

ATTAC

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The French acronym ATTAC stands for ?Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions to Aid Citizens? It was launched in June 1998 on the initiative of Ignacio Ramonet, the editor of Le Monde Diplomatique and Bernard Cassen, its director.

It brought together 70 affiliated organisations and individuals ? ranging from popular education associations, intellectual journals like Le diplo and Politis, unemployed movements, the peasant confederation and various trade unions ? to the singer Manu Cao. But it is basically an individual membership organisation claiming some 35,000 members.

It defines itself as an association of popular education and action. Its red on white per centage flags can be seen at pan-European demonstrations but activity on the streets is not its main objective. ATTAC?s declared aim is to educate the public as to the harmful policies of neo-liberalism and to ?to recover the position lost by democracy to the financial sphere?. As such its local groups meet regularly to hear papers on its various proposals. It is very much a radical think tank aiming to reform capitalism ? albeit one with a sizeable membership and local as well as national forums.

ATTAC has more than 200 local committees across France which are independent of the national executive but the latter is independent of them in turn. Of the 30 members of the national executive 18 are chosen by the 70 original founders of ATTAC and 12 by the national membership. The list of 18 is presented as a list which the individual members can only accept or reject in its entirety. Its national executive includes Susan George and the charismatic leader of the Confederation Paysanne, Jose Bové,

ATTAC?s membership is, according to Bernard Cassen:

?recruited from the lower-middle classes upwards, above all in the public services, with a significant proportion of students and teachers, but employees and executives of the private sector are also present. We also have a sprinkling of farmers and unemployed. What we do not possess ? any more than anyone else ? are roots in the working class, or popular sectors more broadly.?

And as for its age profile, he adds:

?I would guess that young people, that is, under-35s, don?t amount to more than perhaps 25-30 per cent of the total membership. Of course, parties and trade unions have the same problem ? they fail to attract youth.?

In 1999 ATTAC-Europe was founded and since then has spread to most EU member states. ATTAC Germany claims some 10,000 members. These non-French sections do not always have the same political coloration as in France, and in Italy it is at the heart of the ?no-globo? movement.

An international version of ATTAC was created at a meeting in Paris in December 1998 drawing in organisations from Brazil, Mexico, South Korea, the Philippines, Senegal, Belgium, Italy, Switzerland,

Finland, together with several international networks or co-ordination groups.

Central to the work of ATTAC is the imposition of democratic control over financial markets. This makes it radically different to those bodies which concentrate on fighting IMF structural adjustment plans, Third World debt or the WTO's free trade agenda. But the development of a militant movement that stuck narrowly to these goals and such a nebulous proposal as the Tobin Tax proved difficult, ATTAC has broadened its focus to include these other areas to some degree.

The defining objective of ATTAC, however, remains the introduction of a 'Tobin tax'. Named after the American Nobel Prize-winning economist James Tobin, this was intended by its author as a means of bringing stability into the financial and currency markets after the collapse of the fixed exchange rates system in 1971.

ATTAC estimates that a tax levied at a rate of about 0.2 per cent on each currency transaction would raise a sum between \$100bn-\$150n – three times the annual aid bill from rich to poor countries. ATTAC wants the proceeds to be invested in developing the countries of the global south. But it freely admits that 'it will not be enough to finance all the needs of the planet'.

ATTAC realises that no one country could impose the tax without provoking financial institutions into relocating their operations somewhere the tax was not levied. So, ATTAC campaigns against tax havens too. But it concentrates on trying to get the European Union and Canada to become, in effect, a G6 'Tobin tax zone'. However ATTAC admits that even such a zone would still risk of a huge flight of capital.

In effect then, the whole strategy is utopian since it asks the neoliberal poachers to turn gamekeepers. It only means to enforce the adoption of this scheme is by mobilising 'citizens' – above all the intellectuals and the NGOs – to demand it.

ATTAC's biggest project to date was to co-found the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil and on whose international council it sits.

