

# Attac conference in Berlin: opportunism and unwavering loyalty to the state

**Stefan Steinberg**  
**26 October 2001**

The anti-globalisation movement Attac\* held the first national conference of its German section in Berlin last weekend, under the slogan “Another World is possible”. Bernard Cassen, one of Attac’s founders and a director of the French news monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and Susan George, vice president of Attac in France and author of a number of books devoted to the consequences of globalisation were among those who addressed the conference. One of the main speakers was Oskar Lafontaine, the former German Social Democratic Party chairman and briefly economics minister in the SPD-Green Party coalition under Gerhard Schroeder.

Attended by some 2,500, and held over two days, the conference was divided into a number of plenum discussions featuring leading Attac members, as well as a host of workshops organised by over 70 various pacifist, feminist, environmental and radical groups and NGOs (non governmental organisations). Several leading members of the German trade union bureaucracy were also present, such as IG Metall executive member Horst Schmitthenner, and Margret Möhnig-Raane, executive member of the new Ver.di trade union, as well as prominent representatives of the Greens, such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit.

In his opening speech on Friday evening, psychologist Horst-Eberhardt Richter made clear that the potential audience of Attac embraced all of those who felt they had “lost out” as a result of globalisation. Despite occasional heated exchanges and controversies, the entire conference made patently clear that Attac is characterised by unbridled political opportunism. In a number of contributions, leading Attac members emphasised that they had absolutely no plans or perspective for a fundamental change of capitalist society. Instead they limited their criticism to what they described as the “irresponsible repercussions of neo-liberal politics” and called for a strengthening of the national state as well as international capitalist organisations.

The basic perspective of Attac was outlined by the editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique* Ignatio Ramonet in a lead article four years ago: “The globalisation of finance capital has made people insecure. It evades and humiliates national states as the authoritative guarantor of democracy and general well being... in combination with the trade unions and many other organisations which have cultural, social or environmental aims, Attac could emerge as a gigantic pressure group of civil society in establishing a world-wide solidarity”. (December 12, 1997).

In a discussion he held with the right wing economist Thomas L.Friedman, Ramonet was even more blunt about the role of Attac as a pressure valve to dissipate growing social instability. Ramonet declared: “In order to satisfy their basic needs, there are millions of people all over the world who are prepared to erect barricades and employ violence. I regret such a solution as much as Friedman. But when we are clever, then it is not necessary that things proceed so far. Instead we should make a tiny portion of the world’s wealth available to the ‘damned of the earth’.” He closed his remarks with the questions: “What can we do? How can we prevent half of humanity from revolting and turning to

violence?”

During the Berlin conference, speakers and delegates openly expressed their concern at the decay and discrediting of national political structures and the necessity of restoring credibility to and strengthening democratic institutions. The defence of capitalist property relations was made perhaps most bluntly by one of the principle speakers in the opening plenum discussion, the judge Jürgen Borchert. He described some of the disastrous social consequences arising from the liberalisation of capital markets and then appealed for a return to previous forms of market economy, which he claimed were based on the principle of equality. He went on to plead for a better deal for small businesses and closed his contribution with the ominous warning that the “first victim of social discontent was cash values.”

Borchert shared the platform with Barbara Unmüssig from the organisation World Economy, Environment and Development (Weed) and Bernard Cassen, whose own contribution will be dealt with later. Unmüssig made unmistakably clear that the purpose of Attac was limited to finding the ear of the political establishment. She declared that the movement had recently achieved an important breakthrough, and that its arguments for economic reform were now being taken seriously by such newspaper as Germany’s *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the *Financial Times*. At the same time, she emphasised that Attac had no binding theory, world-view or religious or ideological basis.

The priority of strengthening the national state to enable interventionist measures to restrict the movement of international capital (“throwing sand into the wheels of finance capital”) lay at the heart of the discussion on the second day between Oskar Lafontaine, Wolf-Dieter Narr, professor for political science at Berlin Free University and Ingeborg Wick, a feminist and representative of a women’s NGO working in under-developed countries.

At the start of his contribution, Lafontaine posed the question, which power should determine social development? Emphasising the loss of political power by individual nations as a consequence of globalisation, he called for a return to the role of the national state and the “primacy of politics”. The flow of capital must be re-regulated, he said. The “re-nationalising” of the financial markets was the prerequisite for retaining a welfare state. In the sphere of international relations he called for a strengthening of the United Nations and, in particular, the creation of an UN economic council which could intervene in economic affairs on a world scale. In the course of the Kosovo war, the UN had been left out in the cold, he complained.

