

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Tide begins to turn against Greens

Environmentalist insanity in Germany is meeting stronger opposition, as reactions to the Rhine flood show.

The Feb. 19 elections for state parliament in Hesse were another black day in German parliamentary democracy: They brought the reelection of the "red-green" government coalition of Social Democrats and Greens, and, worse, showed a significant increase of votes for the Green party, from 8% (in 1991) to 11%. The Greens will try to capitalize on their increased vote with more anti-industrialism.

Yet, there are also countermoves. Reality, once it turns catastrophic, wipes all sympathies for ecologism off the agenda. This is the lesson learned by the Dutch Greens after the most recent flooding which threatened the lives of several hundred thousand citizens because the dikes that should have protected them, proved to be weak and too low, because no work had been done on them for 20 years due to ecologist obstructionism.

The fact that at the peak of the flood, a quarter-million Dutch citizens had to evacuate their homes, caused a public outcry against the Greens. All of a sudden, the government of the Netherlands found that ecologism ranked second to reconstruction, and a national emergency project to flood-proof 700 kilometers of dikes was passed by the cabinet and parliament within a few days after the flood had subsided.

The Dutch have been "pioneers of ecologism" in Europe. If the seemingly omnipotent Greens can suffer a setback there, can it happen elsewhere?

It can, and it did. The Rhine flood also hit Germany, though it was of smaller dimensions—the dikes were

stronger than in the Netherlands. But the public outcry against the Greens could be heard even in the state of Hesse. There, the population was up in arms over a World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) initiative presented at the end of January at the peak of the flood, for turning several densely populated areas into emergency flood zones to absorb excess water.

At a press event in Frankfurt on Jan. 31, Emil Distel of the WWF in Germany called for a broad-scale "renaturalization" of the Rhine, to return it back to the riverbed it had about 150-200 years ago. Besides radical measures such as accelerated deurbanization of the region and decreased agricultural use of lands, the WWF recommended that the entire area around the city of Trebur in southern Hesse be turned into a special flood zone. This would put 20% of the region under water during flooding, surround only parts of the urban area with a dike system, and turn the city into an island in the water. The city, which fought a similar WWF plan in 1993, attacked the new plan as "out of this world."

In 1993, Trebur proposed an alternate controlled flooding area closer to the Rhine—the uninhabited Kühkopf swamp area. This project, however, met fierce opposition from the WWF, which stated that the arable lands and even parts of the urban areas of Trebur were of "less value in ecological terms" than the Kühkopf. In other words, flood the people.

Strong public opposition prevented the state government from debating the WWF plan, and the ecologist pro-

posal for the "renaturalization of the riverscape" (which had been prepared long before the flood) was shelved. Part of the after-effect of this was that in the Feb. 19 state elections, many voters in the districts close to the Rhine and Main rivers deserted the Social Democrats, which lost up to 10% of the vote. Many voters even stayed away from the polls entirely.

But voter abstention helped the Greens, who control the yuppie constituencies in the rich quarters of certain urban districts. In the Frankfurt banking area, the Greens received 27% of the vote! But elections and reality are two different things: As the Trebur case showed, the Greens will be faced with strong resistance once they propose specific projects.

In other regions, the same phenomenon can be observed. At the end of February, in order to transfer an ocean liner that had been built in the inland Meyer shipyard in Papenburg on the Ems River, to the seaport of Emden, the Ems had to be deepened by 50 cm—a project which ecologists and the Green party fought fiercely on grounds of "protecting nature."

But the population protested. In the summer of 1994, there were repeated demonstrations against the Greens. In one, 3,000 protesters, many from the shipyard, carried banners reading "WWF Job-Killers." The Greens were defeated. The state government of Lower Saxony, also a red-green coalition, backed the protesters; the project went ahead.

Another defeat was suffered by the Greens in Lower Saxony. Reviewing the recent floods, the minister of environmental affairs, Monika Griefahn, unexpectedly overruled ecologist views and gave the go-ahead for an ambitious dike-building program along the North Sea coasts of the state. Griefahn is a former top manager of Greenpeace in Germany.