

Neo-liberals cause rail accidents

by Rainer Apel

Despite the great shock which the British Rail accident near London's Paddington Station on Oct. 5, which left 30 dead, had on German rail experts, many of those experts refuse to admit that the virus which destroyed the British rail system has also infected the German rail sector. German experts and politicians issue solemn declarations that the German way of modernizing the rail system is "not the British way." But this is only superficially true, because the disease has spread in a form somewhat different from its British variant. Unlike British Rail, which was officially privatized beginning in 1993, German rail underwent "only" partial privatization, with the state keeping nominal control of the tracks and the rolling stock. But, the underlying dynamic, that of budget-cutting neo-liberalism, is the same in Germany as it is in Britain, and the effects that the policy has had on the rail sector are the same.

In terms of personnel, the transformation of the German rail sector has been even more brutal than in Britain: The first decade of downsizing in Britain (1982-92) saw the elimination of 25% of the rail workforce, or 160,000 jobs; the first decade of downsizing in Germany (1990-2000) has seen the elimination of 40%, or 270,000 jobs. German experts stress that this had to do with the ostensible need to get rid of the "immense workforce overhang" in the outmoded rail system in East Germany, which West Germany inherited with the October 1990 unification. But this is a foul excuse, because the policies that then led to the big job-cutting of the 1990s had already been in preparation in the 1980s. The "reform" of the East German rail system was taken as a welcome pretext to also make cuts in West Germany, on a scale not seen before.

Likewise, the "cost of unification" and, in particular, the insane assumption of the East German debt at face value as part of the budget, served as a welcome pretext for neo-liberals to promote budget-balancing on a scale not witnessed before 1990. As soon as the alleged "necessity to consolidate the debt" gained priority over everything else, the state-run rail sector, with its debt of 70 billion deutschemarks (roughly \$45 billion), became a prime target.

The 1990s has also been the decade in which outsiders, inexperienced in the rail industry, have taken over the top management of German railways. None of them had come up through the rail sector, or have an engineering background;

rather, all of them had been downsizers in some branch of German industry. The "expert know-how" that made them eligible for the top jobs in German rail, was their trickery in balancing the budget by reducing the workforce and research and development departments, stretching out investments, reducing maintenance work, and the like. Their assignment was not to make the trains run safely and according to schedule, but to produce "revenue," by looking for the cheapest solution and reducing the debt.

The results

The results of that policy are that today there is hardly a train that arrives or departs on schedule; there is a high rate of accidents; and tracks and rolling stock are used up to their limits. The accident in Eschede on June 3, 1998, in which a high-speed ICE train crashed into a bridge, killing 101 passengers, not only was the biggest train catastrophe in post-war Germany, but it also shed light on several of the bigger problems in the rail sector.

The Inter-City Express derailed at Eschede because of a switch that was not appropriate for high-speed trains. Unlike the French high-speed TGV trains which run exclusively on special tracks reserved for them, Germany's ICE trains very often run on tracks that are used by all kinds of trains: commuter trains, low-speed freight trains, low-speed military transports, and the like. Although the Germans are investing three times as much as the British into their rail sector, including in special tracks for high-speed trains, the German rail grid in many parts resembles that of Britain: The Paddington Station accident occurred on old tracks used by all kinds of trains. At Paddington, a commuter train crashed head-on into a high-speed train—both using the track at the same time, at the same location, when the commuter train ran a red light.

In the Eschede crash, the ICE locomotive continued on for 3 km past a bridge, after the third car had become derailed at the switch; the first of the derailed cars crashed into the concrete pillars of the bridge at a speed of 250 kmh, collapsing it and burying the other cars under a pile of concrete rubble; 99 passengers died on the spot, two others later died in a hospital. A preliminary investigation found that a crucial factor contributing to the derailment, was the fact that the ICE cars were equipped with "noise-reducing" wheels that were not made entirely of solid steel, but of two steel parts, an inner core and an outer ring, connected by a hard rubber ring which helps to reduce the noise. These wheels were introduced in the early 1990s, because the ICE trains which had been introduced in 1991 were too noisy to give passengers a comfortable ride.

