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# “FREE TRANSPORT BY DECREE” VERSUS TRANSFORMATION

In recent years, and the past 18 months, in particular, the idea of freely accessible local public transport has taken root in Germany.<sup>1</sup> Roughly half of the country’s population and more than half of SPD, Green, The Left Party and Pirate Party voters favour the idea of state funding for buses, trams, underground networks and trains, and making public transport available free of charge.<sup>2</sup> These circumstances should encourage us to take new, bolder steps; this article is intended as a contribution towards doing just that. Above all, it aims to contribute to the ‘Plan B debate’, and thus to The Left Party’s discussion about a sustainable future.

## A DECADES-OLD CONCEPT

The arguments in favour of this model are widely known: almost everyone would like to live in a quiet area but remain connected and within easy reach of the places that they regularly visit. Most people would also like children to be able to play outside without having to worry about speeding cars or the health risks posed by air pollution. But whether these hopes are achievable largely depends on a person’s employment status, their income and the assets they own. Moreover, people who can afford the proverbial “house in the suburbs” are generally responsible for more traffic and increase the corresponding burdens on the rest of society.

The poor are all too often limited in their mobility, yet suffer the most from the consequences of road traffic: affordable rents often mean living with higher levels of traffic noise, air pollution, concentrations of ultra-fine particles, a greater risk of accidents and, accordingly, higher stress levels. The effects of this situation are felt even more strongly by the children who grow up in these circumstances, as their health often suffers in the long term.

These factors are made worse by the veritable flood of concrete across what were once natural landscapes, ground contamination, and the hectic, aggressive pace of life with cars parked in every place imaginable and a lack of recreational spaces where people can meet. This underscores the overall importance of creating cities that are truly worth living in, alongside answering the broader, long-standing questions of “How do we live today?” and “How do we *want* to live?”

One rather telling aspect of our society is the extent to which urban planning is determined by the needs of car owners. The public purse, which often faces debt to begin with, spends only a fraction on public transportation per

capita of what it annually spends on motorised individual transport. Nevertheless, the argument about empty public coffers is deployed to justify privatisation, price hikes, cuts and service shutdowns at the municipal and regional level. Moreover, badly-needed investments are delayed indefinitely.

Clearly, free public transport would not solve all of our problems; rather, at best it would represent the first step in this direction. Nevertheless, this step is long overdue and would go a long way to solving or at least mitigating many people’s immediate problems. Some people cannot afford to use public transport, and some motorists would prefer to travel by bus or train. In addition, free public transport would certainly improve the situation of people living in areas strongly affected by traffic congestion; and it would also help public transport workers, whose jobs are currently under threat.

At the same time, these points demonstrate a number of potential arguments against free public transport: empty public coffers, the diverse patterns of public transport usage, which are said to cause further social injustices, less available parking spaces, increased congestion and stress due to overcrowded public transport systems, an underappreciation of existing services, and growing “investment gaps”. Moreover, this suggests that the issue of free public transport cannot be separated from the broader issues of social inequality, structures of production and consumption, the public sphere and public finances in particular, as well as from the degree of political will that exists at various levels.

Even if every member of the community supported a move towards making local public transport free at the point of delivery and were willing to support its implementation, such efforts would come into conflict with European and German federal law (regulations concerning public con-

tracts, debt ceilings, etc.). Moreover, local communities have no influence over the overall demand for cars: even a complete switch to public transport by daily commuters at the local level would fail to reduce the number of cars produced nationwide.

A left-leaning, environmentally conscious professor living in the US, whose university is located in a city with free public transport, reports about other difficulties: "I certainly don't benefit from it, as we can't afford to live in the city centre – we can't even afford the parking ticket on the outskirts!" Therefore, the introduction of free transport must be understood as one element of a comprehensive, long-term and indeed contradictory process of restructuring housing, work, recreation, nutrition and mobility; ultimately, these spheres of life constitute a unified whole.

