

# Globalisation, Jospin and the political program of Attac

## Part One

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### PART TWO

The French prime minister, Lionel Jospin, has indicated his support for one of the main policy demands of the European anti-globalisation movement.

During the course of a 50-minute television interview on August 28, Jospin said France would place the issue of a tax on international capital movements on the agenda at the next meeting of European finance ministers, to be held in Belgium later this month.

The imposition of such a tax on international currency transactions, dubbed a “Tobin tax” after the American economist James Tobin who first advocated it in 1972, is the guiding policy of the French organisation, Attac (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens), founded at the end of 1997 and now comprising a number of affiliates in Europe and internationally.

Jospin told his interviewer: “We must discuss the issues (of globalisation) and I am in favour of France taking the initiative so that Europe endorses the Tobin tax.”

This move represents something of a shift for Jospin and his Socialist Party government. While Jospin himself has been favourably inclined towards such measures—as he recalled during the interview, he advocated a Tobin tax in 1995 when he ran for president—key sections of the government have opposed it.

In August last year, finance minister Laurent Fabius presented a report to the French parliament rejecting the idea on the grounds that it was impractical and would destabilise foreign exchange markets.

But the political landscape has changed quite rapidly since then and this is why Jospin is prepared to advocate the tax, even in the face of opposition from Fabius and others in the Socialist Party.

The demonstrations at the G8 summit in July—and the growing opposition to global corporations and the dominance of finance capital they reflected—have revealed the increasingly narrow base of social support enjoyed by the international bourgeoisie.

While some of the political representatives of the ruling classes prefer to ignore social reality in the manner of the Bourbons—learning nothing and forgetting nothing—others, such as Jospin, acutely aware that the protests are the harbinger of a movement of the working class against global capitalism, are looking for ways to deflect and divert it.

Jospin had begun to shift towards the tax proposal before the Genoa summit, authorising a meeting between his senior staff and members of Attac. Following the protests he declared that while France denounced the violence of a tiny minority “under the pretext of highlighting the evils of globalisation” it was “delighted to see the emergence of a citizens’ movement at the planetary level which wants

a majority of men and women to share the potential benefits between rich and poor countries.”

“We want to put in place a lasting system of regulation,” he continued, “that makes the planet a common asset exploited in an equitable manner; we want to establish an equitable community as respectful of the environment as of different cultures and civilisations. This is the heart of the universal message France wants to carry around the world.”

### Attac’s perspective

The history and program of Attac demonstrates that, for all its sometimes strident denunciations of the operations of global capital and the resultant social inequality and poverty, its goal is not the development of an anti-capitalist movement on a socialist program. Rather, it seeks to block the development of such a movement by promoting the claim that capitalism can be regulated through the combined actions of national governments, starting with the imposition of a tax on foreign currency transactions to halt financial speculation and prevent the undermining of national economic initiatives.

Attac’s political objective is not socialism—the transfer of political power to the working class and the economic reconstruction of society on the basis of human need—but the restoration of political power and economic sovereignty to the capitalist nation-state.

The Attac movement was launched in December 1997, in the midst of the Asian financial crisis, with a statement in the magazine *Le monde diplomatique* by its editor Ignacio Ramonet.

“The hurricane that has hit the money markets in Asia,” he wrote, “poses a threat to the rest of the world. The globalisation of investment capital is causing universal insecurity. It makes a mockery of national boundaries and diminishes the power of states to uphold democracy and guarantee the wealth and prosperity of their peoples.”

Ramonet went on to denounce financial globalisation as a “law unto itself” with its own supranational organisations (such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation).

“This artificial world state is a power with no base in society. It is answerable instead to the financial markets and the mammoth business undertakings that are its masters. The result is that the real states in the real world are becoming societies with no power base. And it is getting worse all the time.”

The Attac founding platform echoed these sentiments, declaring that financial globalisation increased “economic insecurity and social inequality” while devaluing “people’s choices, democratic institutions, and sovereign nations responsible for the common good,”

putting in place a “logic that is purely speculative” and only expressing “the interests of multinational corporations and financial markets.”

A “Tobin tax” on international currency transactions, it declared, would put “sand in the gears of speculation” and “feed the logic of resistance” giving “citizens and nations back some room to manoeuvre” while showing that “politics can be restored to its proper place.”

