

On eve of “Day of Action Against Social Cuts”

Attac lines up with German unions to back government plan for welfare cuts

Ute Reissner
3 April 2004

A few days before the European Day of Action Against Social Cuts on April 3, the head of Attac Germany, Sabine Leidig, announced that her organisation will refrain from raising the demand for the withdrawal of the “Agenda 2010” decided upon by the coalition government of the Social Democrats and Greens.

This agenda is the German version of the brutal dismantling of the welfare state occurring throughout Europe today, which is deeply resented by the overwhelming majority of working people. By distancing itself from any radical opposition to this program, Attac is adopting the official position of the German Trade Union Federation, the DGB, whose representatives limit themselves to what they call “clear criticism” of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder’s main project.

Just a few days before the demonstration, following a meeting of the SPD’s Trade Union Council, DGB President Michael Sommer stressed that the party and the unions had moved closer together again. After the resignation of Chancellor Schröder as SPD chairman and the assumption of office by his successor Franz Müntefering, Sommer described the climate as “very good indeed.” (The installation of Müntefering in March was an attempt to save face for Schröder.)

On the same day, March 29, Leidig made her above-quoted statement to the national daily *Frankfurter Rundschau*. The Agenda 2010, she regretted, “has been passed and decided upon, and the demand for its withdrawal, if we raise it here and now, has little chance of success.... We have to bring about a fundamental change of the whole direction of politics, and then the Agenda 2010 will be thrown onto the dung heap of history, which is where it belongs.”

Now, one cannot change the nature of things by loud talk. In the name of a “fundamental change,” even peppered with quotes from the *Communist Manifesto*, Attac explicitly forgoes the defence of those social entitlements and institutions of the welfare state that are still in existence. How can one talk about a fundamental political change in the future if one abstains from consistently defending the most elementary demands of the day that are, furthermore, supported by the majority of the population who take to the streets for precisely that reason?

With Leidig’s statement, Attac gives in to pressure from the DGB and to a certain extent falls victim to the role it has chosen for itself since its founding in Germany four years ago. Attac tries

to position itself as a pole of attraction for the growing social discontent of broad layers, in order to direct them back under the wings of social democracy and its trade union apparatus. In doing so, the organisation bases itself on the expertise of a whole range of mostly discredited groups of the petty bourgeois left, who are all active within Attac under various different names.

The events leading up to the European-wide day of action organised by the unions on April 2 and 3 shed some light on the political mechanisms and relations presently at work in Europe. Since the large antiwar demonstrations in February last year, a series of election results and protests has reflected the growing resistance of the working people against the social attacks launched by all European governments. The most recent examples have been the national elections in Spain and France.

This broad social resistance stands in direct opposition to the social democratic parties and trade union organisations that spent the last couple of years perpetrating a virtual war on social achievements throughout Europe. In Germany, this has led to a massive loss of membership and support of the ruling Social Democratic Party. However, this opposition has not yet been translated into an independent political perspective. The workers, who are trying to fight back, are just beginning to assimilate the lessons from the history and failure of the reformist organisations.

Attac was founded precisely to prevent such a political settling of accounts and to create a smokescreen for hiding the rapidly widening gulf between the social democrats and the working class. The movement was created in 1997 in France with the support of leading figures of the political establishment, including the former socialist premier, Lionel Jospin. The founding conference in Germany in 2001 was attended by leading representatives of the trade union apparatus, including Horst Schmitthenner from the IG Metall, one of the biggest industrial unions of the world, and Margret Möhnig-Raane from ver.di, one of the other large unions in Germany covering the public services.

A number of spectacular mass demonstrations and protests during the past years—best known are those against the WTO summit in Seattle in 1999 and in Genoa in 2001 —made the new organisation very well known throughout the world and gave it a certain nimbus that stands in inverted relation to the effectiveness of its program. The lack of clear contours and the amorphous outer appearance of Attac reflect two components: on the one side, the

diffuse hopes of oppositionally minded youth; on the other, the conscious cover-up tactics of the Attac leadership. This is a leadership whose political orientation is towards social democracy and who are, moreover, well versed in all the bureaucratic tricks and dodges developed in the latter's long history of oppressing and confusing the working class.

