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The Wealth of the Public

**Infrastructure socialism, or:
why collective consumption
makes people happy**

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THE WEALTH OF THE PUBLIC

INFRASTRUCTURE SOCIALISM, OR: WHY COLLECTIVE CONSUMPTION MAKES PEOPLE HAPPY

The COVID-19 pandemic has once again exposed extreme inequalities in access, life opportunities, and means of consumption under global capitalism. It shows that basic needs—from health care to education and housing—must be safeguarded in such a way that they are able to withstand such crises. At the same time, fierce disputes are erupting over how to distribute the costs of the crisis. Private companies are trying to shift their losses onto the public purse. On top of public debt, there is the threat of a fresh round of austerity policies as well as renewed attacks by employers.

The defence of the welfare state is thus entering a new cycle. It should not, however, be fought as a defensive struggle, that simply seeks to preserve that which is under threat. Instead, it is time for a thorough overhaul of the welfare state in order to correct its old mistakes. But what does a welfare state that is prepared for the coming decades and crises actually look like? How can we prevent divisions among capitalism's subalterns from deepening further? Capitalist elites always attempt to use crises to expand their own room to manoeuvre at the expense of wage earners. What could an alternative to this look like? And where is such an alternative being fought for already?

A CRISIS ON TWO FRONTS

Up until now, the financing of the welfare state has been linked to economic growth. In a hard-won class compromise, social benefits have historically been financed and gradually extended on the basis of steady growth. This compromise lasted for a long time without coming at the expense of profits. When the rate of profit began to fall, it was unilaterally abandoned as part of the neoliberal offensive that began in the early 1980s. The welfare state came under increasing pressure. In light of globalization and transnationalization, a strong welfare state was seen as a negative factor in terms of a country's international competitiveness (notwithstanding the fact that a productivist reorientation in the sense of the "social investment state" has taken place in the meantime; cf. Dowling 2016). The reasoning behind this was that not all benefits could be financed under the cost pressure of competition. Little by little, social security systems were prised out of public purview and subjected to neoliberal restructuring. With the advent of so-called "New Public Management", business criteria became the yardstick by which action in all areas of the social system was measured (see Wohlfahrt 2015).

Since then the welfare state has faced a crisis on two fronts: on the one hand, decades of neoliberal spending cuts and privatization policies have depleted social infrastructure and public services, both financially and in terms of human resources—from health, education, and social services to housing, culture, and mobility. There is a lack of teachers, educators, nurses, social workers, and police officers, but also of administrative staff, tax inspectors, and planners. A study by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung estimates that the shortfall already exceeds one million workers, and if demand continues to grow at a dynamic rate, this number could eventually top four million (Adige et al. 2020).

On the other hand, the shift toward increasingly precarious living and working conditions has led to a level of social inequality and poverty that many believed to have been long since overcome.¹ The causes are manifold yet interrelated: the deregulation of labour markets and the endemic proliferation of low wages and involuntary part-time work, the privatization and depletion of social infrastructure, ever-increasing rents, and an unfair taxation policy that favours high incomes and accumulated wealth. As a result, millions of people face uncertain futures. Due to unemployment levels, an increase in the proportion of workers who are now self-employed, and the proliferation of "mini" and "midi" jobs (capped at €450 and €850 per month respectively), more and more people are missing out on welfare support, with women overrepresented among them. Yet even where entitlements can be accessed, they are now so low that they are often insufficient to guarantee a life without

¹ Social inequality is even more extreme than previously assumed, according to the latest figures, which suggest that the richest one percent of the population in Germany owns around 35 percent of net assets instead of 22 percent as previously thought, while the top ten percent owns 67.3 percent instead of 58.9 percent (Bartels et al. 2020).

poverty. Factors such as low wages and forced part-time work do not allow people to accumulate a decent pension, let alone make private provisions for their retirement. For large sections of the population, the existing social security systems no longer offer any future prospects—the welfare state’s promise of security has lost a great deal of credibility and must thus be fundamentally reformed.

NO GOING BACK TO THE “OLD” WELFARE STATE

Those who wish to preserve the welfare state have to face the fact that it must be transformed. In order to be attractive to a re-shaped labour movement of the twenty-first century, the concept of the welfare state must be expanded and modified. To this end, it is necessary to grasp and address left-wing critiques of its previous incarnation.

