

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

No future for German aerospace?

Budget cutters are threatening to halt the development of key 21st-century technologies.

An airplane crash on Sept. 9 during a Berlin air show killed Reinhard Furrer, the former director (1987-94) of the Berlin-based Institute for Space Research. The death of Furrer, one of the most outspoken proponents of the Oberth-von Braun-Sänger heritage, comes as the ideology of fiscal austerity in government and "outsourcing" in industry are threatening to kill all future manned space missions and other big space projects.

Furrer, who took part in the joint U.S.-German "Spacelab D-1" mission in October 1985, quit his post at the institute in 1994, in protest against pressure from government and academic circles to put more emphasis on ecologism in his institute's work. Furrer maintained that mastering the technology of manned space flight would decide, in the next century, which nations would stand at the forefront of scientific and economic development. Moreover, he was an advocate of man's role as a colonizer of outer space.

The current situation in the aerospace sector is quite dramatic, with decisive negotiations ongoing over future funding of space technology projects in Germany as well as on the European level. The next conference of the European Space Agency (ESA), in Toulouse, France on Oct. 18-20, is crucial. The ESA is celebrating its 20th anniversary this autumn, and if one looks back at the original plans of the agency and its 14 European member governments, one cannot escape the sad impression that all the plans for space shuttles, orbital stations, and exploratory missions to the Moon and even to Mars, were born in an entirely

different historical period. Today, the dominant policy among the member governments which fund the ESA is not that projects should be defined on the basis of assessed technology potentials, but on the basis of fixed financial ceilings.

"One has to study the funding, first, and then see what is possible under the limitations posed by that," a spokesman for the German Aerospace Agency (DARA) in Bonn told *EIR* on Sept. 12. "Every other approach is like trying to build castles in the sand. The French still think this way, they still insist on developing a manned space module, but there is simply no money for that."

After all, the German government succeeded in convincing the former Mitterrand government of France of the "need to have cost-sensitive planning," this source explained. He forecast that this line would be reasserted at the meeting in Toulouse. In view of the fact that the core impulse at the ESA comes from the bilateral cooperation between France and Germany, the budget-cutting policy in Bonn means that Paris is forced to back down and operate under fiscal constraints, as far as its space technology ambitions are concerned.

When the ESA built the Spacelab 15 years ago, which has been used in numerous missions in cooperation with the NASA to this day, there was the idea of first developing an unmanned, Automatic Transfer Vehicle (ATV) and, later on, a manned Crew Transfer Vehicle (CTV), to service orbital space stations. The ATV design has survived, in a cut-back version, with the predominantly Franco-

German Ariane-5 rocket project that is to begin full operation early next year. The CTV was first reduced to a Crew Rescue Vehicle (CRV) version, then taken off the ESA agenda entirely for financial reasons. The French still hope for a German "yes," so that the project could be launched on a bilateral basis, but, according to DARA sources, the best that can be expected at the Toulouse meeting is a statement of intent for a CRV without a funding mandate.

The German disinterest in this manned shuttle project implies that there is no hope for more ambitious projects such as the Sänger space plane, named after German space pioneer Eugen Sänger, and an original German design dating from the late 1950s. Whether there is a chance for the joint Franco-German orbital surveillance satellite project Helios II, which Chancellor Helmut Kohl promised he would decide on in September, is uncertain, as is the future of many other projects.

When Economics Minister Günter Rexrodt met on Sept. 7 with senior representatives of the private German Aerospace Industries group, his message was: "He who cannot stand on his own legs cannot hope to receive support from others." First, Rexrodt insisted, the industry should cut costs and deficits, and then ask for government money. Because of this attitude, the ESA budget has been reduced to DM 4 billion (\$2.5 billion), instead of the DM 6 billion needed.

This budget-cutting is even more absurd, because leading politicians, including Kohl, have proclaimed that everything would be done to "make the nation fit for the 21st century." It is not even certain that the nation's aerospace sector, which has lost one-third of its workforce (more than 30,000 jobs) in the five last years, will make it into the next century.