

# On the ATTAC

## A new European alternative to globalization

By David Moberg

PARIS

**A**s financial crisis swept across Asia in 1997, an editor at the prestigious French monthly magazine *Le Monde Diplomatique* wrote that the free movement of investment capital around the world was undermining democracy and “causing universal insecurity.” But there was an alternative. As Nobel Prize-winning American economist James Tobin proposed back in the '70s, a tiny tax on financial transactions could dampen speculation while generating \$100 billion to \$200 billion a year that could be used to reduce global inequality and promote development. Author Ignacio Ramonet asked, “Why not set up a new worldwide non-governmental organization, Action for a Tobin Tax to Assist the Citizen?”

ATTAC was launched the following June (though the group's official name now translates as the “Association for the Taxation of financial Transactions to Assist the Citizen”). Since then ATTAC has grown rapidly beyond French borders, giving a new, sharper edge to the European response to globalization. That new movement is closer in spirit to U.S. and Canadian critics of global capitalism than to the Europe-oriented policies of many European unions and social democratic parties.

At a time when many pundits were writing off the left as dead, ATTAC gave new life and novel forms to traditional left ideals. This loose and decentralized network relies heavily on the Internet and several sympathetic publications to link ATTAC chapters, unions and citizen groups. Several of the country's labor federations have offered support but have kept some distance to avoid dominating the group. ATTAC also assiduously avoids alignment with political parties. Now claiming 30,000 members in 190 local groups in France plus offshoots in roughly two dozen other countries, ATTAC is becoming a global network. The group was instrumental in creating the World Social Forum that met in Porto Alegre, Brazil in late January (see “How To Confront Globalization,” March 19).

ATTAC was formed primarily in reaction to what it calls the “dictatorship of the market” imposed by “financial globalization.”



PASCAL GUYOT/AFP

In December, more than 50,000 union members and sympathizers marched on behalf of workers rights at an E.U. meeting in Nice.

The group argues not only for more regulation of the market, but preservation of a realm free from market values. “People feel there's a public sphere, a social sphere—something outside the market, where there is the republican principle of equality of opportunity,” says ATTAC co-chairwoman Susan George.

Although it continues to push for the Tobin tax, which is gaining substantial support even among moderate politicians in much of Europe and Canada, ATTAC also campaigns against the World Trade Organization (especially new rules on trade in services that could threaten the public sector), tax havens, privatized pensions and genetically modified food. Resisting the easy label of being “anti-globalization,” ATTAC leaders insist they favor greater global integration, but in a quite different way from that promoted by the International Monetary Fund, WTO and most European governments.

**T**he growth of ATTAC reflects and encourages a growing disquiet with the new global economy among parts of the French labor movement as well as the broader public. In many ways, European unions have been less critical of corporate or financial globalization than American unions and workers, who face more aggressive anti-unionism and have fewer legal protections or safety nets. “A speech about globalization that

goes over well in North America comes across as a Trotskyist speech here," says John Evans, general secretary of the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

In general, European labor, including most of the French unions, held out hopes for a "social Europe" as the answer to the new global economy. They thought a unified Europe would strengthen European corporations as global competitors, while the European Union would guarantee workers rights, social welfare, redistribution of wealth and a "social partnership" that included labor across the continent. That strategy, combined with existing national legislation, has partly succeeded, saving European workers from some of the insecurity and inequality generated in the United States.

This has led many unions to focus on defending what they have, rather than attacking the new regime of corporate globalization. "Politically I'm concerned about globalization, but in practice we still have real protective legislation," argues Rafael Nedzynski, general secretary of the Food Workers of the Force Ouvriere (FO), one of the smaller labor federations. "We want to keep it. We benefit from it. U.S. labor may see more clear effects of globalization."