The welfare state has always been linked to specific modes of production and living, to a specific gender regime and to an associated model of gainful employment and reproduction. Feminists have criticized the Fordist welfare state’s centring of the sole male breadwinner. Social security in the Fordist welfare state was tied to (full-time) employment and a largely uninterrupted employment history. Socially necessary care work, which has historically been delegated to women and shifted into the sphere of private household responsibility, was neither recognized as genuine labour nor supported by social security payments. The devaluation of reproductive work was thus systematically inscribed into the Fordist welfare system. It also exacerbated women’s lack of independence and the disadvantages faced by queer people through its patriarchal family model. Although gender and employment relations have changed significantly since then, the linking of social security to employment and the privileging of a heteronormative marriage and family model remain firmly entrenched. This means that without gender justice there can be no renewal of the welfare state.

Most state welfare benefits are also linked to questions of citizenship. Only those of a certain nationality or who are covered by social security through official wage labour are able to access them. Refugees, people undergoing asylum claims, and especially undocumented individuals have very limited—if any—access to state welfare support, even though undocumented migrants make a fundamental contribution to the creation of social value in sectors such as domestic work, care, construction, agriculture, sex work, the hotel and catering industry, or the cleaning trade (cf. Behr 2010). The value of migrant labour is undermined by laws governing the right to residency, and many are forced to accept exceptionally poor wages and insecure conditions. This devaluation is reflected not only in reduced benefit entitlements, but also in the way that the kinds of work they perform (housework, care, etc.) is subsequently socially recognized and valued. This only serves to further exacerbate divisions and competition within and among the working class.

Yet the welfare state as it currently exists even discriminates against migrants who are employed in jobs that are subject to mandatory social security contributions. Their careers are more frequently marked by interrupted employment and phases of informal, lower-paid, or generally precarious work, which results in fewer entitlements. This welfare state’s ability to be selective with benefits based on nationality must be overhauled, not least in light of increasing levels of migration. A fundamental redesign is to reconfigure the welfare state for the twenty-first century. This is a huge task.

Lastly, the left-wing critique of the Fordist welfare state has clearly shown that—despite its undoubtedly positive function in terms of protection and redistribution—it also has paternalistic features and encourages passivity. The bureaucratic, rigid, and control-oriented system of state assistance is not only tied to certain employment models and ways of life, but in many respects also reduces agency. The exclusion of many benefit recipients from participation in society is thus perpetuated, despite social cushioning.

It is true that a number of the objections of the “New Left”, described by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello as “artistic critique”, were later taken up by neoliberal opponents of the welfare state and expropriated accordingly. Nevertheless, there is a key point here that leftist plans for the future cannot ignore: a return to the corporatist bureaucratic forms of the welfare state of the twentieth century is not an option, not only because of changed working and reproductive conditions, but also because of its exclusionary and disciplining character. The reformation of social security systems is therefore also linked to their fundamental democratization.

WHERE THE CHALLENGES LIE

Social security systems are facing several new challenges that cannot be solved using old frameworks.

Socially “disconnected” spaces: The consequences of the erosion of the welfare state are particularly evident at the socio-spatial level. Social inequality is becoming more acute and increasingly determined by postcode,

and in some cases “disconnected” spaces with extremely patchy infrastructure are emerging in disadvantaged areas of cities and in peripheral zones beyond city limits. This hits marginalized groups hardest and heightens competition for already scarce resources. It also plays straight into right-wing discourses of security and order, which evoke the threat this poses to the local population’s supposedly homogeneous way of life. Since a large portion of social services are provided by municipal authorities, socio-spatial disparities between cities and regions are also widening.

The crisis of reproduction: The Fordist model of gender, reproduction, and family has undergone dramatic changes—without, however, achieving gender equality or social rights for all. Today, the dominant model is no longer the “sole breadwinner” but the so-called “adult worker”. The pressure to pursue gainful employment now affects everyone equally and has also transformed systems of care. It is true that an increasing proportion of socially necessary work, which used to be carried out almost exclusively in the private sphere and without remuneration, is now also done as gainful employment—this applies, for example, to care and educational work. As part of the neoliberal restructuring of public services, however, these services are being massively depleted of resources, resulting in overload, stress, and exhaustion. Care work, even as wage labour, is still predominantly the domain of women and migrants, and is therefore paid considerably less than other jobs. Without gender equality and without an end to the devaluation of migrant work, there can therefore be no regeneration of the welfare state.

