded more help from the federal government.

Her statements, which are full of contempt for the needs of the people, express the real priorities of capitalist politicians at all levels. They have nothing to do with the need of the working class, the vast majority of the population, for safe working and living conditions. As in the pandemic, the policy of the capitalist class and its political representatives is profits before lives.

While hundreds of billions of euros are pumped into the accounts of the banks and corporations, swelling the fortunes of

the super-rich, and billions more are spent on armaments and war, the claim is that there is “no money” for the protection of the population from disasters, including the pandemic, or for the fight against poverty and social inequality. The same applies to the need for massive support for the people affected by the flood disaster.

The situation in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), where 47 people lost their lives and thousands face the destruction of their livelihoods and severe damage to their houses, businesses, schools, hospitals, roads and bridges, is similar to that in Rhineland-Palatinate.

NRW Minister-President Armin Laschet (CDU) faced criticism and anger from people affected by the catastrophe during recent visits to the flood-ravaged area. Among other things, he was called a “failure” Monday when he travelled to Swisstal near Bonn and to Schleiden. On Tuesday, he visited Stollberg near Aachen. To demonstrate the unity of the ruling class, he was accompanied by Federal Finance Minister Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party--SPD), his rival in the fight for the chancellorship in this fall’s elections.

One man in Swisstal complained there had been no support from the state government or the local administration. People had helped each other, he said, and volunteers, especially young people, had helped clean up.

The same experience--a complete lack of warnings and precautions and, after the disaster had occurred, of governmental help and support--was also had by flood victims in Ahrweiler. This was confirmed by several residents and people affected by the catastrophe in a **video** report on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“They could have gone through from 5 o’clock [warning people]. Then we wouldn’t have any dead people here!” said Alwin.

Bettina reported that absolutely nothing was done to provide warnings and evacuate people. She attributed this to austerity measures and other priorities of the politicians, such as arms spending.

All those affected described the inability and unwillingness of those politically responsible to warn people, to provide assistance and to save lives. Evacuation orders came so late that they could no longer be implemented.

The video, which has been online since 30 July, has now been viewed over 185,000 times. Many have commented approvingly on the statements of the affected residents and volunteers, because they speak from the heart and hit the nail on the head.

Games & More writes: “According to the statements of those responsible, everyone was warned. Here are hundreds of witnesses who can testify to the contrary. Who do you believe? The person who saw/heard neighbours die, or the person in charge who has a vested interest in dismissing the blame so he can continue to hold office and not lose his emoluments?”

Pheuer one writes: “The woman at the beginning is 100

percent right. Nothing was done because the government didn't want to spend money on evacuations. etc.”

Bin online writes: “I am watching your report for the second time. It is simply authentic. One looks for such reports in vain in the mainstream. Those that are there are cut together briefly. I am sitting on the terrace under the awning, and it is starting to rain. Slowly, the rain is getting heavier, and I shudder to think how the people in the Ahr valley fared that night. Best regards from southern Thuringia and much strength to all those affected.”

Need Username writes: “Thank you for the report on the complete and total failure of politics, public broadcasting and administration to warn the population. Most responsible for the failure in the Ahr valley is Malu Dreyer of the SPD! In the past, loudspeaker trucks drove around and warned of a flood. Now, nothing! You can also warn from a helicopter with very powerful loudspeakers. There has been nothing!”

The fact that the flood disaster and its victims hardly play a role in the official election campaign shows that the official parties and politicians are indifferent to the fate of people whose deaths could have been avoided.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) is demanding billions of euros in immediate assistance for flood victims so they can rebuild and repair their destroyed homes and businesses. All affected workers and families and small businesses must be fully compensated.

Billions more must be invested in renewing and securing the destroyed infrastructure as well as developing extensive protective measures. All necessary resources must be mobilised to immediately restore vital water and electricity supplies.

The implementation of these demands requires the mobilisation of the German and international working class for a socialist programme. The corporations, banks and super-rich, who have continued to enrich themselves during the pandemic, must be expropriated without compensation and their billions in assets used to meet the social needs of the people and carry out climate protection measures.

Only through a socialist transformation of society can the fight against climate change and for a safe and just life be won.



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