Lafontaine had announced his affiliation to the Attac movement a few weeks ago and is undoubtedly its most prominent German supporter. Since tamely retiring from all leading political positions following his dispute with Gerhard Schroeder and the German Bundesbank in spring 1999, Lafontaine has maintained a regular media presence in order to argue for the strengthening of national sovereignty in response to globalisation.

In a recent column he wrote for the tabloid *Bild* elaborated some of his proposals for the German state. Under the headline, "How should we proceed after the terror attacks?" he maintained that empty state coffers and an overly liberal immigration policy were endangering the security of the German state. He criticised the Schroeder government for its *Green Card* policy of allowing the limited immigration of skilled foreign professionals, implying that the measure facilitated the training of potential terrorists in Germany. He finished his column with the appeal, "We have to put an end to the belittling of the state. We are the state!"

In his own contribution, Wolf-Dieter Narr criticised Lafontaine's glorification of the state. The problem was not just capitalism but politics as a whole, Narr said. The state represents "organised irresponsibility" and is wedded inseparably to imperialism. The return to national-based politics was both false and naive, he claimed. The world can only be organised on a global basis. He then spoke of the necessity for a grass roots movement, but had little to say its nature. He finished by expressing his agreement with Oskar Lafontaine on the necessity for strengthening the United Nations.

However confused and mealy-mouthed, Narr's contribution immediately provoked consternation from other Attac representatives. The first to speak was Ingeborg Wick, who energetically rejected any criticism of existing institutions. It was only possible to achieve anything, she claimed, through such institutions. It was a mistake to ignore the establishment. Lafontaine then proclaimed his "dissent" with Narr's position regarding the role of the state and spoke of the necessity for a "politics of small steps". In response, Narr immediately began to retreat from his former stance. He had no solution himself, he admitted, and for his own part no particular problems with the state. After all, he was the only member of the panel who was officially employed by the state.

In addition to Lafontaine and Narr's appeal for a strengthening of the UN, other leading members of the German Attac movement have also emphasised the necessity of reinforcing existing international organisations. In a recent interview with *Der Spiegel* magazine, Attac coordination committee member Peter Wahl declared: "The claim that Attac roundly rejects international organisations is incorrect. Increasingly, globalised markets must be countered by a global framework of control that once again brings the omnipotent market under democratic control. The WTO [World Trade Organisation], IMF [International Monetary Fund] and the World Bank can theoretically be regarded as appropriate institutions to this end."

Nowhere was the extent of the political opportunism that is rife in Attac more evident than on the issue of the war in Afghanistan. In its role as a "gigantic pressure group", the organisation sees the war entirely from the standpoint of how it can further its own agenda.

Attac has issued two brief statements criticising US military action in Afghanistan as a contravention of international law. At the conference, leading speakers dealt with the war largely from the standpoint of how the changed situation after September 11 could be exploited by Attac to advance its own ends. None of the statements drawn up by Attac on the war attempt to delve into the economic and strategic background of the US-led aggression. And in individual workshops where participants attempted to raise such issues the reaction by Attac members was distinctly hostile.

The caution with which Attac tackles the issue of war was explained in a comment by one of the speakers in a podium discussion, Bettina Gaus, who conceded that there were very many different opinions on the war inside Attac. She shared the podium with Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a leader of the Green Party in the European Parliament and a member of the French Attac movement for the past four years. In an interview with the German *taz* newspaper, Cohn-Bendit declared his preference for a United Nations-led military operation to unseat the "fascistoid, anti-women Taliban

newspaper, "government" with support given for the liberation struggle of the Afghan opposition, with planes, weapons and soldiers." None of the other four speakers on the platform challenged Cohn-Bendit's fulminations about what he described as the necessity to develop a pan-European answer to American-led globalisation.

The reason for Attac's ambiguous position regarding the war becomes clear in light of a comment made by its founder, Bernard Cassen. In an interview with the newspaper *Tagesspiegel*, Cassen declared: "Never was Bush closer to Attac than today!" Anybody who thought this was just a slip of the tongue was corrected at the Berlin conference. Bush's war policy was a main theme of Cassen's speech to the conference.

The recent moves by President Bush, he explained, "to dry out tax oases" and police certain forms of speculative banking represented a change of course, which "reflected favourably and even legitimised policies proposed by Attac." Cassen continued by saying that Bush's emphasis on the primacy of politics over the economy—"the economy has to serve the state and not the other way round"—represented a rehabilitation of the role of the state, which Attac warmly welcomed. In similar manner, Cassen also greeted "the recent cancelling of debts by America to Third World Countries such as Pakistan."