### THE PLACE OF TRANSPORT WITHIN COMPLEX PROBLEMS

The introduction of free public transport is not an automatic first step towards socially and environmentally sustainable development. As such, free public transport also requires the development of specific concepts, strategies and alliances. It is widely acknowledged that the automotive industry is the "heart" of the industrial sector and thus of what German managers and politicians alike refer to as *Wirtschaftsstandort Deutschland* (Germany as a location for global business). Accordingly, the country's Ministry for Economic Affairs declares: "The German car industry is the largest branch of manufacturing in the country, and, measured by total turnover, by far the most significant industry in Germany. Businesses in the sector account for a turnover of more than EUR 404 billion and directly employ over 790,000 people (preliminary figures from 2015). The car industry is, therefore, essential to prosperity and employment in Germany".<sup>3</sup>

The introduction of a rebate scheme for used cars in the wake of the most recent global financial crisis, followed by the "environmental premium" for e-cars and hybrids as instruments to "cope with the crises" and secure German industry, leaves no doubt that, despite wide-ranging talk about climate protection, sustainability and global responsibility, no-one seriously intends to make fundamental changes to existing structures of production and consumption.

The emissions scandal was not only entirely avoidable; we also failed to use it as an opportunity to implement long-overdue changes. Although the high and indeed increasingly environmentally harmful emissions produced by cars, as well as statistics on crash victims and damage caused by accidents, are publicly and officially viewed as regrettable, the only solution put forward is "improving the transportation of people and goods". In this context, however, "improving" transport implies deploying more effective technologies, the use of energy sources that cause lower levels of emissions, more sophisticated accident-prevention technologies, and the optimisation of logistics and traffic flows (particularly through satellite-supported systems and intelligent mobility).

The aim is thus not to reduce traffic levels while maintaining the right to socially and environmentally sustainable mobility for all, but ensuring that the transport system can still function properly while seeking advantages for domestic businesses within globalised society. In other words, the aim is to increase competitiveness, and thus reduce individual and social costs (at best, this includes the externalised environmental costs of transport). Clearly, however, reducing individ-

ual costs, in this context, primarily refers to reducing costs for business, rather than those incurred by the population.

Four aspects must be taken into account if we are to adequately address the general parameters of future developments: first, we have already passed several tipping points – in the sense of the breaking points of functioning ecosystems – or are rapidly approaching them. Second, even the technological, or rather technological-economic, changes towards gradual crisis management have come too late. Third, social inequalities, including those relating to mobility, cannot simply be corrected "upwards" due to the severe consequences that the current system already has for the environment. Fourth, global inequalities, as well as those related to mobility, already exist on a dramatic scale, and this means that industrial regions will have to massively reduce the amounts of resources and energy they use and the harmful emissions they produce.

The environmental crisis is caused by existing structures of production and consumption. Contemporary social structures, in turn, are responsible for grave social inequalities in the Global North, and even more so throughout the world. The main perpetrators are the same in both cases: the primary owners and managers of corporations in the energy sector (which supply the lion's share of energy required for transport), in agribusiness (which also creates strong demand for transport and energy, and produces biofuels) and in the military-industrial complex, or rather the "security sector" (which secures resource flows, and territories, as well as demand and supply for the aforementioned sectors).

These sectors consume the vast majority of resources and natural materials, and are responsible for the majority of air, water and soil pollution, and thus overall for the destruction of the planet. This dynamic evolves in conjunction with the owners and managers of financial institutions and high-tech corporations. Cooperation between owners and management engenders networks and structures of power that extend to the elites that are required for successful capital valorisation, in other words, state and administrative actors, politicians, lawyers, accountants and economic consultants, scientists and media personalities, leaders in the military and security apparatus, civil society and in other sectors of the economy.