Nevertheless, Anne-Marie Perret, an FO colleague who is federal secretary of the civil servants union, notes that the pressures to privatize and deregulate, which threaten many public services and workers, come mainly from the common European market itself. "The challenge is to protect ourselves, to preserve the social conquests of our former leaders and members," she says. "We are not against the opening of markets, but states have to check what happens and not delegate the private sector to operate in its place."

But rather than a bulwark against globalization and free market fundamentalism, the European Union has become a stalking horse for privatization and "neoliberalism" in Europe as well as in global trade negotiations. In December, more than 50,000 union members and sympathizers marched on the E.U. meeting in Nice on behalf of a new social charter of workers rights. While the charter was adopted, it was quite weak and, because of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, almost did not recognize the right to strike. "For us Europe is not what we can dream about," Perret acknowledges. "This is not Europe for citizens, not Europe for social programs. It is more focused on financial and industrial challenges."

**W**idespread strikes in 1995 against cutbacks in the French welfare state first signified the growing public dissatisfaction with the free market policies of the French right and the European Union. Since then, the French public has showed greater concern about inequality, job insecurity, unemployment, threats to health care, education and French culture, and the safety and quality of food—from worries about genetic engineering or hormones in U.S. beef to multinational control of agriculture. "In this country, you touch the food, it's a revolution," says Christophe Aguiton, international affairs director of ATTAC and a leader in a new, more rank-and-file oriented labor federation, called SUD

(Solidarity, Unity, Democracy—which also plays on the French word for "south" and images of leisure).

The fight against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment raised new worries about corporate power, and the collapse of the MAI in 1998 raised hopes that financial globalization could be checked. In November 1999, there were more protesters against the WTO in the streets of France than there were in Seattle. "European unionism has not really been engaged in the fight against globalization," Aguiton contends. He sees the CFDT, a large labor federation that was once Catholic and later socialist, as having embraced much of the new free market policies in Europe.

But the new, more critical stance toward globalization is changing labor groups like SUD and the CGT, a labor federation historically linked to the declining French Communist Party. Both federations were founders of ATTAC. "We are out of the working-class paradigm," says Pierre Tartakowsky, an editor of a CGT magazine and general secretary of ATTAC, who argues that unions now have to work with a wide variety of non-governmental organizations, the unemployed, small farmers and environmentalists. Leaders of SUD—which was expelled from the CFDT in 1989 for being "too left"—see the U.S. labor movement of the last few years and its coalition work as representing what SUD is trying to do in fighting globalization, Aguiton adds.

Although some of the French critics of globalization, such as the small farmers, are often portrayed as nationalist or protectionist, ATTAC and the labor movement are ardently internationalist. Both want to protect French social gains and still hope to create a Europe that is more attuned to social needs and less an advocate of large corporations. European works councils mandated by the European Union for large companies so far have provided limited gains, but unions see a need for more Europe-wide and transnational bargaining, building on agreements recognizing core labor rights negotiated with a few European multinationals like Ikea and Statoil. "We refute the idea that it is possible for us and the working class to defend ourselves by invoking national rights and traditions," Tartakowsky says. "Now we need to globalize the resistance and the gains. We cannot gain any more in one country. We have to transnationalize rights and the building of wages, which doesn't mean we have to have the same wage everywhere for everyone."

Although still relatively small and institutionally weak, ATTAC represents a creative new force within European politics that is outside both political parties and the official labor movement. It is reinforcing trends within the European labor movement to take a more critical view of financial and corporate globalization and the limited gains that average citizens have made through the European Union. Most of all ATTAC has begun to counter what Susan George identifies as the main barrier to organizing, the "sense of inevitability" about contemporary capitalist globalization, by raising realistic hopes that "another world is possible." ■

Senior editor David Moberg is a fellow of The Nation Institute, which supported research for this article. His e-mail address is [dmoberg@igc.org](mailto:dmoberg@igc.org).