Precisely the same point was repeated by one of his closest collaborators in France, Susan George. In her closing address to the conference she confirmed: "Even George Bush has recognised that tax oases are bad for business. Thank you George Bush! You have shown the advisability of implementing the Attac programme."

The economic and fiscal measures undertaken by Bush in response to the attacks of September 11 do not have the slightest progressive content. Subsidies made by the Bush administration to the airlines and other industries hit by the financial downturn and the aftermath of the September 11 events are aimed at bailing out shareholders, enabling the companies to cut jobs and streamline at the expense of ordinary workers. At the same time, the Bush administration is pressing ahead with tax handouts that will drastically widen the gulf between rich and poor in American society.

While Cassen and George have only positive comments to make on the economic "turn" being made by George Bush, they, and indeed the conference as a whole, had nothing to say on the attacks on democratic rights being undertaken by the various states constituting the anti-terrorist alliance. In the name of the struggle against international terrorism, national and international police and intelligence bodies are being given unprecedented powers to oversee, coordinate and control the lives and activities of millions of ordinary citizens, while immigration controls and the persecution of foreign workers and students is being intensified across the globe.

It would be wrong to regard as a mere oversight the fact that such issues played virtually no role in the Attac conference at the weekend. The two-day gathering in Berlin very clearly revealed the political and social physiognomy of the movement. Attac is a pole of attraction for those in society who are profoundly disturbed at the prospect of social instability arising from the break-up of the relatively stable post-war economic and political conditions. The Attac perspective, however, is entirely oriented towards the past. The forces around Attac yearn for a return to a period when national capitalist states exercised broad control over the economy and society.

Despite the emphasis Attac makes on protest actions and demonstrations, the organisation is hostile to any genuine mass democratic movement. Its perspective is limited to applying pressure on existing institutions, seeking the ear of the powerful and increasing Attac's own influence within the political establishment. This accounts for its enthusiasm for the state and indifference to the attacks currently being made on democratic rights.

It was possible to detect some differences in attitudes, between the

layers of a greying older generation and the young people and students who slightly outnumbered them at the conference. Many of the older delegates were evidently disgruntled members or former members of the Green Party or activists from pacifist organisations, with thirty years of protest politics behind them. In Attac, they see the chance for a fresh start, although they have failed to draw any significant political consequences from their previous activities.

The leading lights of Attac at the congress—such as Cassen, George, sociology professor and long-standing member of the Swiss social democrats Jean Ziegler and Cohn-Bendit—all occupy prominent positions in respected universities, editorial offices and government organisations. Also in evidence at the conference were stalwarts of the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism, the successor party to the East German Stalinist SED). Although the PDS was not prominent in podium discussions. What unites all of these forces is the fear that the current economic crisis could give rise to a new social movement, which develops independently of the existing rightward-moving mainstream political parties.

Although it was evident that the German trade unions had made no appeal to their members to attend the conference, leading members of the bureaucracy made their own appearance to sniff out the potential of Attac for pursuing their own chauvinist campaign against the “excesses of globalisation”.

Also in evidence at the conference were two radical groups— SAV (linked to Britain’s Socialist Party organisation of Peter Taaffe, and *Linksruck* (which has ties to Britain’s Socialist Workers Party). SAV and Linksruck have both joined Attac, and made considerable efforts to mobilise their members for the conference. Both groups have a long history of entering and participating in various political organisations—the SPD, the German peace movement, the Greens and the PDS. Now they have evidently decided to operate as a left fig leaf for Attac.

There were indications of a more militant attitude amongst some younger participants, mainly students, who applauded loudly when any criticism was made of the war against Afghanistan or the policies of the current German “red-green” coalition government. Nevertheless it was apparent that most of the youth attending had very little political experience. In her closing contribution, Susan George sought to exploit the limitations of her audience by urgently warning against “theological and doctrinal purity”. What was important, she emphasised, “was to concentrate on what unites us and not get lost in debates over controversial issues”. It was an unmistakable appeal not to disturb the thoroughly diffuse and confused political foundation of the movement, thereby making the manipulation of its supporters all the easier.

All in all, the unsavoury impression left by last weekend’s conference was the determination of the Attac leaders to utilise the movement to demonstrate their own worth as a factor for ensuring social stability to the political elite.

\*Attac stands for “ Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens”



To contact the WWSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**