

Tens of thousands in Germany protest “Stuttgart 21” railway project

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The dispute over the rebuilding of Stuttgart’s main railway station is now reverberating throughout the German political establishment. Chancellor Merkel has tied her political fate directly to this controversial building project—“Stuttgart 21”—an issue that has brought tens of thousands of protesters onto the streets in recent weeks.

In the budget debate in the Bundestag (parliament), Merkel defended the costly multi-billion construction of Stuttgart’s new main railway station. She has refused to call for a referendum, on the grounds that the state elections due next March will be tantamount to a public referendum on the “Stuttgart 21” project.

If the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) loses the elections in Baden-Württemberg, a state where it has held power continuously since 1952, Merkel is unlikely to cling onto her position as CDU leader and chancellor.

Stuttgart, the state capital of Baden-Württemberg, has experienced a wave of protests for months, the scale of which has not been seen in Germany since the peace and anti-nuclear movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Week after week, tens of thousands of people protest in front of the central station to prevent its demolition. In between, there are countless smaller protests, such as the so-called “Schwabenstreich”, which marks the passing of 7 p.m. each day with the tramping of feet, the clanging of pots and pans, and honking of car horns. There have also been clashes with the police, when several hundred protesters stormed and occupied the building site.

The participants include various social layers, including many from the middle and upper middle classes. *Der Spiegel* has described it as a “bourgeois revolt”. Actors, architects, professors, doctors and environmental activists have been particularly active. Even former Daimler CEO Edzard Reuter has signed a petition calling for a construction freeze and a referendum.

There are many different motives driving people onto the streets.

“Stuttgart 21” is generally regarded as a prestige project that costs billions but brings few benefits, while urgent infrastructure projects like improving public transport, schools, day care centres, etc., are stalled due to a supposed lack of money.

Officially, the cost of moving the railway station below ground and the construction of a tunnel under the city to the airport is estimated at €4.1 billion, which will be paid by the city, state and federal governments, as well as Germany’s national rail company Deutsche Bahn. Originally it was “only” going to cost €2.6 billion. Experts now believe that the total cost, including the new high-

speed rail line to Ulm, will be more than €10 billion. In addition, there are incalculable risks due to the difficult ground conditions.

Other new construction and renovation projects—such as the expansion of freight transport to relieve roads and highways—have been stalled for years, just like local transport projects and important investments by the city and state.

Since the new transit station will have only eight tracks, instead of the 17 in the present terminus, opponents also fear growing congestion in urban transport. Although Stuttgart will be linked up to the high-speed track between Paris and Budapest and travel times over long distances will be shortened somewhat, regional traffic in the densely populated urban areas will suffer. The limited capacity of the new station will make it virtually impossible to introduce a synchronised timetable with short transfer times, as has contributed significantly to the success of the Swiss Federal Railways.

The urban planning arguments of the project’s proponents cannot convince the opponents. The huge area above ground that will be freed up by eliminating the railway tracks of the old station are earmarked for new shopping malls and apartments, which Deutsche Bahn intends to market as profitably as possible. This will not necessarily improve the quality of life of the population. The massive construction site would swathe the city for years in noise and dust.

The opponents of “Stuttgart 21” are also motivated by environmental, conservation and safety concerns. It is feared that the quality of the groundwater and Stuttgart’s mineral water springs, the second largest in Europe, will be adversely affected if underground streams have to make way for the railway tunnels. The station building, whose side wing is currently being demolished, is regarded as a cultural monument. Many trees in the city park will also fall victim to the new building.

Finally, engineers fear that the soil’s high anhydrite content could give rise to serious safety risks. The mineral expands by up to 50 percent when it becomes damp and pushes aside everything that comes in its way. For this reason, the architect Frei Otto, co-winner of the competition for the new station, has dropped out of the project, but his warnings of possible hazards are falling on deaf ears.

But all these factors are insufficient to explain why tens of thousands are moved to protest against a project that has been planned for 15 years. The final straw has been the arrogance and high-handedness of the authorities and politicians. “Stuttgart 21”

has become a “metaphor for a callous clique economy, the epitome of a detached, arrogant class”, writes the *Frankfurter Rundschau*.

