

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Transrapid needs political backing

Ecologists, backed by their budget-cutting allies, still hope to stop the maglev rail technology.

In 1835, the first steam-driven railway in Germany, the *Eagle*, began to ride on the 6.1 kilometer line between Nuremberg and Fürth," Transport Minister Matthias Wissmann recently explained. "And 15 years later, already 6,044 km of rail lines connected the German production centers." The same rapid progress can be expected when the first German maglev train, the Transrapid, begins daily operation in 2005, on the 285 km line between Hamburg and Berlin, Wissmann said.

His statement of technological optimism came in the context of an unprecedented event, on Oct. 30, in which 120 foreign diplomats rode on the maglev prototype on the test track in Lathen. The event had been arranged by President Roman Herzog, together with Wissmann, to promote the revolutionary technology on the world transportation markets of the early 21st century.

The most spectacular interest in the maglev technology from abroad, has come from China's Deputy Prime Minister Zhu Ronghi, who told a visiting German government delegation in mid-October that he considers the Transrapid the ideal vehicle for the planned high-speed rail connection from Beijing to Shanghai. But also, the government of Brazil has recently signalled interest in the Transrapid, for its rail project from São Paulo to Rio de Janeiro.

And, among much other interest, the U.S. Senate is debating the maglev for projected rail connections along the east and west coasts.

In all these cases, even in fast-developing China, it still will take several years before such projects become

reality. Ironically, it might even be that the maglev will operate abroad, before it runs in Germany itself. The problem inside Germany is an ideological one, having to do with ecology and the penchant for fiscal austerity. The ecologists have run out of arguments, because the Transrapid's ecological advantages are apparent. And, unlike the 1970s and 1980s, a majority of Germans view jobs and social security as bigger concerns than pollution and other "green" issues.

But, the opposition against the Transrapid has been rekindled by the budget-balancers: By insisting that the state save money by setting up the Hamburg to Berlin project as a mixed public-private venture, an endless chain of frictions over funding has been created, leaving the new technology vulnerable to administrative and fiscal sabotage.

For example, in October, when Herzog announced his plan to invite the foreign diplomats to ride on the maglev, an alliance of 60 ecologist groups and two parties, the Greens and the (post-communist) Democratic Communists (PDS), announced its intention to collect 80,000 signatures against the Transrapid from among the citizens of the state of Brandenburg. A good part of the Hamburg to Berlin line will run through that state, and the fact that the national parliament in Bonn had to amend the national transportation laws to authorize the state-private character of the project, was believed to guarantee that the line would be built on schedule, and completed by 2004-2005. Also, the Brandenburg state government okayed the project. But, unlike other German

states, Brandenburg's Constitution provides its citizens a right to veto or revoke a government decision, through a referendum.

The 80,000 signatures which the anti-maglev alliance wants to collect during Oct. 20 to Feb. 19, are intended to force the state government and parliament to review the project. With black propaganda claiming that funds "would be better spent on local job-creation projects, creating many new jobs, than for the expensive Transrapid, which only creates a few jobs," the alliance hopes to spark the state parliament of Brandenburg to approve a referendum on maglev.

Because, for cost-cutting reasons, that referendum would be held on the date scheduled for the next national elections, in mid-September 1998, the okay to hold the referendum would imply that the state government would be freezing its previous approval of the Transrapid project, until then. But, construction on the Hamburg to Berlin line is scheduled to begin in spring 1998. The question now, is whether the national government will stick to that schedule, or in yet another bout of pragmatism, delay the project by half a year or so. The national government also is under heavy budget-cutting pressure from the banks, which are arguing that in view of shrinking tax revenues, a delay of the Hamburg to Berlin project could provide the money urgently needed to balance the budget.

Now, the fact that Herzog arranged the Oct. 30 promotional, seems to indicate that if the government is committed to sell the Transrapid abroad, hopefully, it will also launch an offensive against the opposition at home. The LaRouche movement in Germany has already begun to do so: An open letter endorsing the maglev is being mailed to all relevant institutions in Brandenburg.