The main consequences of these interrelations are, first, that the six economic spheres mentioned above shape everyday life in our societies: work (particularly the extent of employment in the automotive industry), housing, mobility, nutrition and recreation. They determine the characteristically oversized environmental footprint of our mode of production and lifestyle, which, on a global scale, destroys the basis for life itself. A second crucial outcome is that these networks and structures of production and consumption lay the basis for the organisation of a social consensus based on the motto of "carry on in the same old way", or, rather, of "carry on in the same old way, but a bit better".

To summarise, these aspects must be considered when discussing the introduction of free public transport as a first step towards socio-ecological transformation. That said, we should not be easily discouraged by contradiction or opposition. What is needed is detailed, public explanation of the interrelations and structures mentioned above, without demanding too much from people who have already been convinced – or those who are potentially persuadable – of the need for free public transport. After all, they have a specific grievance, and their readiness to engage in social activ-

ism is tied to this grievance. This willingness to participate needs to grow and strengthen. In this sense, a movement for the introduction of free public transport should refrain from attempting to solve “all of the world’s problems”.

Ultimately, given the highly complex nature of society’s problems, grievances relating to agriculture, housing or surveillance are just as likely to become starting points that can be used to raise public awareness and to work towards socio-ecological transformation. Nevertheless, a two-fold compatibility would be desirable, and although this may seem contrary to the last point, the task before us, on the one hand, is to find actors with which we can form alliances for the introduction of free public transport and, on the other hand, to search for opportunities to support other democratic movements and establish links to them.

### **BUT WHY SHOULD TRANSPORT “BE FREE”, AND WHOSE INTERESTS WOULD THIS REFLECT?**

The question of “why” is easily answered: first, because this issue is about improving the quality of urban life; it also poses the challenge, particularly in Germany, of restructuring and partially dismantling the automotive industry. Second, numerous initiatives already exist, and there is popular support for “free public transport”. Third, a wealth of experience has already been gained from similar situations and a degree of (improvable) international cooperation also exists. We currently know of about 100 cases where local public transport is being provided free of charge. Tallinn, with a population of almost half a million, has become the first EU capital to provide free public transport.

Left-wing alliances calling for the introduction of free public transport have been active for years in Sweden (Stockholm) and Canada (Toronto). In Germany, the ZAK3 group in Tübingen was followed by a model project in Templin, not to mention growing efforts in other cities for free public transportation by left-wing, environmental, youth groups or groups linked to the Green Party. Owed particularly to its Erfurt branch, since 2011, The Left Party has shown increasing interest in the issue. It adopted the demand for free public transport into its party manifesto in 2011 and at the national level in 2013. About half of the party’s state branches have embraced the concept, at least in part, which has filtered into various municipal manifestos. Related initiatives have been launched and municipal electoral campaigns have made free public transport a key theme.

The Left Party’s parliamentary group has produced brochures and hosted events on the issue. Berlin, Heidelberg, Wiesbaden and other cities have set up coalitions for free public transport in collaboration with the Pirate Party, and these have also led to vital feasibility studies. These numerous and multi-faceted activities have often resonated in the media and have helped keep the matter “in the news”. That said there are only a few extra-parliamentary initiatives – apart from the group ZAK3 and organised “fare dodgers”<sup>4</sup> – that are particularly focused on this issue.

We are still a far cry from campaigns at the federal state level, let alone a unified movement at the national level that encompasses members of The Left Party, in particular, the Pirate Party, the SPD and the Greens. This is both tragic and inexplicable, as these four parties all speak of the need for socio-ecological transformation. Coming into play here are the problems set out above. On the one hand, people who vote for these parties support free public transport: a majority

is convinced of the need for a coalition government consisting of the SPD, The Left Party and the Greens, and debate the issue regularly.

Internationally, there are five groups campaigning for the introduction of free public transport: the first consists of initiatives such as *Planka* in Sweden, which includes people who, for the most part, are active in more traditional organisations such as political parties, student associations and trade unions. Most are members or supporters of the Swedish Left Party. Their main objective is to ensure the implementation of human rights, especially the right to mobility in the broadest sense. This is also reflected in their campaigns for the rights of refugees and migrants, an issue which, at times, they absolutely prioritise.

These groups focus on a way of life based on solidarity and thus on environmental sustainability, and this includes the provision of free public transport. This is reflected in their lifestyles, which are guided by self-determination, a focus on good health and living together in solidarity. Their publications criticise the “car society” and address the problems mentioned above.

The second group of actors are alliances of left-wing organisations, such as those found in Toronto. These actors discuss and pursue free public transport as a decidedly socialist project.<sup>5</sup> Their ultimate objective is revolutionary change of the structures of production, consumption and society, and thereby of social relations of power. In addition, most of these actors actively fight for civil rights in labour, grassroots participation, and transport, municipal and social policy.

The third group consists of platforms of activist citizens who fight for a city in which people can live together in solidarity. They demand participation in all relevant socio-political decisions, and campaign against privatisation and social marginalisation, particularly of Roma and refugees. Their platform could be compared to a social forum that works continuously and includes a working group on the issue of free public transport. These activists believe that it is possible to live in a city with clean air and that provides an attractive environment for all of its residents. They seek trans-regional and international cooperation with people from social milieus that have similar “philosophies”, predominantly in the countries of former Yugoslavia.

The fourth group is made up of more traditional collective actors, such as the Scottish Socialist Party, which has campaigned for free public transport for many years. This party, which has chosen the protection, democratisation and expansion of the commons as its primary political goal, has invited its voters and other interested groups to participate in their project.

Fifth, some public administrations are consciously working towards the expansion of democratic participation on behalf of collective actors and citizens, while involving local public transport workers. This includes Tallinn’s city government, which organised a referendum on free public transport with the support of the Centre Party; and the Swedish town of Avesta, which is governed by a coalition of three different parties. That Avesta ultimately adopted the Swedish Left Party’s proposal, despite the fact that the party neither has a majority in the local council nor currently holds the mayor’s office, was down to pragmatic and economic reasons more than anything else: attractive, free local public transport was more convenient and indeed cheaper for the community than maintaining and expanding roads.

Similarly, citizens in many French communities with free public transport have gained experiences of citizen-oriented, left-wing local politics. In this context, free public transport represents one element that forms part of a complex restructuring of communal life oriented towards the public and the common interests of citizens. An analysis of local electoral manifestos demonstrates this very clearly.

In contrast, the situation in Poland is more complicated. Initial experiences with free public transport were the result of administrative decisions largely unrelated to electoral manifestos, citizen participation or democratic initiatives. This is now changing, particularly since the city of Żory – with its spirited development campaign “We are Żory!” – began marketing itself as a family friendly city with a healthy climate and free public transport. This situation developed out of the ubiquitous lack of mobility that resulted from extreme poverty, and which prevented many people from being able to see a doctor or children from going to school; at the same time, the town centre went into decline because people could no longer afford the bus fare to travel into town. The other possibility, of course, would be to allow motorists to continue causing congestion in inner cities. It is in the best interest of all municipalities to improve local public transport, not least in order to attract new taxpayers through improved accessibility.

In sum, this brief overview of various free public transport initiatives across Europe reveals that, in all cases, free public transport was, on the one hand, never merely a singular issue and that it was introduced only after a number of intermediary stages. None of the five groups described above would be strong enough – even if they were to expand on a massive scale – to implement the necessary steps concerning the right to mobility, clean air and a good life for all, nor for the introduction of free public transport in every municipality throughout Europe.

Rather, this would require the political and cultural will of all those involved, as well as increased and comprehensive investments in public transport and related sectors. After all, the only feasible outcome would be a nationwide public transport service that also linked up to other means of transport, such as bikes. The decisive factors here are shorter distances to (more appealing) stations and stops, shorter transfer times, longer operating hours, punctuality, and a comfortable service that is safe in the broadest sense, as well as courtesy and the availability of good quality information.

A lasting and sustainable reduction in the demand for cars and thus in car production, however, would only materialise through the targeted and conscious avoidance of traffic in social life – and thus also in economic life – on the basis of an expansion of free or at least reduced-fare regional and trans-regional public transport. Here, again, Tallinn and some Polish municipalities provide inspiring examples. The cases set out above teach us valuable lessons, but are not enough to meet the challenges presented by socio-ecological transformation. Existing praxis, however, also shows that people develop a general willingness and ability to learn and to adapt to the implementation of new ideas that are welcomed by the community. In turn, much can develop out of this process.

## WHAT NOW?

The experiences of the Left (and The Left Party) in Germany, as well as public interest in the issue and among potential left-wing voters in particular, suggest that the best way forward would be to link together The Left Party’s campaign

against precarious employment and living conditions with a political campaign for free public transport. This campaign could be used to popularise and raise the credibility of ‘Plan B’, the conclusions of the *Woche der Zukunft* conference,<sup>6</sup> and, more generally, socio-ecological transformation.<sup>7</sup>

Given that members of the European Left Party in France, Greece and Slovenia, as well as the New European Left Forum (NELF) and the *transform!* network in Sweden and Finland have acquired a fair amount of experience in campaigning for free public transport, it appears wise to pick up on their on-going debates and activities and carry them forward at the European level. Free local public transport could serve as an example with which to discuss further steps towards a comprehensive EU-wide structural change of modes of production and life, the rolling back and over-coming of oligarchical capital structures and the expansion of democratic structures based on solidarity.

The most promising launching points would be the introduction of free public transport in metropolises such as Paris or Berlin, coupled with its implementation in larger German federal states such as Thuringia or North Rhine-Westphalia; this could lead to a renewed dynamic. However, this would only be possible if the underlying political framework were to undergo simultaneous change at the level of EU member states and the EU itself.

Ultimately, the task at hand is to unify different local, trans-regional, national and EU-wide struggles. Therefore, the first step must be to tie existing approaches, projects and movements closer together, assess experiences and coordinate the next steps as part of a common effort.

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<sup>1</sup> Slogans include “*Gratis-ÖPNV*” (free public transport) and “*Nulltarif im ÖPNV*” (No charge for public transport). “*Nulltarif im ÖPNV*” is a project run by The Left Party parliamentary group as part of its “Plan B”. See: <http://www.plan-b-mitmachen.de/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/150521-plan-b-a5-mobil-web.pdf>. <sup>2</sup> See a poll conducted by the magazine *Stern*: “Deutsche bei ÖPNV-Flatrate uneins”, in: *Stern*, 25 March 2015, [www.presseportal.de/pm/6329/2981375](http://www.presseportal.de/pm/6329/2981375) and a feasibility study conducted by the Pirate Party: Hamburg Institut Research gGmbH: *Fahrscheinlos. Grundlagen- und Machbarkeitsstudie fahrscheinloser ÖPNV in Berlin*, Berlin 2015, [www.piratenfraktion-berlin.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Piratenfraktion\\_Studie\\_Fahrscheinloser\\_OEPNV\\_Berlin\\_Juni\\_2015.pdf](http://www.piratenfraktion-berlin.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Piratenfraktion_Studie_Fahrscheinloser_OEPNV_Berlin_Juni_2015.pdf). <sup>3</sup> Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Industrie: *Branchenskizze Automobilindustrie*, available at: [www.bmwi.de/DE/Themen/Wirtschaft/branchenfokus,did=195924.html](http://www.bmwi.de/DE/Themen/Wirtschaft/branchenfokus,did=195924.html). <sup>4</sup> Known as “Die Schwarzfahrenden”. <sup>5</sup> For more information see: <http://www.socialistproject.ca/documents/FreeTransit.php>. <sup>6</sup> More on the “Week of the Future” conference can be found at: <http://www.rosalux.de/kapitalismusalternativen/specials/futuring-zukunft-machen.html>. <sup>7</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.rosalux.de/kapitalismusalternativen/thema/sozialoekologischer-umbau/2372/287.html>.

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