The rise in paid care work and the increasing tendency for it to be supplied via the private sector also raises the question of where the limits of the capitalist exploitation of care may lie. On this basis, it must also be clarified whether important social tasks should indeed be completely removed from the market, i.e. whether, and to what extent, a socialization or even re-municipalization of public services is necessary.

Migration: The increase in global migration raises once again the old question of access to security systems that have hitherto been administered primarily by nation states. The societies of the Global North have become immigration societies to a greater extent than ever before. Isolation can only be achieved by abandoning human rights standards and the traditionally leftist principles of solidarity and anti-racism. A welfare state primarily conceived as a kind of social safety net, however, requires the accumulation of entitlements over years, if not decades, which is hardly compatible with increased freedom of movement and global migration. The exclusion of many migrant workers from social security benefits enables the hyper-exploitation their labour. Welfare rights must therefore be rethought and gradually disentangled from restrictive citizenship and residency laws.

Global inequality: The income gap between the richest and poorest countries has narrowed over the past decades. However, this is mainly due to the rise of new capitalist centres such as China or South Korea, or of so-called emerging economies such as Brazil, Russia or India., while the process of neoliberal globalization has seen other countries fall further behind. War and destruction, the exploitation of resources, unfair trade agreements, unjust world economic relations and a hierarchization of the international division of labour in global production chains are destroying the future prospects of millions of people. The resulting dynamic of exploitation between the Global North and Global South brings the issue of access to state welfare systems in the rich countries into sharp relief. Meanwhile, the gap between rich and poor has reached unprecedented dimensions even in the more prosperous societies, with dramatic consequences for social cohesion, democracy, and ultimately for economic development itself. Growing inequality thus undermines the foundations of the social fabric.

Climate crisis: There is a close connection between the increase in class-specific inequalities and the drastic increase in CO₂ emissions. The share of global emissions generated by the rich is growing disproportionately fast, while the share generated by the world’s poorest is declining. This imbalance also generally applies to individual societies (Kleinhückelkotten et al. 2016). More equality is therefore necessary not only on social grounds, but for environmental reasons as well.

The consequences of capitalist growth have led to a planetary ecological crisis, which is causing further social upheaval, a worsening of the crisis in reproduction, an increase in migration, and increasing the scope of economic damage. These developments pose challenges to our understanding of the welfare state that can no longer be ignored. At the same time, it is clear that “the welfare state is worth more than what it costs” (Urban). If solidarity-based forms of crisis management cannot be implemented, and if there is no redistribution of resources and no generalization of social rights, an increase in conflicts around distribution and a brutalization of social conditions can be expected.

At issue here is nothing less than the creation of a new, environmentally sustainable, gender-equitable welfare system compatible with open, immigration-based societies in the twenty-first century, one applicable on local, national, and international levels. In order to meet these challenges, however, the welfare state must also be financed. In light of the environmental crisis, it is not an option for the welfare state to simply carry on the old tradition of compromise based on continued economic growth. On the one hand, businesses and wealthy individuals must offer greater financial support for the common good. On the other hand, the relationship

between taxes and contributions must be rebalanced in order to overcome the dependence of social security on gainful employment. The relationship between collective production and collective consumption must also be readjusted.

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURES: FREE AND DEMOCRATIC

Divisions and fragmentation among subaltern groups can be seen in the recurring difficulty of developing common demands that open up collective visions for action. This is also reflected in discussions about the future of social security and the prospects of the welfare state in the twenty-first century. What, then, might a positive blueprint look like that could bring together the concerns of the diverse protest movements currently voicing their concerns? If we survey the growing labour struggles (particularly in the care and education sectors) the protests over rent, anti-privatization alliances, new anti-racist campaigns, and the climate change movement, what are the common demands that meaningfully combine and represent the diverse concerns of a pluralist left and the various subaltern groups it comprises?