The planning took place without any public debate. It took place under the so-called “dumpling or *spätzle* connection” [*spätzle* are a local culinary speciality], which has grown up during 60 years of CDU rule. “This includes”, according to the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, “the respective state prime ministers, state legislators, mayors, bankers and entrepreneurs, eleven of which, quite by chance, can be found in the group of supporters of Stuttgart 21. Or, like the Stuttgart city finance director Michael Föll, sit on the advisory board of the very construction company that has been awarded the contract for the demolition of the north wing.”

A petition with 60,000 signatures was rejected by the authorities with the same arrogance as their rejection of an appeal bearing 21,000 signatures. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) too is mired in this “*spätzle* connection”. It fully supported “Stuttgart 21”, and only changed its attitude when the extent of the opposition became evident. Now it is calling for a plebiscite, without taking a position for or against the project.

As imaginative and energetic as the protests against the “Stuttgart 21” may be, their perspective remains extremely limited. This is shown by the very fact that it is the Green Party that is benefiting. The latest poll by Infratest Dimap puts the party at 27 percent, only eight points behind the ruling CDU and well ahead of the SPD (21 percent). The 5 percent for the Free Democratic Party (FDP) places in question whether the party will win sufficient votes to enter the state legislature.

If this trend continues, the Greens for the first time are presented with the chance of nominating the state premier next March, with the support of the SPD. They are also virtually guaranteed the post of Stuttgart mayor, a position the party already occupies in the cities of Konstanz, Freiburg and Tübingen.

The Greens see this primarily as an opportunity to return to the federal government, following their fall from power in 2005, should Merkel be toppled as a result of “Stuttgart 21”. They have placed themselves at the head of the protest movement in order to rescue bourgeois rule—or even the rule of the CDU. They are perfectly willing to form an alliance with the CDU and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU). On some issues, such as reform of the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces), the Greens already stand closer to right-wingers in the government such as Defence Minister Theodor zu Guttenberg (CSU) than the SPD or even sections of the CDU.

Boris Palmer, mayor of Tübingen, and the leading Green in the Swabian region, is one of the supporters of a coalition with the CDU. “You also need the support of big business for a new economy. That is much easier with the CDU than the SPD, even if the politics behind it are the same,” he commented in *taz*.

The Greens justify their rejection of “Stuttgart 21” with the argument, in the words of state parliamentary faction leader Jürgen Trittin: “You can only spend each euro once.” That may sound obvious to a parochial Swabian household, but it is patently inappropriate for the economy as a whole. The Greens employed the same arguments to justify their support for the social cuts of the Schröder era, although the euros they saved did not flow into the state budget but rather into the bank accounts of the rich and

powerful.

It should be borne in mind that two years ago the government spent not one but €750 billion to rescue the banks, money it did not even have. The money was borrowed at high interest rates from the very same banks they were seeking to save, and which also had access to low-interest loans from the Bundesbank (Federal Bank). This example alone shows that money circulation in the modern economy is much more complex than Trittin’s banal saying.

Large and long-term infrastructure projects, including those financed through debt, can be of social value only if two conditions are met: first, the grip of the banks and private profiteers over economic life must be broken, with the vast resources they control being socialised. Secondly, the mass of the people must be democratically involved in the planning and decision-making.

The Green Party vehemently rejects the first condition, which requires a socialist programme. And therefore, they cannot meet the second—the democratic participation of the population—although they promise it again and again.

In their 40-year history, the Greens have proved repeatedly that as soon as they take over government responsibility they are the faithful servants of the business lobby. After they had climbed to the highest government positions on the backs of the anti-war and environmental movement, they became war supporters and champions of Schröder’s Agenda 2010 welfare and labour “reforms”; doing this in the face of massive resistance in the form of major demonstrations and mass protests.

In Stuttgart, the Greens will behave no differently. If they succeed in rising to government office on the shoulders of the protest movement against “Stuttgart 21” they will argue that, unfortunately, the contracts for the prestigious project cannot be cancelled. This is what they have already done in Hamburg regarding the Moorburg coal-fired power plant and the dredging of the river Elbe, which they rejected in their election campaign and then supported once they had secured their ministerial offices at the side of the CDU.

The struggle for a sustainable city and environment requires more than imaginative protest. It requires a socialist programme based on the defence of all social and democratic achievements of working people, youth and pensioners, led by a political movement that is completely independent of the Greens, the SPD, the Left Party and all other bourgeois parties.



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