***"We need to globalize the resistance and the gains. We cannot gain any more in one country."***

# Smoke Screen

Big Tobacco is working hard to ensure the whole world will get its taste of freedom

By Tom Washington

HAMBURG, GERMANY

Fuhlshüttel airport is a smoky place. Outside customs, a 10-foot statue of the Marlboro Man appears through the haze. He's neon lit and sports full cowboy regalia: Stetson, chaps, studs and a lasso at his hip. A branding-iron font over his head reads, "Taste the Freedom. Come to Marlboro Country." At first glance, he appears no different than any of the thousands of twisted promotional images that fragment our attention spans every day. Here in Hamburg, though, the Marlboro Man seems strangely out of place, a kitsch icon of another age. America may have driven the Marlboro Man out of town, but he's riding high in the rest of the world.

Around 35 percent of German adults smoke. The country has one of the highest smoking rates in Europe, just behind the two leaders, Poland and Russia. And Germany's love affair with tobacco and the Marlboro man doesn't seem to be waning, either. In 1998, the German Parliament defeated a bill that would have placed heavy restrictions on cigarette advertising and smoking in public areas and the workplace. Currently, Germany has no national tobacco control legislation.

When the Berlin Wall crumbled in 1989, Phillip Morris was one of the first major players to step in and offer the tired masses its taste of freedom. Big tobacco's subsequent boost in profits has been based largely on the ability to expand into the world's poorest and most populous countries and the know-how to find loopholes in government regulations against tobacco promotion. This two-pronged approach has allowed tobacco transnationals to storm through the Eastern Bloc and neighboring Baltic states faster than the blitzkrieg.

In the Czech Republic, for example, Phillip Morris made a successful \$413 billion dollar bid for AS Tabak, the state cigarette monopoly, gaining a firm hold on sales in Central Europe for decades to come. This 1992 venture was the largest single U.S. investment in a former Eastern Bloc country that year. Hamburg-based Reemtsma Tobacco, No. 4 among the world's major tobacco producers, was right behind them. Foreign business now accounts for more than 75 percent of Reemtsma sales, with markets in Asia and Central and Eastern Europe taking the lion's share. Last year the company's sales outside of Germany exceeded the 100 billion-cigarette mark for the first time.

Other numbers from the tobacco industry are on the rise as well. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates tobacco use is killing 4 million people a year worldwide. If left unchecked, the WHO reports the death toll will climb to 10 million annually by the year 2030. Seventy percent of these deaths will be in developing countries. The WHO also reports that by the year 2030 tobacco is expected to be the single biggest cause of death worldwide, outstripping heart disease and HIV by a significant margin. Despite these figures, Big Tobacco still does not accept responsibility for the ruined lives its products have caused.

In the United States, the past decade has been a PR nightmare for Big Tobacco. Growing consumer awareness about the harms of tobacco addiction and the simultaneous attempt by the tobacco companies to withhold damaging health-related evidence about their products resulted in a slew of billion-dollar lawsuits. Particularly damaging were last year's \$145 billion class-action lawsuit in Florida and Minnesota's \$6.1 billion settlement in 1998, which opened thousands of Phillip Morris documents to public scrutiny.

The subsequent drop in tobacco sales in the United States and government-imposed restrictions on cigarette advertising have forced Big Tobacco to assume a different marketing approach. The most visible change has been their apparent willingness to negotiate. Rather than assuming the familiar defensive stance about their products, they say they're ready to support FDA regulations. At Phillip Morris, this about-face in PR policy includes a \$100 million makeover campaign, in which it's portraying itself as a benign player in the global village under the guise of Kraft Foods, "corporate citizenship" and its "Youth Smoking Prevention" program.

Will the makeover work? Ray Rogers, director of the Corporate Campaign and an expert on consumer boycotts thinks not: "Phillip Morris having a bad reputation is not news, but the failure of a comprehensive and expensive public relations campaign to change people's minds reveals an irreversible credibility problem. It is doubtful that any PR firm could improve this corporation's image, based on its horrible record of destroying millions of people's lives, which it continues to