

One year after the German flood disaster, angry victims complain: “We have received nothing”

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It will soon be one year since the flood disaster in mid-July 2021 affected several regions of Western Europe. “Like a war zone” was how residents of these flooded areas described their situation at the time. Today, one year later, this assessment still applies to large parts of the affected areas.

On July 14 and 15, 2021, severe weather and heavy rain unleashed huge flood waves in the German states of Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia, and in Belgium. More than 220 people lost their lives. The masses of water destroyed and damaged thousands of houses, roads, bridges, large parts of infrastructure, schools, hospitals, doctors’ offices, shops, hotels and guesthouses, shops and businesses, in short: the lives and livelihoods of thousands of people.

The damage was worst in Ahrtal in Rhineland-Palatinate, where the flooding of the river Ahr reached record levels. Hundreds were injured and 9,000 buildings destroyed or severely damaged; 134 people lost their lives. The water level reached to the ceiling in many houses. Tens of thousands of people were without electricity, drinking water and telephone services for days, many for weeks.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, the flooding of the rivers Ahr, Erft and Rur as well as the Ruhr and Wupper caused enormous damage. Forty-nine people lost their lives in the state, while the flood also claimed 38 lives in Wallonia, Belgium.

Almost all of the victims shared the same experience: when the flood came, there was no alarm, no advance warnings and no precautionary evacuations organised by the responsible federal, state and local authorities, although meteorologists and other scientists had warned of the danger days before. Even during and after the flood, the authorities failed to provide coordinated aid.

In contrast, the help provided by those affected and by volunteers, some of whom travelled long distances to aid the flood victim, was outstanding and their support continues to this day. “We couldn’t have done it without the many volunteers,” reads a Facebook page from the Ahr valley.

A few days after the flood disaster, the *World Socialist Web Site* published its statement, “The floods in Europe and the bankruptcy of capitalism,” which identified the dual causes of the flood disaster:

“First, it is the direct product of the climate crisis produced by the capitalist profit system, which is leading to ever more extreme weather events,” it said. Flood disasters and droughts have long been known and researched as consequences of the climate crisis, but although they ultimately threaten “the survival of the planet and all humanity,” “the ruling class is incapable of and unwilling to adopt serious climate protection measures because this would undermine its

economic and geostrategic interests.”

Secondly, the WSWs pointed to the “decades of underfunding and cuts to infrastructure, including flood barriers, a working early warning system and a disaster prevention system. International experts have pointed out that the high death toll is directly bound up with inadequacies in these areas.”

Criminal negligence was clearly at play in the flood disaster. During the federal election campaign at that time, Chancellor Angela Merkel and the candidates for chancellor Armin Laschet (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party, SPD) all visited the flooded areas and promised quick emergency aid and “unbureaucratic assistance.” A €30 billion reconstruction fund, financed half by the federal government and half by the state governments of NRW and Rhineland-Palatinate, was set up.

However, only the immediate emergency aid of up to €3,500 per household, and thus not even the proverbial drop in the bucket, was actually made available in an uncomplicated manner and arrived relatively quickly. Most people are still waiting in vain for the much needed, higher levels of financial aid from the reconstruction fund.

In its programme “The anguish after the Ahr flood” (17 May 2022) the ARD television channel reported that only a handful of those entitled had received financial support due to the complicated application procedures for financial assistance. Almost a year after the flood, the destruction is still omnipresent. Although politicians had promised quick help, aid has still not reached those who urgently need it.

According to the ARD report, the authorities in Rhineland-Palatinate expected 10,000 applications, but many victims were unable to overcome the considerable bureaucratic hurdles put in their way. So far, only 700 have received money from the responsible investment and structural bank ISB and just five applications(!) have been fully paid out. So almost a year after the flood, nearly 10,000 affected people in Rhineland-Palatinate alone are still waiting for support.

In addition, there are widespread fears that reconstruction will not take place based on scientific analyses of the causes of the flood. It is still unclear where houses close to the Ahr river and washed away by the flood are to be rebuilt. A new flood prevention concept is still not available and, according to one expert, this may take at least another two to three years.

The criminal inaction of the authorities continues to this day and has provoked angry comments from flood victims.

“The money is not being paid out,” one local resident, a restaurateur in Ahrweiler, told the WSWs. “Several million euros were collected

via donations for the flood victims. Half of this money is supposed to have been paid out so far, but where is the other half? Nothing has reached us. The government is able to find 100 billion euros for the Bundeswehr and send weapons to Ukraine that cost many more billions, but what about us?"