In recent years in Germany, this debate—prompted by a series of discussions in connection with Joachim Hirsch (2003) and the Frankfurt group links-netz (2012)—has increasingly revolved around the importance of social infrastructures as part of a post-neoliberal social policy. This approach places social services at the centre of social transformation. On the one hand, years of neoliberal policies mean the shortages in this sector are particularly glaring, and on the other it is the only sector that promises considerable (both climate and resource neutral) employment opportunities in industrialized countries.

So instead of providing social benefits individually through a mix of insurance models and tax-funded entitlements, as in the past, the idea of putting “social infrastructures” at the core of a new welfare state is designed to enable the consistent expansion of social services and make them freely accessible to all—and free of charge. This applies to healthcare as well as the education, training, childcare and support sectors, and would ensure the right to affordable housing and mobility as well as access to electricity and drinking water or the Internet. In contrast to an unconditional basic income, for example, the primary focus of this concept is not on securing individual consumer capacity in monetary terms, but on their access to social resources, i.e. collective consumption.²

Does this mean everything would be available free of charge? Yes and no. It would be conceivable, for example, to enable basic services to be provided free of charge in all these areas and to make people pay in whole or in part for the satisfaction of individual needs, preferences, or passions that go beyond this. For the energy supply sector, which provides a basic modern human need, this would mean the following: basic supply would be guaranteed as part of the social infrastructure. Whoever consumes more energy would pay for it, and super-consumers would pay considerably more—because the price would rise progressively. This principle—high consumption equals additional cost—can be applied in a number of a different areas (cf. Schachtschneider and Candeias 2013). This would mean a per-capita quota for drinking water provided free of charge, but more expensive supply for water destined for private swimming pools; free local public transport, but surcharges for frequent air travel and luxury cars; free access to the Internet and digital goods, but price increases for huge data transfers. High-quality healthcare and childcare, primary education or vocational training and certain periods of further education should be available free of charge to all. Affordable housing (including in the inner-city) can be achieved through a mixture of rent regulation, (permanent) social and non-profit housing, the promotion of non-profit collective ownership, the socialization of large property holdings, and suitable corresponding policy concerning real estate.

Such an approach would not only help to reduce social inequalities but would also contribute to the greening of production methods. Investment in social services makes sense environmentally, since working with people is less likely to cause environmental degradation, and the expansion of these services also opens up new employment opportunities as compensation for the jobs that will be lost as various branches of the climate-damaging industries are decommissioned. This approach would assist in not only resolving the crisis of gainful employment, but also that of (unpaid) reproductive work. As social services are expanded, professional care work will receive greater recognition and be allocated additional resources. At the same time, the pressure to

2 This does not mean neglecting the importance and achievement of the classical social security model. On the contrary: a more democratic, more solidarity-based society must also look at, develop and universalize social security in order to better cover risks faced by individuals and potential disruptions to their lives. This means, among other things, that elements of a minimum security net (such as a minimum pension, a sanction-free minimum welfare payment, or basic child security benefit, etc.) must be strengthened over performance-related entitlements, and the obligation to provide these minimum standards must be extended. One conceivable option here would be a comprehensive insurance scheme for employees (including civil servants, freelancers, self-employed people, etc.) in the pension system, as well as a citizens’ insurance scheme for everyone in the health system and a socially-oriented comprehensive care insurance scheme.

work will decrease, because the fulfilment of essential basic needs would be guaranteed. This will leave more time for both self-care and caring for others, as well as for community work and political or civic involvement. Last but not least, it this approach also offers an opportunity to reshape gender relations in an emancipatory way, enabling a stronger focus on reproductive functions and activities, and greater attention to figuring out what sustains and safeguards our collective lives. A final important element is a more robust decoupling of the right to a share in social wealth from both employment status and from particular family models or lifestyles: this means individual entitlements being accessible to everyone regardless of age, gender, or background.

The expansion of social infrastructure also strengthens a societal structure centred around democracy and solidarity, because it means that fears and anxieties around the necessary social upheavals are reduced. Additionally, right-wing visions of a discriminatory welfare state become less attractive when marginalization, competitive pressure, and social inequality are combated. The concept of social infrastructure thus facilitates much more than a rethinking of left-wing social policy beyond the Fordist welfare state; the demand for free, basic, and environmentally and socially conscious welfare provisions for all who live in a particular place (irrespective of passport, gender, postcode, or other status) can also offer a unifying perspective for multiple struggles and promote a socially left point of orientation in society that fosters both solidarity and social-environmental considerations.