The platform called for the recapturing of the “spaces of democracy lost to the financial sphere” and for opposition to “any new abandonment of the sovereignty of states on the pretext of ensuring the ‘right’ of investors and merchants.”

These statements make clear the political *modus operandi* of the Attac organisation. It seeks to base itself on the growing hostility to social inequality and the attacks on democratic rights which the domination of global capitalism has produced and fashion this hostility into a nationalist political program.

Far from being anti-capitalist, Attac’s program is aimed at defending the interests of a definite section of the capitalist class.

Attac undertakes this defence in two ways. First, it seeks to block the development of political consciousness by asserting that the mounting social ills arising from the dominance of global capital can be combated by restricting the power of finance capital—as if this were separate from capital as a whole.

Second, it works to create a social base for those sections of the bourgeoisie, both in France and Europe more generally, which are becoming increasingly hostile to US capital as they fight for their own interests on the international arena.

Jospin has expressed these interests in terms of the “universal message that France wants to carry around the world”. His foreign minister, Hubert Vedrine, recently put the matter more bluntly. Speaking to an annual seminar of diplomats in Paris at the end of last month he declared: “We shall pursue our efforts towards a humane and controlled globalisation, even if the new high-handed American unilateralism doesn’t help matters.”

#### **Susan George’s address**

Attac’s political objectives and its fundamental opposition to the development of a socialist movement have been clearly set out by its vice-president, Susan George.

George, who has written several graphic exposures of the operations of the international financial system and the grinding poverty inflicted through the growth of international indebtedness, was one of the key speakers at the World Social Forum held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in January this year. Even before she made her address, however, the basic outlook of her organisation was underscored by its invitation to two Jospin government ministers to attend the forum.

George told the gathering that it was necessary to place mega-corporations and international financial markets under “democratic control” and that “just as our forebears fought for and won national taxation systems to alleviate inequalities and provide services nationally, so we have to fight for international taxation.” Such taxes, she insisted, were technically feasible. “The world as a whole has never been so rich and the technology exists if governments want to use it. The real problem is that they do not.”

And then to emphasise her opposition to the development of an international socialist movement, George continued: “I’m sorry to admit it, but I haven’t the slightest idea what ‘overthrowing capitalism’ means in the early 21st century.

“Maybe we shall witness what the philosopher Paul Virilio has

called the ‘global accident’ but it would surely be accompanied by enormous human suffering. If all the financial and stock markets suddenly collapsed, millions would be thrown out onto the pavement as large and small firms failed, bank closures would far outstrip the capacity of governments to prevent catastrophe, insecurity and crime would run rampant, and we would find ourselves living in a Hobbesian hell of the war of all against all.

“Call me a reformist is you like—I want to avoid such a future. I also want to avoid the programmed neo-liberal future. If my analysis is correct, that means both stopping the adversary’s program and forcing through measures which can replace the present savage capitalist system with a co-operative one in which markets have their place but cannot dictate their law to the whole of society.”

We have quoted these remarks at some length because they sum up all the essential ingredients of the Attac perspective.

In an effort to prevent the drawing of revolutionary socialist conclusions from an examination of world capitalism—and from facts and figures she herself has presented—George sets up a straw man.

The Hobbesian nightmare she depicts does not represent the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism but, on the contrary, the consequences of the capitalist system’s most basic tendencies. As the Marxist movement has long maintained, the historical prognosis does, in the final analysis, come down to the alternative of socialism or barbarism.

A preview of what is to come was seen in Asia, when the financial crisis of 1997-98 plunged millions of people into poverty, virtually overnight. But the Asian crisis, as has since been revealed, was only the initial expression of fundamental tendencies within world capitalism. These tendencies are now being manifested in the development of a global slump, and the ever-present threat of a financial crisis, touched off by the default of countries such as Argentina or Turkey or even a crisis centring on the US dollar and the American financial system.

According to George, the only viable perspective is to subordinate international financial markets to the political rule of the state. But neither she, nor any of the other advocates of this program, ever examines why the system of national and international regulation, which formed the framework of the capitalist order for a quarter of a century after World War II, collapsed.



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