On May 12, 150 to 200 people affected by the flood demonstrated in Ahrweiler organised by the initiative "Ahrtal—Wir stehen auf" ("Ahr Valley—We are making a stand"). On Facebook, those affected by the flood wrote that they were "angry, sad, disappointed and shocked."

They are demanding the maintenance of supply tents and stations: "These must remain as long as they are needed. For those affected—who are still without kitchens—as well as for the aid workers we still need in the valley." Another demand is to keep landfills open, where residents and volunteers can continue to dispose of rubbish from their damaged houses free of charge. The initiative also complains about the length of time and bureaucracy involved in applying for money, as well as the failure to repair landscape and infrastructure that remains in a ruinous condition.

In May, new plans by state and federal politicians rekindled the anger and outrage in the flooded areas. The plans confirmed the gulf between those affected and an aloof political elite. In April, the district of Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler decided to organise a commemoration on the anniversary of the flood disaster on July 14. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Rhineland-Palatinate Premier Malu Dreyer (both SPD) are due to speak.

The local environment and district committee only learned of the plan on May 16 and was supposed to approve the additional expenditure of €155,000 for the organisation of the event, with much of the expenditure for security measures. It was assumed that the state would cover a large part of the expenses, with the district providing €50,000, when necessary, from a donations pot for flood victims! After some controversial discussions, the environment and district committee initially agreed to the plan.

When these plans and the high costs became known, an eruption of anger from the population forced the district of Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler to immediately withdraw its consent for such an expensive commemoration. Eventually, the responsible politicians agreed on an event that should not cost more than €30,000 from the district treasury.

Notable during the flood catastrophe was the behaviour of two politicians, Anne Spiegel (Greens, Rhineland-Palatinate) and Ursula Heinen-Esser (CDU, North Rhine-Westphalia), the environment ministers of their respective states. Both politicians had to resign months later.

Following the federal election in 2021, Anne Spiegel was appointed minister for Family Affairs in the current "traffic light" coalition of the Greens, SPD and Free Democratic Party (FDP). The parliamentary investigation committee of Rhineland-Palatinate revealed, however, that she had taken a four-week family holiday shortly after the flood. Her CDU colleague from NRW had also continued her trip to Majorca despite the deadly flood and later made false statements about her holiday. Both politicians embody the indifference and contempt that prevails in the elite for the working population.

The undignified handling of the Parliamentary Investigation Committee (PUA) in North Rhine-Westphalia is also significant. The new state government of North Rhine-Westphalia, which now includes the Greens as well as the CDU, wanted to quietly wind up the committee, although no final report has been submitted. The SPD and FDP recently agreed, however, to continue the committee—mainly in

response to public anger and opposition. The SPD was also apparently initially willing to simply let the investigative committee expire.

This demonstrates how insignificant a real clarification of the flood disaster is for these politicians of all political stripes: how the disaster could happen in the first place, who is responsible, and how such disasters can be prevented in the future.

The working class must draw the necessary conclusions. It cannot rely on capitalist politicians in the struggle against the climate catastrophe and its effects—floods, droughts, forest fires, etc. It needs an independent perspective.

Millions of people worldwide have been affected by flooding or heat disasters for many years now. Fierce fires are being reported from Greece and Spain and floods from Turkey, the US, Asia and Australia. In Africa, millions of people are suffering from droughts. In India and Bangladesh, thousands have just lost their lives and millions their homes and shelters due to particularly heavy rains and floods.

The profit-before-lives politics and inhuman indifference of the ruling class that characterises the coronavirus pandemic—with 20 million deaths worldwide and over 140,000 deaths in Germany—is also evident in the flood disaster.

Hundreds of billions of euros and dollars were poured into the pockets of the big corporations and banks during the pandemic. Hundreds of billions more are now being poured into fuelling the war between NATO and Russia in Ukraine, with the constant threat that this war will lead to a nuclear exchange and the destruction of humanity. At the same time, the working class is being forced to pay for the war through rising inflation and the exploding cost of living.

Opposition to these intolerable conditions is developing worldwide. The struggle against climate change and the dangers and catastrophes associated with it is bound up with the struggle against social inequality, pandemic, fascism and war. It requires the revolutionary mobilisation of the working class against capitalism. Only through a worldwide socialist reorganisation of society, putting the needs of the vast majority of the population first, can the struggle against climate change be won and ensure that flood disasters like that of July 2021 are never repeated.



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