

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Will Germans ever land on Mars?

Budget-cutters and ecologists are threatening the existence of the German aerospace sector—with help from the British.

Compared to other budgets, the planned cut of 2.5% in the FY 1997 budget of the Ministry of Research and Technology appeared rather small. This comes in close connection, however, with cuts in the defense budget—which affects many R&D projects in aerospace, as well. These cuts involve vital “investment” funds for long-term projects, which, argue the budget-balancers, produce no short-term revenue; according to them, private industry should do more and relieve the state of its financial burdens.

No doubt German industry can and should do more; but, as far as the genuine, long-term interests of a leading industrial nation like Germany are concerned, the state has a crucial part to play, and cannot “opt out,” not least, because other governments are giving considerable support to their national aerospace sectors. And because that is the reality, in spite of all that neo-liberal economic propaganda alleging that “more deregulation is needed in Germany,” the aerospace industry is quite embarrassed at the Bonn budget-cutters.

On July 5, Manfred Bischoff, president of the national association of aerospace enterprises (DLR), denounced the planned budget cuts as “the wrong signal, if Germany wants to remain a leading industrial nation into the next century.” Bischoff continued that “given the ongoing restructuring of the aerospace industry in Europe, Germany is threatened with being turned into a pawn on the chessboards of other European nations.” Although he did not name names, everybody knew he meant the British and

the French, who are not very interested in a strong German aerospace sector.

The maneuvering against the Germans has intensified, even after reunification in 1990 (which influential circles in London and Paris opposed), and even more so, since London and Paris resolved a year ago, to build up a front against the Clinton administration and what they see as “its German proxy on the continent.”

The new Anglo-French Entente Cordiale, as recently as mid-July, was successful in outmaneuvering the Germans over a profitable aerospace agreement with China, and having an Anglo-French group get the contract to design a Chinese regional air carrier.

The British have also tried to sabotage the Franco-German cooperation, especially in space research and the new Ariane-5 launch vehicle. Ironically, the British have had most of their success not by talking to the French, but by convincing the Germans that space research budgets absorb too much money. The German government has been in the forefront, in recent years, in efforts to downsize state-funded European space programs, to scrap “costly” manned space missions that have no immediate commercial results. Instead, commercial satellite launchings which are said to bring short-term revenues, are being pushed.

But it is in the field of manned space missions, that the Germans have a technological margin that the British and French, who have always been more interested in the immediate military benefit of space projects, do not

have. German space engineers developed and built the module for the 1980s NASA Columbus space station mission, and they have also designed numerous key components for scientific exploratory missions, to prepare for manned missions to the Moon and Mars.

A team of engineers in Marburg has just presented their prototype of a relay satellite, Amsat P3-D, which has been designed for a role in Mars missions. It is intended to serve as a reliable “telephone cell in space,” in an orbiter near Mars, to transmit vital data between the exploratory probes on the Martian surface and Earth. A German component also serves an unmanned mission of Russia to the red planet, Mars 96, which will be launched at the end of this year.

Impressive as these contributions may look, they are a result of programs that were authorized 5 or 10 years ago. There is no such program in Bonn at present.

The German-born leading NASA staffer, Jesco von Puttkamer, who in the 1960s worked with Wernher von Braun’s Apollo project, had some warnings for the Germans, when he came to receive an honorary degree from the University of Saarbrücken on July 15. In an interview with the weekend supplement of the July 6-7 *Berliner Morgenpost*, which mostly dealt with the future of the Mars missions, he said that it was quite absurd that “Germany, which is where many of the space travel pioneers originated, has cancelled its involvement for the rest of this century, and thereby has decoupled from the moving train.

“If a country like Germany hesitates for much longer, it could wake up one day and realize that it has turned from a supplier into a client, because others meanwhile have explored the potentials of outer space,” Von Puttkamer warned.