However, under budget pressure, instead of carrying out a proper engineering job, rail managers used a "noise-reducing" wheel that already existed, namely, on trams used in many German municipalities. This wheel works on trams that

run at maximum speeds of 50-60 kmh, but the ICE is designed for maximum speeds of 250-280 kmh. Engineers warned against using these wheels for the ICE. They also warned against the increased wear which such wheels would be exposed to under such high speeds, i.e., the wheels would more quickly become “unround” (a term describing the degree to which the outer ring of wheels is worn off) and would require more maintenance. The wheels were introduced despite the warnings, rail managers reduced maintenance as part of the budget cutting, and the predictable occurred: An examination by investigators of the wheels at the ICE Eschede crash showed that their “unroundness” was already 1.1 millimeters, instead of the officially permitted 0.6 millimeters. Any unexpected obstacle encountered on the tracks would mean that trains running on such run-down wheels, ran a high risk of wheel breaks and derailment. This is what happened at Eschede.

All of these facts about the Eschede catastrophe were made known to the public — not by the rail management, but, mostly, by leaks to the media. The public outcry forced management to replace the wheels on all ICE trains during the weeks following. But, there was no change in policy — not even when the Christian Democrats of Chancellor Helmut Kohl were replaced by the Social Democrats of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in October 1998. The Social Democrats are committed to budget-balancing, and they even reduced government funding for ICE track construction. The fundamental problem, namely, a policy mix of various “cheap” solutions, prevails in the German rail sector, and catastrophes like Eschede can happen again any day. Sources say that it has been pure luck that no major train accident has occurred in Germany since the 1998 Eschede tragedy. Unfortunately, Britain has seen several major accidents with numerous deaths over recent years.

Even Tories back state control

In Britain, a poll published by the *Guardian* on Oct. 26 revealed that 73% of voters think that the rail sector should be returned to state control. In particular, 79% of Labour Party voters think that the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair should do what he promised before the 1997 elections, namely, that the state should reverse the privatization policy of the previous Conservative governments and take control of the rail sector. What is particularly striking about this poll, is that 64% of Tory voters share this view, that the neo-liberalist transportation policies of Tory Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and John Major (1982-97) have killed too many citizens to be tolerated any longer.

None of these problems should have come to plague Germany. Instead of copying the French TGV, a modernized version of the traditional wheel-based technology which went into operation in France in 1981, and instead of operating the ICE (a somewhat more “stylish” version of the same technology) in 1991, the Germans should have opted for the magneti-

cally levitated (maglev) Transrapid rail system. A technology by German engineers that dates back to blueprints first produced in the 1930s, the Transrapid, propelled by maglev technology that keeps it free from direct contact with the track, is a revolution in transportation. The magnetic field “cushion” on which the train rides keeps it safe from derailing, because any obstacle or interference with the field will slow the train smoothly.

The first operational maglev prototype was presented in 1969, but the Social Democratic governments in the late 1960s and early 1970s decided against the technology, as the first generation of baby-boomers infected with ecologism occupied political posts. For them, maglev was “too modern, too futuristic”; they opted instead for a less modern system that became the ICE of the 1990s.

Long before the ICE finally began to run, the Christian Democrats replaced the Social Democrats in the government, and from September 1982 on, they introduced all the neo-liberal vices of Thatcherism into Germany. Nominally against the Social Democrats’ and the Greens’ radical ecologism, but obsessed with Thatcherite budget-cutting and privatization, the Christian Democrats, during their 16-year uninterrupted reign, found many reasons to oppose the maglev rail technology. For them, the maglev system is “too expensive,” and they wasted the time from 1982 to 1993 deciding on a line for one pilot project, finally settling for a line between Hamburg and Berlin. For budgetary reasons, the Christian Democrats wasted another three years designing a complicated “mixed public-private funding” package for that maglev project, which set a maximum state funding limit of DM 6 billion, while the rest had to be provided by the “free market.”

This neo-liberal nonsense had a predictable result: Construction, to begin in the spring of 1997, was postponed into late 1997, then to spring 1998, then put on hold during the election campaign of summer 1998, and then delayed with the change of government in October 1998 to today. Because the Schröder government is also committed to budget-balancing, and it considers building a maglev line to be the job of the “free market,” it is still unclear when, if ever, the Transrapid will run in Germany.

One thing is certain: The ICE which crashed at Eschede in June 1998 should never have become operational. Instead, the fail-safe Transrapid should have been introduced there long ago. Budget-balancing, an obstacle to technological progress, should have been dropped long ago. Had maglev been introduced in Germany in the 1970s, other countries would have followed suit, and it might have been in use today even in Britain. The passengers who died in rail accidents during the 1980s and most of the 1970s, should never have died. The situation that prevails now in the German rail sector, which once was a worldwide symbol of safety and reliability, and in that of Britain and many other countries, has to be blamed on the neo-liberals.