The aim of the social infrastructure approach is to (again) remove numerous social services from the dictates of the market and (re)place them under public control. In concrete terms, this means the decommodification of social services and stripping them of commodity status. The re-municipalization of privatized hospitals, old people's homes, childcare centres, housing or private mobility services, for example, also often raises questions about the private ownership model in and of itself—as recent campaigns against excessively high rents have made abundantly clear. Here, redistribution and social justice can be combined with demands for democratization and emancipation. Beyond the question of ownership, new forms of participation and self-administration need to be developed. Social infrastructure in public hands also means a comprehensive process of democratization which places it in the hands of its producers and users. In many places, the idea of health or care councils is already the subject of discussion. Regional mobility and transformation councils are also on the agenda. Such efforts would bring us a step closer to a participatory democracy and would facilitate the first steps towards a green infrastructure socialism (cf. Editorial, *prager frühling*, 2009).

A STRATEGIC PROPOSAL AT THE RIGHT TIME

How can such a transformation of public services be implemented? One thing is certain: the project will only succeed if the various stakeholders involved feel that it reflects their interests. In our view, the idea of cost-free, democratic infrastructures can open new horizons for left-wing politics: social infrastructures offer possibilities for collectively working through and overcoming divisions, because they offer egalitarian access to diverse subaltern groups. Functioning social infrastructures give expression to an alternative vision of collective wealth that is capable of both articulating and then asserting a common interest in public wealth (cf. Candeias 2019, 6).

There is also an opportunity here to move beyond fruitless, antagonistic debates on the left on several issues: Universal basic income: many unemployed and self-employed people, as well as those in precarious employment, place great hope in the idea that this kind of basic income will provide them with more security and freedom. By contrast, employees in more traditional employment, already plagued by rising social security contributions while real wages stagnate, fear added burdens. The debate is often characterized by rigid pro and contra positions, and there has been little progress around this issue on the left for years. The “social infrastructures” model, in combination with basic, sanction-free social security provisions, can open up new perspectives and enable new alliances among previously divided interest groups.

The growth question: here too, arguments on the left have stalled between supporters of the Degrowth perspective and advocates of Keynesian-inspired qualitative growth. Nobody denies that certain sectors, such as industrial production, which involves a high turnover of materials, will have to shrink, and that others will first have to grow—i.e. the entire care economy and social infrastructure, and in relative isolation from material growth. Such qualitative growth is necessary on a transitional basis, not least because of the gaps in many areas of reproduction. Alternative forms of industrial production are likewise necessary—this applies above all to countries of the Global South, but also in countries such as Germany with respect to climate-friendly and resource-sustainable innovation. A growth versus post-growth binary is therefore counterproductive. Instead, the focus must be about shifting course in the medium-term towards a “reproductive economy” (Candeias 2011), in which our needs and the economy are able to develop qualitatively without growing materially. Social infrastructures would be at the centre of such a reproductive economy.

Such infrastructure would therefore also be the central pillar of a new publicly-steered economy, without which a socio-ecological transformation will hardly be possible. There are very few approaches that grant a public mode of production its own economic character. Exceptions are the “public value” approach (Mazzucato and Ryan-Jones 2019) or that of the “social economy” (Müller 2005 and 2010). This would require a different model of public accounting: one that would evaluate existing and required resources in light of use and demand, and focus on the question of how and for what purpose we actually intend to use such resources. This social model of accounting could provide a basis for a public mode of production independent of the capitalist transfer of value. The welfare state would then not only be a compensatory mechanism for balancing social distortions and perform a stabilizing role in times of crisis, but would itself be an element of such a public economy. It would be the basis of a different mode of production and reproduction, one which could be described using the term “green infrastructure socialism”.

UNIFYING CLASS POLITICS FOR GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE SOCIALISM

In the looming conflicts set to emerge around socio-ecological transformation, a well-developed and universally accessible social infrastructure will provide security to those who feel threatened by the necessary structural changes that will accompany it and make a positive future more readily conceivable. In recent years, a growing number of political movements and Die Linke have already begun to orient themselves towards the concept of social infrastructure in order to shape it into a unifying project. Questions of redistribution have been discussed in connection with the right to freedom and democracy, just as the issue of class politics has been addressed alongside the need to recognize and facilitate diversity and different modes of living.

