

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Maglev project gets a green light

The cabinet has finally given the official go-ahead for Germany to enter a new era of transportation.

On March 2, the Bonn cabinet finally voted for the construction of the first track for a Transrapid maglev train. The project is long overdue: It has been debated for more than 20 years.

Running at 10-minute intervals, the Transrapid is designed to carry 600 passengers at a maximum speed of 400 kilometers per hour in less than 60 minutes over the distance of 285 km between the nation's two biggest cities, Berlin and Hamburg.

The project, which will be carried out by a group of private investors with state backing, requires an input of DM 5.6 billion for the construction of the track, and another DM 3.3 billion for rolling stock and operating costs. Experts believe that 12-13 million, maybe 15 million passengers, will use the Hamburg-Berlin maglev annually.

The train will, as Minister of Transportation Matthias Wissmann said, begin full service in the year 2005. But there are still many bureaucratic hurdles to cross.

The Transrapid, which entered the experimental phase in 1971, has been fought over 23 years now by a powerful cartel of bureaucrats, ecologists, and "experts" who call the technology "expensive" and "immature."

The maglev represents a revolution in transport technology: It doesn't run on wheels, but is driven by a magnetic device inside the body of the locomotive that corresponds with the alternate magnetic pole inside the tracks; the energy supply for the new system is unlimited because it is fed in through the tracks, and since these

are not touched at all by the train, which "rides" on a 10-millimeter air cushion, there is minimum friction, so that the train can run, over very long distances, at an average speed of 400 km/hour.

Granted, that speed can also be reached by wheel-driven trains like the French TGV or the German ICE, but only over shorter distances.

The first big problem for the maglev train emerged in 1972, when the Bonn government okayed the development of the high-speed ICE (Inter-city Express). This was fought and delayed by the same cartel that was sabotaging the Transrapid, but over the years, pragmatists in Bonn began to favor that system as "easier to realize than maglev technology." The ICE began commercial service in June 1991—ten years after the French had introduced their TGV.

Then the anti-progress cabal decided to lift their ban on the ICE, which they saw as a "lesser evil" in comparison to the Transrapid. A prominent argument of the anti-maglev group since 1990 has been that since the French TGV and the German ICE are the dominant systems on the market, the future high-speed rail grid of Europe would then be based on conventional, wheel-driven trains, with no room for the maglev. It was an open question whether the Transrapid would ever be built.

But the setback which the German ICE technology suffered in the autumn of 1993, when the government of South Korea decided to give to the French the multibillion-deutschemark contract for a 400 km rail track be-

tween Seoul and Pusan, and buy the French TGV, helped to shift the balance of forces inside Germany in favor of the maglev technology. Critics of the Transrapid were increasingly faced with charges of sabotage against the one transport technology in the world in which Germany still has an edge over the French producers of the TGV, and over the Japanese and the Americans, who have national projects for maglev train development as well, and are lagging behind the Germans by a margin of only a few years.

The positive Bonn cabinet vote for the Transrapid Hamburg-Berlin line has not removed all obstacles yet. Guided by its fiscal austerity philosophy, the government insists that the "costly" Transrapid be realized on a private-initiative basis. This requires a change in the laws which define public infrastructure as under state jurisdiction. But all new legislation has to pass both houses of the parliament, the national assembly (Bundestag) and the house of the 16 states (Bundesrat).

There seem to be no problems in the cabinet, and, as this government holds a parliamentary majority, no big problem in the Bundestag either; but the Bundesrat, with its veto rights, is controlled by a solid majority of opposition Social Democrats (SPD), who oppose the Transrapid.

Bonn rumors have it that the SPD might accept the maglev train, but only as part of a "grand deal" that saw a "pragmatic" Christian Democratic Union (CDU) offering substantial concessions, like giving up state funding of nuclear technology and space research.

This would be a bad deal. The only reasonable alternative is to fight the issue through, winning SPD members over to the pro-maglev camp. This is what the CDU has to do now, to realize the Bonn cabinet decision of March 2.