

Green Party environment minister worried more about her image than raising the alarm over last year's German floods

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Former Rhineland-Palatinate state Environment Minister Anne Spiegel (Green Party) was not concerned with the plight of the population during last year's severe flood disaster in the Ahr Valley, but about her image. This has been evidenced by recently published emails and chat transcripts. Spiegel has since risen to become federal Minister for Family Affairs in the traffic light coalition government of the Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Free Democrats (FDP) headed by Olaf Scholz (SPD).

The flood disaster, which claimed well over 200 lives, hit parts of North Rhine-Westphalia, Rhineland-Palatinate, the Netherlands and Belgium from July 14 to 15. In the Ahr Valley in Rhineland-Palatinate alone, 134 people were killed and over 700 injured. The destruction of houses, apartments, businesses, roads, bridges and central infrastructure such as water and electricity supply was and remains devastating.

The WSWs wrote on August 4: "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."

This assessment is confirmed by a report in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) on March 9. The newspaper obtained confidential files from the committee of enquiry set up by the Rhineland-Palatinate state legislature on the flood disaster in the Ahr Valley. These contain emails and chat transcripts from Spiegel, who was climate and environment minister in the state government at the time of the flood.

On the morning of July 15, the extent of the destruction

caused by the flood could only be guessed at. As the deluge unfolded, houses were destroyed; cars were left hanging in trees; countless uprooted trees and destroyed cars clogged the roads, as far as they had not been destroyed; people were missing, some of whom had been taken by surprise and drowned or washed away by the floodwater while sleeping in their houses; some were still holding out on the roofs of their houses, where they had rescued themselves during the night. However, the Environment Ministry press office and Spiegel herself were mainly concerned about their own image.

In a text message sent by a Ministry of the Environment employee to Spiegel, and almost identically to her press spokesman at the time, Dietmar Brück, it was said that the situation was "very serious," that a disaster situation had been declared in several districts and that people were missing.

The response was not to set everything in motion to hurry to the aid of the distressed, to help them find the missing and injured, to organise emergency shelters, to provide medical care and to clean up the damage. Rather, these tasks were taken over by thousands of volunteers over the next few weeks.

Instead, press spokesman Brück wrote to Spiegel and the staffer saying that the heavy rain event would be "the dominant theme." This meant, "Anne needs a credible role," but it should "not look like being politically instrumentalised."

More exposing statements on the division of labour in the state executive followed. For example, Brück's communication said Minister President Malu Dreyer (SPD) "will make the expressions of sympathy," but information about the flood situation and warnings could come from the Environment Ministry. It was necessary to be careful that Dreyer and SPD Interior Minister Roger

Lewentz did start talking about “a five-point plan against heavy rain.”

To which Spiegel replied, “That coincides with my thinking. ... The blame game could start immediately, we need to put out wording that we warned in time, we always made all data transparent, I had warned in cabinet, that without prevention and precautionary measures everything would have been worse, etc.” Roger might even “say that the disaster could have been prevented or would not have been so bad if we as the Environment Ministry had warned earlier.”

So, these were the “concerns” and reflections of Spiegel and her staff as the scale of the disaster became clear and the death toll in the Ahr Valley rose hourly.

Yes, it would have been the task of Spiegel’s Environment Ministry to warn the population loudly and to evacuate all residents along the Ahr as quickly as possible. Based on the advance warnings of meteorologists and the forecast water levels, for which the State Office for the Environment was responsible, urgent warnings could and should have been issued.

On July 14 at 3:24 p.m., the state office in Altenahr forecast a water level of over five metres, far higher than the “flood of the century” in 2016. But Spiegel’s Environment Ministry still sent out an email at 4:43 p.m. saying that there was “no threat of extreme flooding.”

However, according to the *Koblenzer Rhein-Zeitung*, before the press release was published, Spiegel was more concerned with its grammar than its false assertion there was no serious flood danger.

Shortly after the email was sent, Environment Ministry employees noticed that the information was obsolete. State Secretary Erwin Manz (Greens) is said to have written to the press office shortly after 6 p.m. saying the press release was “obsolete,” reports the FAZ, referring to information from the committee of enquiry. There had been an extreme event on the Ahr, a campsite had been evacuated, it was said. When asked if there was still anything to be done, Manz answered “not today.” In this way, valuable time was wasted during which many lives could have been saved.

Spiegel was to testify before the state parliament’s investigative committee on Friday. But her attitude, as expressed in the published emails and chat transcripts, does not indicate she will take responsibility for the failure to warn the population and the ensuing disaster.

In an interview with finance daily *Handelsblatt* shortly after the flood disaster in July last year, Spiegel arrogantly stated that one could not protect oneself against every

extreme weather event.

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

In reality, her statements—as well as the emails and chat transcripts that have now come to light, which are full of contempt for the needs of the people—expressed the real priorities of all capitalist politicians. And these are not the interests of the working class, the vast majority of the population, for safe living and working conditions. As in the pandemic, the same applies to the environment: profits before lives.

While Spiegel has meanwhile ascended to the federal government as family minister, tens of thousands in the Ahr Valley, and others affected by the flood disaster, are still waiting for the promised “generous” state support. The application process is so extensive and complicated that many have not even been able to submit a claim so far and are more or less on their own. Others are waiting for important information and permits to be able to repair and rebuild their houses and apartments. Reconstruction and the repair of public infrastructure also continues to be a long time coming.

In addition to the effects of the floods, the coronavirus pandemic and mounting social miseries, exacerbated by rising inflation, the threat of another catastrophic world war now looms. Here, too, the Greens are playing the leading role in the return of German militarism. They are at the forefront of warmongering and war hysteria against Russia, without ever saying a word about the responsibility of NATO, the US and German governments for provoking the war in Ukraine.



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