In January 2001, Ignacio Ramonet wrote in an article on the Forum that its purpose was not to protest 'as in Seattle, Washington or Prague (...)' but to try, this time with a constructive spirit, to propose a theoretical framework and practice that allows us to advocate a new globalisation and affirm that a new world is possible, less inhuman and more solidarity-based. From his cautious language it is quite clear that Ramonet envisages only a reformed, more humane, more solidaristic capitalism.

While 'official' Porto Alegre was a concerted attempt by ATTAC to prove that 'another reformism is possible', Jose Bové, a member of ATTAC, was arrested and threatened with deportation for leading a demonstration that destroyed genetically modified crops during the WSF.

Jose Bové and the leaders of Via Campesina also have a reformist programme, even if one tied to non-violent direct action. Their programme centres on humanist slogans such 'Agriculture is not a business' and that 'food should not be treated as a commodity, but as a human right'.

But they do not tell us how this can be realised without the expropriation of agribusinesses and the ranches of the latifundists, without the seizure of the technological and scientific resources from the big corporations, without the co-operativisation of peasant agriculture.

Leading members of the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire – French section of the Fourth International – such as Christophe Aguiton and Pierre Khalfa are also prominent members of ATTAC. But they have been recently accused by Cassen of 'wearing two hats', of trying take over ATTAC and of pushing the WSF

towards becoming not only a movement but even 'a Fifth International'. The founding fathers at Le diplo are horrified at such a prospect.

Attac has recently turned sharply to the right with the appointment of French Communist Party economist Jacques Nikonoff as its President. Nikonoff's appointment (not election) followed a long period of infighting within the leading body, but his candidature was not allowed to be voted upon by the membership.

He accuses the far left and the neoliberal right of having a common interest.

'Instead of gathering together, extremism divides. The verbosity, violence, gesticulations, sectarianism, which mark the tradition of the extreme left would announce the defeat of the movement if the latter were to yield to it. The neoliberals always prefer the extreme left, because they know that it never gained anything and that it never will. The altermondialist movement must resolutely prefer the diversity which makes its richness and its strength.'

He then went on to call for a bureaucratisation of the anti-globalisation movement by erecting 'firebreak systems that can prevent the groupuscules who are trying to manipulate things behind the scenes.'

The honorary president of ATTAC, Cassen joined in the fray in a book published to coincide with the Paris ESF in November 2003, *Tout a commencé a Porto Alegre...Mille forums sociaux!* He was, it seems, very unhappy with first European Social Forum in Florence in November 2002. He says that 'an attentive observation of the Italian speakers' in Florence enabled him to detect that 'the members or those close to Rifondazione Comunista took the lion's share, giving it a tonality definitely less pluralist than in Porto Alegre'.

It is true that by trying to minimise the question of the US-UK preparations for war against Iraq, Cassen put himself and the right wing of ATTAC in a very defensive position. Florence was very radical, very anti-war. His own contributions at the Paris ESF were ill-tempered and unpopular. However he need scarcely fear any takeover within ATTAC because of its grossly undemocratic structure and the fact that the Fourth International has no intention of 'taking over'.

In an interview given to *New Left Review* in 2003 Cassen remarked, with the almost brutal frankness which is his trademark: 'In the localities, you may find the phenomenon of 'entryism' - organized political groups joining the local committees to try to take them over. So far, they have always failed. But with our national structure, power is not there to be taken; it is proof against raids.'

Power is not there to be taken because it resides safely in the hands of the original founders. In short ATTAC is not a democratic organisation.

It is therefore curious why the sections of the Fourth International and the International Socialist Tendency (with the exception of the SWP in Britain) so assiduously build ATTAC. It is not an active, militant campaigning organisation of anticapitalist youth,

It is not even a mass organisation of the labour movement whose working class membership could potentially be roused against the bureaucratic leadership. It is a social democratic pressure group with more than a whiff of French chauvinism about it.

It is 'along with the Brazilian PT and its NGO acolytes' the main force of the right-wing in the anti-capitalist movement. In short it represents the bourgeoisie. It is inconceivable that this movement could go forward to becoming an International of co-ordinated action and class struggle with Cassen, Ramonet and

Nikonoff in its ranks, let alone in its leadership.

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