Green Party minister resigns from German cabinet after flood disaster

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Four months after taking office, Germany's coalition government has lost its first member. On Monday afternoon, Green family minister Anne Spiegel announced via email that she had decided to step down "due to political pressure."

This follows more and more details emerging about the complete irresponsibility with which she had reacted to the Ahr valley flood disaster, which claimed 134 lives last summer. As state environment minister of Rhineland-Palatinate, Spiegel failed to warn the valley's residents in time of the approaching flood wave, which could have prevented most of the deaths.

The "political pressure" Spiegel mentions in her resignation letter comes from her own party. The minister had become a liability for the Greens because her efforts to save herself through advancing ever new excuses and lies exposed the real character of the party. As newsweekly *Der Spiegel* put it, she had become a "symbolic figure for failures and blunders by the authorities and politicians before and during the deadly flood in the Ahr valley."

Minister Spiegel embodies a social milieu whose world revolves only around their own sensitivities, prepared to walk over corpses to advance their careers, and with nothing but contempt for the less well off.

Although meteorologists had been warning of extreme flooding for days, Spiegel's environment ministry did nothing to warn and evacuate the population. Even on the afternoon of July 14, when the responsible agency had long since reported the highest water level in living memory, the ministry sent out an email saying there was "no threat of extreme flooding." The only correction Spiegel made to the email was to insist it use properly gendered language.

As the full extent of the disaster became apparent the following morning, the minister and her closest aides were more concerned with their media image than the victims and the flood damage. While the death toll rose hourly, Spiegel took care to use correct "wording" to cover up her responsibility.

Although Spiegel's misconduct during the flood disaster was well known, the leaders of the Green Party, Robert Habeck and Annalena Baerbock, brought her into the new federal cabinet at the end of last year as part of the three-party coalition with the Social Democrats (SPD) and Liberal Democrats (FDP). She fulfilled the necessary gender and internal party faction quota.

But the revelations about her reckless behaviour in the flood disaster did not stop.

In March, speaking before the investigative committee of the Rhineland-Palatinate state parliament, Spiegel and her state secretary, Erwin Manz, denied any responsibility. They claimed that the Environment Ministry was only tasked with converting precipitation reports into water levels and to report these values to the affected municipalities and district councils. Everything else had to happen "on site." It was not the ministry's responsibility to issue warnings to the population, they claimed.

Finally, it became known that Spiegel had gone on a four-week holiday in France with her family ten days after the flood disaster, interrupting it only once for an on-site visit to the Ahr valley. She spoke with helpers there and had photos taken that gave the impression she cared about the flood victims.

At that time, the people in the Ahr valley were mourning their dead relatives. Tens of thousands stood in front of the ruins of their homes and lives, waiting for urgently needed help and the speedy reconstruction of the destroyed infrastructure. Spiegel claimed she had attended cabinet meetings online during her holiday,

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but this turned out to be a lie.

As calls for her resignation grew louder, Spiegel tried to save her job last Sunday by making a tearful appearance before the media. At a press conference called at short notice, she justified her holiday by citing her husband's health problems. It was said he had been taking care of the children and should not be exposed to any more stress following a stroke in 2019, and that there was the added stress of the pandemic on her four children (three of primary school age, one of nursery age). For this, she would like to apologise.

While a bus driver who causes a serious accident through personal negligence is held responsible, even if he or she is under family stress, this should not apply to a minister with an annual salary of over €100,000 euros, apparently.

Moreover, hardly any family in Germany can afford to assign one parent to look after the children full-time and go on holiday to France for four weeks. Even the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*noted, "Spiegel's apology and the ensuing debate only show how far away Green politicians have become with their political-moral standards from the material everyday life of many families."

Coronavirus stress also has political causes. Even two years after the start of the pandemic, the federal and state governments have failed to adequately equip schools to conduct proper online teaching and to supervise students. While they have pumped hundreds of billions in coronavirus aid into the corporations and banks, increased the arms budget by €100 billion and even subsidised electric cars with up to €10,000, there is a lack of internet connections, computers, and sufficient teaching staff.

The ruthless "profits before lives" policy of the state and federal governments, of which Spiegel herself was a member for six years, has also caused the number of infections to explode. Three quarters of the 23 million infections registered in Germany since the beginning of the pandemic fall into the four-month term of office of the "traffic light" coalition of the SPD, Greens and FDP. The political irresponsibility that finally forced Spiegel to resign can be found here on a large scale.

Spiegel is not an isolated case. Ursula Heinen-Esser, the state environment minister in North Rhine-Westphalia, where 49 people died because of the flood disaster, also resigned last Thursday. The Christian Democrat (CDU) politician had behaved in a similarly irresponsible manner as her Green colleague in Rhineland-Palatinate.

Heinen-Esser was on holiday in Mallorca at the time of the flood. She travelled back for an emergency meeting of the state cabinet but then returned to her Spanish holiday island the same day. She, too, tried to cover up her behaviour with lies and excuses.

First, she claimed she had only returned to Mallorca for four days to organise the return trip of her underage daughter and her friends. Later it turned out that she had stayed on the island for nine more days, celebrating her husband's 76th birthday with cabinet colleagues who were her friends.

These cabinet colleagues included Stephan Holthoff-Pförtner, Minister for European Affairs, Serap Güler, State Secretary for Integration, and Ina Scharrenbach, Minister of Domestic Affairs, who was responsible for the reconstruction of the flooded areas. Heinen-Esser had appointed Scharrenbach as her deputy for "cabinet affairs." Now it turns out that one and a half weeks after the worst German flood disaster in decades, both were in Mallorca at the same time for three days for private reasons.

The indifference to the needs of ordinary working people expressed in the behaviour of Spiegel and Heinen-Esser shows the real priorities of all the capitalist parties. This will not change even after their resignation.

The same contempt for human life is also expressed in foreign policy. The Greens, SPD, CDU, and all the other establishment parties are outdoing each other in demanding Germany supply heavy weapons to Ukraine, risking a nuclear third world war. In the process, it is becoming clearer by the day that NATO is waging a proxy war against Russia, in which the Ukrainian population serves merely as cannon fodder.

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