The attempt to suppress the contradiction between these two components creates the peculiar vagueness that makes up one of Attac's characteristic features. Attac, one might say, is not the "movement" proper, but a preemptive reaction of the left wing of bourgeois politics to the real social movement that is emerging within the working class—a movement that will develop and grow to the extent that it consciously adopts its own revolutionary perspective.

This role of Attac was expressed clearly in the run-up to the Day of Action, which was decided upon at the European Social Forum held in Paris last November. The German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) supported the decision of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) to call such a protest in collaboration with Attac and other groups, and then began to work systematically to ensure that the demonstrations remain as small as possible and be directed into political channels that do not threaten the European governments.

Originally, the DGB had been reluctant to participate in such an undertaking. But then, on November 1, 2003, more than 100,000 people came to Berlin to demonstrate against the social cuts initiated by the Schröder government. This demonstration, the size of which greatly surprised its organisers, had been called by a coalition of various radical groups. Attac had only joined in at the very last moment, while the German trade unions had vigorously opposed it and had issued calls to their members not to participate. When, to their horror, their warnings were ignored by so many workers, they shifted course. They decided to place themselves at the head of the protests in order to stifle them. The DGB now declared that they were ready to participate in the preparation of the European Day of Action together with Attac.

The ensuing collaboration was characterised by a constant effort to straddle the fence between the SPD on the one side and the mass discontent by the victims of its social cuts on the other. This was the source of continuous quarrels about speakers, locations, schedules, slogans, and so on. These conflicts did not reflect any fundamental disagreements between the DGB and Attac. Both the program and the personnel of these organisations overlap to a great degree. Sabine Leidig, the leader of Attac-Germany, for example, led a regional DGB organisation (Mittelbaden) from 1996 to 2002. What was determined in the course of these squabbles, however, was how to balance between the anger of the workers, pensioners and students and the political alliance of the DGB and SPD.

In a circular to all its members and member organisations on the collaboration with the DGB, the national coordinating committee of Attac wrote on February 27, 2004, that collaboration with the trade unions was indispensable in order to put maximum pressure on the government in Berlin.

"However," it added, "the situation is characterised by highly non-transparent decision making, anxious efforts to keep control and a couple of problematic decisions." No decision could be

taken without the consent of the national DGB executive. The coordinating committee expressed its concern that mobilisation could lag far behind its potential "unless better and more transparent forms of cooperation and collaboration are found soon."

Attac was expecting, the circular continued, "that social movements and globalisation critics will be represented at all three rallies [planned in Germany]. However, what we hear from the individual unions and the DGB locals is that they intend to prevent this at all costs."

And it appears that they have been successful. The speakers' platforms at the rallies will be reserved for the "big shots" only. The central rally in Berlin at the Brandenburg Gate will be addressed by Michael Sommer, head of the DGB; Bernard Thibault, president of the CGT, the French Trade Union Federation; a high-ranking representative of the Protestant church; and a social democratic MP.

This kind of censorship provoked a lot of criticism. The National Federation of the Unemployed, headquartered in the east German town of Leipzig, sent an official letter of protest to the DGB executive dated February 29, 2004, because none of its representatives was accepted as speakers: "We urgently call upon the DGB to correct its previous decisions and intentions.... We believe that all speakers of the most varied organisations and alliances should have the opportunity to make contributions to the various rallies.... We think that one can only seriously confront the policies of the federal government, with its cuts and social injustice, if one joins hands with all social partners, representatives of various interests and, above all, the concerned victims themselves."

However, the German and the European Trade Union Confederation rigorously suppressed any authentic voices from below. Towards the end of the above-quoted Attac circular, it says: "All in all, the local situations differ greatly, but important parts of the unions are clearly having problems with any open mobilisation.... In addition, we doubt whether the appearance of the demonstrations themselves will adequately express our intention and clearly name our political opponent: The issue is the responsibility of the red-green federal government for a political course that is thoroughly mistaken and cannot be improved. The whole direction is wrong, the Agenda 2010 must go."

But now, three days before the demonstrations, Sabine Leidig from Attac Germany has expressly stated that Attac is not prepared to lead that struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact