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Europe

The automobile society

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The European Union prefers the train. Officially, at least. Transport Commissioner Neil Kinnock's "Green Book" recognises the enormous "external costs of car transport. In the corridors of the Brussels Commission, phrases like "avoiding traffic build-up" and "slowing down" are common. But we all know the real situation. Trains might be more socially and ecologically reasonable, but EU "reform" has destroyed the rail system.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/sm-traffic.jpg>]

The real EU priority is reducing the cost of road transport. Each year, the average distances travelled by people and merchandise increase. The revised Maastricht Treaty, and European Monetary Union will cause a further, artificial increase of road traffic, increase journey distances, and shift even more traffic from rail to road and air. Like in North America, trains will become more and more rare. There are three main reasons for this.

Car traffic

In 1970, the number of car travellers multiplied by the distance travelled was 1,580 person-kilometres. By 1996, the figure was 2.5 time higher: an incredible 4,000 person-kilometres. And there are less people in each car nowadays. In 1970 the average car contained 2 persons. In 1996 only 1.5.

Rail transport only increased by 30% over the same period, while bus transport increased by 50%. Even in 1970, rail was responsible for only 10% of total transportation. Buses represented 23%, and cars 77%. By 1996 rail only represented 6% of total transport, compared with 15% for buses, and 85% for cars.

These figures don't include travel inside urban areas. But given the stagnation in metro and tram construction, the weight of private automobile transport is certainly even higher when we include urban travel.

Trucking

Goods transport (in kilometre-tonnes) has doubled over the last 25 years (from 850 bn. kilometre-tonnes in 1970 to 1,500 bn. in 1996). During this period, the amount of rail transport has slipped by 15%, river and canal transport has stagnated, and pipeline transport has increased by 30%. In contrast, road transport of merchandise has increased by almost 150%, from 420 billion kilometres-tonnes in 1970 to 1,100 bn. in 1996. As a result, the share of trucking in total goods transport increased from 50% in 1970 to 70% in 1996.

Artificial, obligatory traffic

There is very little real economic growth in the EU. In real terms, salaries are stagnant or falling. But we have seen uninterrupted growth of automobile traffic, which the EU even defines as a "growth-stimulating sector." More and more person-kilometres are "produced" every year. The European Commission's new Green Book on transport calculates that "the daily travelling distance of the average European citizen has increased from 16.5 km (10 miles) in

1970 to 31.5km in 1996. This increase in demand has mainly been satisfied by an increase in the use of the private automobile. The number of private cars for every 1,000 inhabitants has increased from 232 in 1970 to 435 today."

Over the same period, what the EU calls the "intensity of transport" has increased by more than 50%. In other words, each tonne of merchandise travels 50% further than in 1970, before reaching its buyer.

As in so many other areas of capitalism, in the transport sector we are witnessing the transformation of productive forces into destructive forces. Technology and equipment which once brought mobility for people and diversity in the merchandise available is now engaged in artificial "growth," and average journey lengths are being stretched.

In goods transport, average journey length is increasing because of an absurd division of labour, and greater distances between producer and customer. The engine of an Opel Corsa automobile is produced in Vienna, Austria, and the body is made in Zaragossa, Spain. EU-inspired subsidies to the cost of commercial transport contribute to this ecological nonsense, destruction of regional economic structures, and miserable working conditions for professional drivers.

Individuals are commuting further and further to work: one consequence of the concentration of capital. The closure of so many small shops has increased the length of the shopping circuit, and the destruction of the urban tissue obliges people to travel further and further for their leisure activities.

There are obvious ecological and economic reasons to put a stop to these developments. And democratic reasons too. In 1995, only 40% of European households had a car. Larger families, families with young children, young people and women are all over-represented in the 60% of households that do not possess an automobile. In other words, policies which favour road transport and the private motorcar are by definition against the interest of a majority of the population.

An increase in the density of car ownership (more cars per 1,000 people) will not mean an improvement in this exclusion. In the United States, increased car ownership has gone hand in hand with the deterioration of the public transport system (bus, tram, metro, rail).

Total automobile society

There are powerful interests opposed to the development of a reasonable, responsible and human transport system. Twelve of Europe's 20 largest trusts are in the oil refining, petrol distribution and vehicle construction business. These companies represent 2/3 of the total turnover of the 20 major trusts on the continent. A rich and influential enemy.

The European Commission and the member states are planning on the assumption that air and road transport of merchandise will double by the year 2010, and that there will be a 30-50% increase in person-kilometres of private automobile transport. Three EU programmes are working actively to create this total automobile society.

EU Structural Funds: These are supposedly an aid to poorer regions. In fact, a large part of spending goes to road building, particularly in "little-motorised" regions. In 1994 these funds were worth 43.3 billion DM (\$29.5 bn). In 1999 they will be 63 bn. DM.

Transnation networks

Most of these high-profile projects concern new "high-use" connections, to "fill the gaps" in the continental transport network. They include the Eurotunnel between Britain and France, a tunnel under the Alps between France and Italy, and the Skanlink bridge between Denmark and Sweden.

There are also a number of destructive High Speed Train projects. Gigantic investments in these rail lines will almost exclusively benefit businessmen. Nine out of ten rail trips in the EU are on trains with an average speed of 50 km/hour or less. For the majority of rail travellers, speeds of 250 km/hour are absurd. The average longer journey is about 200 km. A high speed train could only reduce the time of such a journey by a few minutes.

In June 1996 German Chancellor Helmut Kohl told an EU committee on transport that "a High Speed Train between London and Moscow would substantially increase the support of the citizens for the European Union".

This is grotesque. How many people actually travel between London and Moscow? Almost exclusively businessmen. Who almost exclusively prefer the plane.

Subsidising rail privatisation

At the same time as prioritising long distance, high speed travel, rail operators are dismantling the regional and local transport networks which most people use most. Cuts in staff are reducing the level of service and passenger security. Each application of "market forces" weakens the supposedly weakest section of the travel system: the public system.

In Britain, the "profitability" of bus operators increased after the 1985 liberalisation, even though the number of passengers decreased by 27.4% between 1985 and 1994. Prices increased by 25% during the same period. A clear example of the logic of privatisation: less buses travelling more kilometres, carrying less passengers, who pay more than before. The working conditions of transport staff are also affected. The average age of buses in circulation is increasing, and security norms are being loosened.

Left turn

We need to change the whole direction of transport policy.

- Reducing average journey time.
- Putting strict limits on the destructive potential of the transport system on our environment.
- Stricter speed limits, and a reduction in the maximum tonnage which trucks can carry.
- Lorries should not be allowed to transport merchandise during the night.
- Find ways to cut significantly the amount of merchandise transported across Europe. What is left should be moved by rail.

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We need to establish clear estimates of the total real costs of our transport system, including the social and ecological costs. This will inevitably mean increasing the cost of road transport of merchandise. But we should not allow transport companies to "compensate" for this extra cost by reducing salaries or intensifying the work of their employees. States' increased revenue from these new tariffs should be used to develop public sector transport systems.

Above all, we must stop the privatisation and deregulation of the sector. Mobility should be recognised as a general, social right, like health, education, and the retirement pension. Some say this will inevitably increase bureaucracy. The solution is in the democratisation and decentralisation of this expanded public transport system.