

Taking over Berlin's energy supply

How the Berliner Energietisch is campaigning to democratize the local energy sector

Dr. Stefan Taschner, Berliner Energietisch/ BürgerBegehren Klimaschutz e.V., Berlin

Introduction

In the nineties of the last century, many municipalities in Germany were affected by the wave of liberalization and privatization. Promoted by the EU market liberalism, indebted municipalities withdraw from the areas of local interest (energy, water, waste, public transport) and started to privatize them. This led in a revenue from the sale for municipal budgets, however in a short term only. Due to the better efficiency of private providers as well as by the triggered competition the consumer was promised falling prices, better quality and more customer-oriented service. However none of these promises were ever kept.

One and a half decades later, things are starting to turn around. In recent years especially in the area of energy supply a clear trend of a remunicipalisation is recorded. This was caused by the nationwide expiring concession contracts for the distribution of electricity and gas in numerous municipalities.

The pending of new contracts has led in many municipalities to a discussion of the local energy supply in the future. Often this debate was not just about the concession contracts but also on the distribution of energy by a community-owned energy supplier.

In this debate not only the local government and the local councils are involved. In many places, different civil society actors have joined in. In Berlin, this task was done by the Berliner Energietisch, roughly translated as Berlin Energy Roundtable.

The Berliner Energietisch

The Berliner Energietisch is a broad social alliance and a socio-ecological movement of local Berlin initiatives and organizations and many dedicated citizens. It was founded in summer 2011 as a reaction of the agenda of the new local Berlin government that was formed after the election 2011.

The history of the Berliner Energietisch however goes back more than a year before the actual foundation. By the end of 2010, three Berlin initiatives - attac Berlin, BürgerBegehren Klimaschutz and Powershift – came together to discuss the possibility of a newly orientated energy supply for Berlin. BürgerBegehren Klimaschutz dealt quite some time with this subject and had established itself as a point of contact for citizens' initiatives and especially politicians.

The non-party alliance sees itself as an open platform, where everyone is welcomed who wants to work together on the redesign of Berlin's energy supply. The Berliner Energietisch consists currently of 55 local civil society groups that are all active in supporting the campaign. These alliance partners range from large organizations to small initiatives from across the social and environmental movements to activist networks. Church groups, welfare and tenant counseling organizations as well as cultural associations could be found in the alliance as well as the usual suspects from the environmental and social association.

As the common agreement ecological, democratic and social aspects were manifested equal as essential pillars of a new energy supply in Berlin.

The Agenda of the Berliner Energietisch

To organize the realignment of the Berlin energy supply it was more needed than to just put political pressure on the newly elected government. The Berliner Energietisch has therefore decided to choose the way of direct democracy. The frame of the new energy supply should be determined by a referendum. For this purpose, a draft law was worked out, which defines essential key principles. In addition to the municipal ownership of the electrical power grid, a community-owned energy supplier designed as a modern energy service has also been established.

Precisely, the environmental, social and democratic reorganisation demands several concrete steps:

Ecologically

The aim must be to provide Berlin on a long-term run with a hundred percent decentralized produced, renewable energy. A community-owned energy supplier will therefore offer only genuine

green electricity, which comes primarily from renewable energy plants in the Berlin-Brandenburg region. New investments in nuclear and coal-fired plants are banned. The promotion of energy saving and efficiency are also key business objective. The utility has also fulfil the task to encourage Berlin's citizens to start small-scale, community projects. This guarantees an energy production in the hands of many instead of some.

Socially

A community-owned energy supplier has to make a contribution for a social development of the energy transition. Especially in Berlin it must have an explicit social orientation against energy poverty. Possible fields of activity are for example a targeted counselling of low-income households. Also the switch to more efficient appliances has to be encouraged. Also necessary is a support of house retro-fitting policies that would be fair to renters, and try to avoid displacement. The new grid operator would also commit to offering unionized jobs to all current grid company workers to ensure a smooth transition and maintain that workforce until 2020.

Democratically

The draft law specifies broad transparency rules and a number of opportunities for the Berlin citizens to participate in this process. The written down civic participation mechanism goes far beyond the well-known parliamentary control of state-owned enterprises.

Direct elections would be held for citizen representatives on the administrative council in order to make both utilities more democratic. In detail, the proposed law propose that all citizens of Berlin can directly elect six members of the board of directors. The employees of the energy company would elect another seven, while the final two seats would be reserved for the Berlin environment and economic ministers.

Furthermore, the law also allows for direct participation in company affairs. **Annual neighbourhood assemblies** would allow Berliners to meet their council representative, learn about policies, and bring new initiatives and suggestions. Any initiative gathering 5.000 signatures will force the company to consult the customers on a particular issue.

There would also be a possibility **to petition the council** outside of these assemblies and an **ombudsperson** with non-voting participation in the administrative council would collect and convey concerns of users.

Since no similar form of public control of community-owned utility is know in Germany or Europe, the model was adopted in major parts from the Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD).

The roadmap to realize the ideas of the Energietisch

The campaign of the Berliner Energietisch is asking Berlin's citizens not less than to "reclaim" Berlin's power. Therefore a three step direct democratic way was chosen. The first step is a proposal for a petition for a referendum. 20.000 valid signatures have to be collected within six month. After taking this hurdle the second step is the petition for a referendum. 173.000 signatures have to collected in the time frame of six month. Finally a referendum has to be called.

After successfully completing the first and second round of signature collection, the local Berlin government has now fixed the date for the referendum at 3rd of November. To vote the initiative's proposal into law not only the majority of supporting votes cast is necessary. Also an approval rating of 25% of the Berlin's eligible voters has to be reached. This means that at least 630.000 yes votes are necessary. A task that is not easy to face and in Berlin only one initiative has fulfilled.

After a possible referendum win the draft law will become effective. Berlin would have to establish an energy utility and has to reinforce its activities to buy back the grid with public.

A successful referendum would be an important milestone in order to subtend a real basic democratic participatory model to the neoliberal privatized one. It would give the phrase of "community-controlled utility" a new meaning.

Further information in english:

"Referendum movement in Berlin aims to democratize entire energy sector" - democracy at work
<http://www.democracyatwork.info/articles/2013/03/referendum-movement-in-berlin-aims-to-democratize-entire-energy-sector/>

"Gaining public ownership of electricity in Berlin" - The Municipal Services Project
<http://www.municipalservicesproject.org/blog/gaining-public-ownership-electricity-berlin>