

# Debate: Should socialists support the HS2 rail line?

## Developing efficient public transport



HS1: The channel tunnel link

**Mark Pickersgill**

Stevenage Socialist Party

The second high speed line (HS2) in Britain (the first being the channel tunnel link from London to Paris) would initially connect London to Birmingham by 2026 with a journey time of 49 minutes.

The line would later join Birmingham to Manchester and Leeds, reducing journey times to Manchester to one hour 20 minutes from London.

The route has already been modified, due to environmental concerns. The trains will be able to carry over 1,000 passengers at a time, making them more fuel efficient than car travel and short haul flights.

In France, for instance, some airline companies no longer offer flights from Paris to Lyon because the journey times are faster by train.

As many people use rail as in the 1950s, but with only half the network available because of decades of cuts and closures.

### Old lines

Some have argued that disused and existing lines could be utilised instead of building any new lines.

In fact, part of the proposed route for HS2 uses part of the "great central line", which was closed in 1966. This line was built to larger and

more modern European standards 100 years ago, but did not have a direct route out of London, and eventually went towards the east Midlands rather than Birmingham.

However, high speed trains will travel at 250 miles per hour requiring purpose built straight track alignment. Most of Britain's rail network was built over 150 years ago, and is unsuitable for high speed rail.

As socialists we are in favour of efficient, comfortable and affordable public transport systems. Anyone who has travelled by high speed rail, such as the Bullet train in China, will have experienced such benefits.

### Concerns

There are concerns over HS2's effect on the countryside, that investment will be cut on the rest of the railways and that high ticket costs will deter people from using it. This has been the experience where high speed lines have been built in countries such as France and Spain. Massive investment is required to modernise and expand the existing transport system, as well as spending on high speed rail.

Privatisation has resulted in increased fares and overcrowding, while private rail companies are receiving huge public subsidies.

Rather than opposing HS2, socialists should campaign for affordable fares as part of bringing the whole transport system into public ownership and democratic workers' control.

## White elephant won't improve rail services

**Steve Bell**

Aylesbury Socialist Party

My involvement in campaigning against HS2 arose from supporting an anti-cuts 2011 election candidate in a local working class ward. The most common question on the door was about our attitude to HS2, as all the main parties supported it and the line would be 100 metres from many people's homes.

After much discussion, research and exploration, Walton Court and Hawkslade Stop HS2 was set up. We collected 2,000 signatures from the estate, showing the depth of opposition. We became one of over 70 groups opposed to this scheme.

In the press, opponents of HS2 have been portrayed as only Tory councils and well-to-do landowners wishing to protect their own interests. But it is clear the line will also affect many working class communities.

I was therefore disappointed to see leading trade unionists supporting the HS2 scheme. Many opposing HS2 believe that the £32 billion cost of HS2 would be better spent on expanding the current rail infrastructure.

### Open to question

The evidence to support the building of the scheme is open to question, especially job

creation, usage and that it will ease the already crowded existing services.

No stations are planned between the Heathrow and Birmingham airport interchanges. The service is proposed for business use and therefore will lead to tickets priced at a pre-

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mium, meaning working people will continue to use the cheaper existing service. The Netherlands HS scheme is being bailed out by the government precisely because of this.

Environmental and social consequences will hit working people living close to the line the hardest, as they won't be able to afford to move, owing to the high cost of living in the south east.

Yes, we do need rail services that are fit for purpose and existing rail services do need a massive amount of investment. But this project will not solve this and is likely to be a white elephant once built.

This campaign is not going to go away. Campaigners are likely to stand as independent candidates against those supporting HS2, as well as local communities taking part in mass civil disobedience.

We are for jobs, services and investing in infrastructure, but not so that multinational corporations can profit at our expense.



White elephant?

## Italy: Val di Susa's destructive rail project benefits the rich

**Christine Thomas**

Controcorrente (CWI Italy)

For more than 20 years, the people of Val di Susa in the Piedmont region of Italy have fought tenaciously against a high speed rail line linking Turin to Lyons in France.

The latest protest against the line took place on 28 January, one day after 26 activists were arrested.

This beautiful, narrow valley has already got a main road, a motorway and a railway line that is only running at 30% capacity.

Why not upgrade the existing railway, ask protesters, at a cost much lower than the estimated €20 billion needed for the high speed link? They dismiss as hot air talk about 'creating local jobs' when governments

from right and 'left' have presided over the destruction of thousands of jobs.

Tunneling into the mountain will release harmful uranium and asbestos, damaging the health of people in the area. Only the big construction companies, the bankers, the speculators and the mafia will benefit from this destructive project.

### Riot police

In June, 2,000 riot police armed with (illegal) CS gas were sent into the area. They attacked the peaceful Maddalena protester camp. Several protesters were injured and hospitalised.

The area is now effectively under occupation by Italian state forces with a razor wire fence policed by

armed patrols. The trigger for the invasion was a deadline set for European Union funding. If work on the project didn't start, no money would be forthcoming.

The government has said protesters are all violent outside agitators. This couldn't be further from the truth.

Local people of all ages are actively involved in the campaign. Thousands have been mobilised, often at a moment's notice.

Solidarity from workers and young people beyond the valley is growing. FIOM, the metal workers union, organised a one day regional strike.

Former MEP Joe Higgins and current MEP Paul Murphy (Socialist Party Ireland) have visited the valley and raised the issue in the European parliament.

## Germany: Opposing 'Stuttgart 21'

**Wolfram Klein**

Sozialistische Alternative (CWI Germany)

Sozialistische Alternative (SAV) members have been involved in the opposition to the 'Stuttgart 21' high speed rail line since 1995.

SAV members have spoken at demonstrations of over 100,000 people. We have helped to organise construction blockades, build the youth wing of the movement and intensify links with other campaigns like in Val di Susa, Italy.

People oppose the waste of tax money, the destruction of parts of the Schlossgarten (Castle Park) and the threat to the second biggest source of mineral water in Europe.

Stuttgart 21 would link Stuttgart

airport to Ulm (between Stuttgart and Munich), and probably increase the use of the airport. Munich airport is getting a third runway, which also has massive opposition.

In Stuttgart, the current main railway station would be replaced by an underground station with less capacity. Property speculators want to get their hands on inner city land which is currently used for track installations.

Protests contributed to the election of the first "Green" state prime minister. But the new state government of Greens and Social Democrats (who support Stuttgart 21) has not changed much.

In January police have broken up blockades against the demolition of Stuttgart's old station.