Other groups and organizations are also (finally) according the issue of social infrastructure with the importance it deserves: A new “foundational economy”, as Wolfgang Streeck has called it—citing a group of European authors of the same name who developed the concept (Foundational Economy Collective 2019)—is also a point of reference for social democratic intellectuals (cf. SPW 2019, among others), and for trade unions such as IG Metall (metal workers’ union), ver.di (public sector union), the EVG (railway and transport workers’ union) or the GEW (education and science workers’ union), as well as for welfare organizations and increasingly the environment movement and related associations.

The conditions for implementing large progressive policies are currently less than ideal, and there are tough battles yet to be fought over the how to meet the immense costs of the COVID-19 crisis. At the same time, the crisis has called many supposedly established truths into question and shown that old patterns of political reaction can be redrawn. Within a very short period of time, it has not only been possible to reduce the economic and consumer cycles of entire societies in the interests of pandemic prevention, thus prioritizing—at least temporarily—politics over economy. In the course of combating the crisis, it has also become possible to mobilize large volumes of state funding to support businesses, the workforce, and public infrastructure while also stimulating the economy by abandoning the so-called *schwarze Null* (black zero) overnight. At the level of European governance, the ban on joint debt has also become negotiable. All this means nothing for how the crisis develops in future, however, and as mentioned above we still face fierce battles over the distribution of costs. However, it does show that the once iron grip of the free-market principle of TINA³ has begun to loosen through collective experience on a societal level. Within the context of the pandemic, not only has an alternative financial and debt policy become more attractive, but also one which favours a more forward-looking version of government intervention and management. The breaking of such taboos is well worth capitalizing on. These small spaces which have emerged for a leftist social vision must be exploited in order to forge and fight for new ways forward (cf. IfG & Friends 2020).

...AND WHERE IT’S ALREADY HAPPENING

Many protagonists are already active in the struggle to expand and reorganize social infrastructure. At present, this is probably most visible in the *healthcare sector*. The focus of the latest round of public service enterprise negotiations in Germany (from September 2020) is on upgrading care. Both the federal and state governments have announced that, in light of the COVID-19 crisis, they have no additional funding to spare.

3 TINA: There Is No Alternative.

Despite the largest rescue package in history, workers in “system-relevant” professions will therefore continue to merely receive symbolic recognition. In the nursing sector, strikes and struggles for higher wages, reliable working hours, and better staff quotas have been going on for a long time. The calls for funding to be based on demand and for more staff in this crucial area of healthcare could become a focal point for campaigns by both employees and users of social infrastructure. In terms of infrastructure socialism, it is also a matter of bringing these important functions back into the arena of social responsibility—in other words, a re-municipalization or socialization of hospitals and care facilities.

The same applies to *education and training*, where the focus of the current bargaining round is likewise a fight for greater financial compensation and better employment offers. Here, too, the pandemic has mercilessly exposed how poorly resourced this fundamental area of community life is—both in terms of qualified personnel and physical and digital hardware. In order to implement reliable, universally accessible social infrastructures in the areas of education, training, and social work, it is necessary to improve wages and salaries for staff, increase the number of childcare spots available, and expand all-day care services. Relatedly, trade unions, welfare organizations, Die Linke, and other interested parties have long been fighting for the nationwide abolition of childcare fees. These measures could reduce educational inequality, which in Germany is particularly acute, and facilitate greater social participation and democracy.

Parallel to these collective bargaining rounds in the public sector, wages and benefits for *public transport* workers are being negotiated on a nationwide level for the first time. Apart from reductions in workload via an increase in staffing, the goal is a large-scale expansion of the public transport network. In light of the intensified climate crisis, the expansion of public transport infrastructure will be a key element of any transition towards sustainable mobility systems. Fridays for Future, ver.di, and Die Linke, among others, are organizing to tackle these issues as part of a collective effort. Concrete steps towards providing universal access to mobility as a form of social infrastructure have already been implemented in some cities. The introduction of free public transport for all begins with initiatives such as a free annual pass for schoolchildren, senior citizens, and Hartz IV welfare payment recipients, and a €365 annual ticket for everyone else, efforts designed to facilitate the essential switch from cars to climate-friendly means of transport. In order to meet the growing demand for local and long-distance public transport in a literal sense, the rail network must be expanded, and alternative arrangements developed for the production of trams, e-buses, trains, underground carriages, and other vehicles. At least some of this production could be accomplished by way of public enterprise, and would thus form a further building block of the public economy outlined above.

