

Report from Germany by Rainer Apel

When will the maglev finally run?

Some people are getting fed up with the government's failure to push forward construction of the maglev rail line.

On Oct. 18, something quite unusual happened in the city of Kassel: 560 workers from the Thyssen Transrapid System plant took to the streets, calling on the German government to put an end to the protracted uncertainty over the project to build a magnetically levitated train line from Hamburg to Berlin. Construction on the first operational maglev line, connecting Germany's two biggest cities, still has not begun—15 months after the beginning was originally scheduled in the spring of 1998. No progress has been made in the one year that Social Democratic Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has been in office, because of his government's obsession with budget-balancing.

The protesters in Kassel, who were joined by Hesse State Gov. Roland Koch and State Economics Minister Dieter Posch (both are Christian Democrats) reminded Schröder of a promise he had made personally in Kassel, at an election campaign event on Sept. 1, 1998. Schröder had said: "The maglev train which has been developed here, will go into operation. We will build this train. . . . Nobody in Kassel should be worried about his job."

But people, and not only those in Kassel, are worried. The Schröder government has put the entire project into question, with its refusal to cover the funding gap of 3 billion deutsche-marks (roughly \$1.9 billion) for the construction of the line. The government has created additional obstacles with its "compromise" proposal to build a single-track line only, instead

of the dual-track one that is in the original plan. This would mean that the same track would have to be used for traffic in both directions, reducing the frequency of traffic. Such a system would never have the number of passengers required to be profitable.

Learning about this latest idiotic plan, Adtranz, one of the three main producers of the Transrapid maglev system, threatened to pull out from the project, in a statement on Oct. 13. Thyssen, in turn, declared that it was committed to the project, but if the funding of the Hamburg-Berlin line were not secured in Germany, it would search for another investor abroad. Siemens, the third producer, is also still committed to going ahead.

The role of Thyssen is crucial, because it produces the revolutionary maglev-based system of traction and levitation, while the other two contractors in the Transrapid Group manufacture parts of the system that are also produced for conventional trains. Thyssen Transrapid System presently has about 1,000 skilled workers employed in Kassel, and secures the jobs of 5,000 more people in feeder industrial firms elsewhere. An estimated 18,000 would be employed, additionally, in construction work on the Hamburg-Berlin line. The construction would take five years, and the line would be fully operational a year after the completion of the project.

There are plans, at Thyssen, for expanding the maglev workforce to 20,000, and the jobs in the supplying firms to more than 100,000, during the first decade of the next century.

This assumes that the completion of the pilot project between Hamburg and Berlin will provide the impetus for further projects from Berlin to Europe's east and southeast, and from Hamburg to Europe's west and north. The implementation of the Hamburg-Berlin line is also the necessary precondition for Germany's ability to sell the maglev system abroad: A memorandum presented by the Chamber of Commerce of Hamburg in August mentions the United States prominently, with options for maglev lines being built in Florida, California, and Pennsylvania.

But the battle over funding is still not decided. There are more people inside Schröder's Social Democratic Party (SPD) now, than in past years, who support maglev technology. And, unlike the Christian Democrats, who prefer that the maglev be funded by "the free market" (which has failed), SPD politicians have called for an intervention by the state, either as a credit guarantor, or a direct funder, of the maglev technology.

During a debate in the state Parliament of Lower Saxony on Oct. 10, Sigmar Gabriel, chairman of the SPD parliamentary group, made the proposal to look for additional state guarantees for maglev loans, but he also said that the Transrapid system would become more attractive for investors if there were the perspective of a larger maglev grid, beyond the Hamburg-Berlin project. Gabriel endorsed a "European perspective for maglev grids, for example Netherlands-Lower Saxony-Bremen-Hamburg-Mecklenburg/Prepomerania-Berlin-Warsaw-Moscow." This proposal opens the door for a much broader discussion on trans-continental maglev grids: for example, the proposal for a Eurasian maglev grid, from Rotterdam to Beijing, as has been proposed by the LaRouche movement.