

## Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

### Maglev project is gaining speed

*Parliamentary approval of the Berlin-Hamburg maglev rail line opens the door to a new era in transportation.*

**O**n May 9, the national parliament passed two planning and "financial coverage" laws that complete the special legislation package which is required for the construction of the world's first fully operational maglev rail line.

The 285-kilometer track for the Transrapid train, which will run at 10-minute intervals between Germany's two biggest cities, Hamburg and Berlin, needs investments of close to DM 6 billion (\$3.75 billion) from the state, and another DM 3 billion from private investors who are organized in the Magnetic Levitation Train Planning Group, which is carrying out the engineering and construction.

The project will allow trains to travel at speeds of up to 450-500 kilometers per hour, will cut travel time to less than 60 minutes, and be completed by the summer of 2005.

In parliament, the project was supported by the governing three-party coalition of Christian Democrats, Christian Social Union, and Free Democrats. The Social Democrats, along with the Greens and Democratic Socialists (post-communists), voted against it. The SPD did so on fiscal grounds, which are, however, only a pretext for fundamental opposition to modern technologies. The SPD rejects the maglev train, along with nuclear technology and aerospace projects, especially manned space travel. SPD parliamentary spokeswoman for budgetary policy Ingrid Matthaeus-Maier argued in an interview with the daily *Berliner Zeitung* on May 20, that if "giant projects funded by loans," such as the Berlin-Hamburg maglev, were cancelled, it would be much eas-

ier to balance the federal budget. Were the Transrapid project dropped, the government would not have to axe the social welfare budgets, she said.

This twisted argument concocts an artificial conflict between high-tech investments and social welfare, which in reality does not exist. The SPD documents once again, that it is the "other variant" of the Conservative Revolution ideology infecting the government, making the maglev project all the more important for Germany, because it may help to reverse the general trend.

The maglev has been embattled for over 26 years, ever since the first Transrapid test bed was constructed in 1969. Maglev options were discarded in the 1970s by the SPD-led governments, on grounds that "other things" were allegedly more important than "giant" investments in technology projects of the future.

Maglev options were then almost eliminated by the West German CDU-led conservative governments during the 1980s, which decided in favor of the conventional technology of high-speed trains. In 1991, the Intercity Express (ICE) train was launched. It was the complement to the French TGV, which was launched in 1981.

Only in the wake of the collapse of the East bloc in 1989, was a new chance for the Transrapid created, because the entire railway grid of the East German state, and its links into eastern Europe, had to be rebuilt from scratch. The "primitive accumulation" policy of the socialist regimes from the early 1970s on, had run down the public infrastructure totally.

With reunification in October

1990, maglev options reentered the discussion, and the most spectacular proposal discussed inside the political establishment then was one which was presented in December 1990, by Josef Duchac, the governor of the eastern state of Thuringia. He called for a 640-km maglev line from Berlin to Frankfurt/Main, passing through Leipzig and Erfurt. The proposal for a project that would have cost DM 12-15 billion was inopportune, in the government's view, because in late 1990 and early 1991, Chancellor Helmut Kohl was desperately collecting the German share of DM 18 billion for George Bush's Gulf war. The Duchac proposal was flatly rejected, as were other proposals; for example, one for a line between Bonn-Cologne and Berlin, which was made in mid-1991 by Kohl's labor minister, Norbert Blum.

Only in 1994, did the Transrapid reenter the stage, this time with the Hamburg-Berlin project, which was okayed by the government's parliamentary majority in the summer of 1995. But the government did not give up its main loyalty to fiscal austerity, so, the idea of a "mixed, state-private venture," which would reduce the burden on the federal budget, was born. This idea required a change in the law, because under existing law, all projects of public infrastructure maintenance and development fell under the jurisdiction of the state.

The special "maglev law" that had to be pushed through the legislative bodies, took another year, before its last component was finally passed on May 9.

The door is now open for progress on the maglev. A promising sign was a speech in Chile on May 2 when, in an unprecedented move for a senior German diplomat, Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel endorsed a "Transrapid train—for example, from Santiago to Val Paraiso."