In the area of *housing and rent*, the debate has already progressed much further. Efforts are underway to defend the statutory cap on rent prices that has been successfully won in Berlin, with the fight now extending to other federal states. Concomitant discussions surrounding the socialization of private property more broadly are also taking place as a result. This is the goal of the Berlin referendum that seeks to mandate the expropriation of property firm Deutsche Wohnen & Co. In order to vastly increase affordable housing stock, large-scale construction is now being contemplated by means of a “new social housing” category. It would also be useful to set up a public construction corporation, i.e. an association of guilds in public ownership, in order to become independent of the construction industry.

For several years now, the expansion of social infrastructure has also played an important role in feminist-led debates and struggles for *gender equality*. The international movement for a global feminist strike and debates around feminist class politics are centred on raising the social and material recognition of both paid and unpaid care work while also reducing the burden it places on women. The movement for reproductive justice seeks to expand high-quality social services, as does the queer-feminist Care Revolution network. Through this network, unpaid carers are organizing together with professional care workers, as well as those who as patients, disabled, or chronically ill people are dependent on support in everyday life. Good working conditions and adequate facilities in childcare centres, all-day schools, nursing, healthcare, and health-related support services all reduce work overloads, especially for women, and enable a more equitable distribution of care work (cf. Fried and Schurian 2016).

In recent years, struggles for the equal *participation of refugees* in social life have linked up to form a worldwide movement for Solidarity Cities (see Christoph and Kron 2019). Within this movement, cities and municipalities are seen as sites for the facilitation of democratic participation and access to vital local services and infrastructure for refugees and undocumented people. New York City was the first place to introduce a “City Card”, a kind of identity document that provides access to municipal services such as healthcare and education, as well as libraries and museums, but also enables the bearer to open a bank account and sign a lease. In addition, the “City Card” offers protection against racial profiling, police violence, and deportation, because it is recognized by the local police authority. It therefore makes an important contribution to the decriminalization of undocumented people. In Europe, too, a “City Card” is under discussion in numerous

places. Zurich and Bern are making progress here,⁴ but in Berlin, too, Die Linke is considering the introduction of a similar kind of identity document (cf. Frank 2019).

On the *financial front*, an increase in pressure on the federal government to provide assistance and an end to the debt freeze are needed to create more room in state and local government budgets. We can already anticipate that austerity policies and their justifications will have a major impact in future, particularly following the next German federal election. This is the latest point at which negotiations will conclude concerning how and by whom the debt incurred fighting the pandemic will be repaid. All this is taking place against the backdrop—among other things—of the old and as yet unresolved issue of local government or municipal debt, currently estimated at around €45 billion.

Municipalities, however, are where most people's lives take place and are shaped on an everyday level. Further restrictions across a wide array of public services will cause frustration, provoke a shift away from democratization, and encourage the acceptance of a destructive vision of rights, while also deepening class divisions. Conversely, the development of social infrastructures, as described above, will not only combat inequality, but also facilitate more democracy and participation (including by groups previously underrepresented in the public sphere).

All of this will require strong grassroots initiatives to identify further points of crystallization for such a perspective that both lend themselves to activist campaigning and have high publicity value; these can then be used to simultaneously generate productive conflict on multiple levels (local, national, European, etc.). To this end, priority must be given to winning over those who suffer most from the current shortcomings in social infrastructure.

The decisive factor will be whether it is possible by the time of next year's Bundestag elections to form a socially and environmentally conscious political bloc that makes the upgrading and expansion of social infrastructures the focal point of a joint project (which must continue to exist after the elections). For it is only through widespread social pressure and a pooling of forces that consistent steps can be taken in this direction—towards a green infrastructure socialism.

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⁴ See www.zuericitycard.ch/ and wirallesindbern.ch/city-card/.

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