

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Maglev rail transport in jeopardy

Bureaucratic waffling and foolish budgetary calculations are on the verge of killing this vital technology.

The Transrapid magnetically levitated (maglev) railway system, the state-of-the-art technology which has been in a never-ending "experimental phase" since the late 1970s, is now in serious danger of losing out altogether in Germany. Bureaucratic sabotage from the policy establishment and big industry resulted in a decision that Germany should have the conventional electric ICE high-speed train instead.

Hopes that the ICE, introduced in Germany in the summer of 1991, with its slight technological advantages over the French TGV, would gain an edge on the international export markets, were blown apart several weeks ago, when the contract which the German producers firmly expected to conclude with the South Korean state railways was granted to TGV instead.

Reflecting this new situation, the R&D experts of the three governing coalition parties, the Christian Democrats, the Christian Social Union, and the Free Democrats, passed a resolution on Oct. 26 endorsing the maglev system as a "strategic technology," production of which should be supported by the state in cooperation with private industry, for sales on the world market.

The realization of the project for a 285-kilometer maglev line between Germany's two biggest cities, Hamburg and Berlin, was the most essential step to begin with, in order to convince prospective clients abroad of the merits and feasibility of the new technology.

On Oct. 31, Chancellor Helmut Kohl surprised the public with an an-

nouncement that he intended to make the issue a "matter of the chief's personal interest," with the firm commitment to pass a decision on the project by no later than the end of this year.

Then on Nov. 4, Transportation Minister Matthias Wissmann announced before a congress of the German Transport Forum—a private lobbying group of industrial, banking and political representatives—in Berlin, that by the beginning of 1994 at the latest, a decision for the Transrapid, which he called a "symbol of the future," would definitely be made. He even said the maglev technology was "too good to end up in an industry museum."

Hopes were raised that, finally, 15 years of bureaucratic blockades against the Transrapid technology would end.

But then on Nov. 8, Finance Minister Theodor Waigel wrote a letter to the Christian Democrats declaring that he was not at all willing to give the go-ahead for any state funding of the maglev technology, such as the DM 4 billion that is required to build the line from Hamburg to Berlin, for reasons of "preventing new, unclarified budgetary risks."

Moreover, Waigel said that "the majority of experts" had informed him that the technology was "still not mature enough" and that the forecasts about the profitability of that line were too uncertain to provide a basis for a positive decision at this point. "It would be irresponsible to open up new categories of state support," Waigel wrote.

The finance minister's reaction did not come as a surprise, really, but the reaction of the Christian Democrats to this letter did: They decided to not even debate their own resolution, in the Nov. 9 session of the parliamentary group in Bonn. This was a rather absurd step, since the Free Democrats' parliamentary caucus had already adopted the resolution of their own technology experts in favor of the Transrapid.

It was even more absurd. A senior Christian Democrat whom this author talked to about the issue on Nov. 5, declared there would be no problem at all in his caucus, whereas there would be one with the Free Democrats, where "certain" resistance against the maglev train could not be overlooked.

After the tactical retreat of the Christian Democrats, there is a great danger now that no decision will be taken by the government and the Parliament by early 1994, and because next year is a big election year, with a total of 17 campaigns on the state, municipal, and federal levels, it must be feared that according to the supposedly unshakeable laws of the establishment in Germany, fundamental decisions that "cost money" will simply be postponed until early 1995, when the new Parliament and government begin work.

This delay by more than a year could mean the end to the Transrapid. It is the general estimate here that Germany's technological edge over the second largest developers of the maglev train system, the Japanese, is two years or even less, and that, even if the Japanese system were not as good as the German one, clients on the world market would read the indecision in Bonn as a vote against the Transrapid, and as a factor of incalculability regarding German industrial policy. Potential clients abroad would then opt for the Japanese system.