

# **Another alternative is possible**

**Resist the rule of transnational non-governmental organisations!**

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In December 1997 French left-wing paper *Le Monde Diplomatique* wrote an editorial for Tobin tax on international financial transactions. This launched discussion, which led to foundation of Attac (Action pour une Taxe Tobin d'Aide aux Citoyens) the next June. Today Attac has spread to dozens of countries, but the strongest presence is by far in France, where organisation claims more than 30 000 members and 220 local organisations.

## **Tobin tax**

Advocates of the Tobin tax never forget to mention that author of the idea, James Tobin, is a Nobel prize winning economist. And as most of the other Nobel prize winning economists, he is also disgusting advocate of any reforms of the far-right liberals, which supposedly progressive Attac seldom remembers. The original proposal was a 0.1% tax on international financial transactions, which would decrease the short-time speculation considered harmful. According to estimates, this way some 50–200 billion dollars of additional tax revenues would be collected annually. Advocates of the tax optimistically propose that money would be allocated to UN and similar organisations to erase global poverty. I am not at all enthusiastic with this idea..

Attac makes difference between two kinds of capitals – financial and industrial. Second one is good, creating work and wealth, first one is evil, creating speculation, volatility and economic crisis. This is complete bullshit, last 200 years of capitalism is a proof that industrial capital is just as destructive, cruel and dangerous as the financial one. Vast majority of the mankind was not better off when there were 50%, 90% or 99.9% less international financial transactions than today, since industrial capital was still there provoking imperial wars, plunder of natural resources, overtake of commons and creating humiliating working conditions everywhere.

Developed states already collect 100 times more tax revenues than Tobin tax would bring, but global poverty hardly seems to be decreasing – quite a contrary. And what if the most unlikely scenario that revenues of this new tax were allocated differently from the 1000 old taxes would take place? Vast majority of the “development aid” which is supposed to “erase the poverty of the world” is export subsidies for Western transnational corporations for projects which may destroy lives of millions of people (such as building of dams or pulp mills). In the least harmful end of this “aid” are small-scale projects which create corrupted “civil society” and better paid career perspectives to elites of the developing world than their government may offer. Do we need more this kind of “aid”? No thanks.

## **Other cornerstones of Attac**

Besides the Tobin tax, Attac campaigns for a variety of other “progressive issues”, most importantly for debt relief for third world countries, against tax heavens, against privatisation of the public services and against war. As for the debt relief goes, I do not quite see why poorest of the world should beg for pardon from the West for loans which were pumped to their corrupt never elected leaders some 30 years ago by their Western supporters. Germany always never paid any compensations which were sanctioned to it after World Wars. Developing countries which have tried the same only failed because they were trying it one by one, not united. As for the war, Attac has issued few anti-war declarations usually without analysis of the business interests on control of raw materials as reason of wars, but for example a visible French Attac

member, minister Daniel Cohn — Bendt was a vehement supporter of US invasion to Afghanistan. What comes to tax heavens, champions of “law and order” should remember that tax evasion is not only privilege of the rich, but also only way for millions to make their ends meet. Complete implementation of such stupidity as intellectual property rights would not only push millions into a more deeper misery, but also deprive access of consumers to affordable pirate products, which seldom loose in quality to original ones.

Chairman of the French Attac Bernard Cassen noted in founding conference of their German sister organisation that “President Bush has taken steps in the direction of Attac’s proposals since September 11, 2001. It is clear that we still have a long ways to go. But it is necessary to note that ... Mr. Bush is now against tax shelters”. The extremely stupid joke of Mr. Cassen is also a good reminder that in essence campaign of Attac against tax heavens is for more or less violent imperial intervention against state sovereignty. As an anarchist I am in no means an apologist of the state sovereignty, but I do not see how global empire, or “global democracy” as such ideologists of Attac as Heikki Patomäki and Network Institute for Global Democratisation (NIGD) think tank call it, would be any better. Campaign against tax heavens has also stirred up the global anti-terrorist hysteria.

During its 50 years of existence, UN has been nothing but an arena for superpower intrigue, and it will never be anything else. I do not see how the current “global democracy” of the US would be any better if spiced with a mixture of Chinese politruks, Indian Hindu fascists and African dictators. Attac also supports “democratisation” of WTO, IMF and World Bank, thus agreeing about necessity of these structures in governing the global capitalism they support.

But even more, I see no any democracy in the bullshit workplace where I have to make my living, or the bullshit university discipline to which I must submit to gain any bearable place in the ladder of the state and capital. Why should I expect big bosses be any more “democratic” after any reform, when no change will take place in the position of the smallest bosses kicking my head and humiliating me in my immediate vicinity? And here we come to the very essence of the critic against Attac — it is not that goals of Attac are harmful, they are just irrelevant. They are pointless in the context of oppressive local and global systems in which we are living in. At worst they are creating new power structures or legitimising the old ones, at best just weak and confused reactions against the most recent attacks by capital against our conditions of living, without any vision how peoples movements should move from reaction to offensive.

## **Social democracy refounded**

The formal goal of the Attac might be impossible ideal of capitalism with a human face, but I think its final role will be something very different, whatever the intention of its founders. Role of Attac will be reforming the West-European social democracy. In the turn of year 1999, social democracy seemed to be in its final agony, social democrats in power in 12 of the 15 EU countries, nothing remaining from their original socialist ideals. Labour movement controlled by social democratic parties seemed to be in a complete dead end, absolutely powerless against neo-liberal attacks rubber-stamped by parliaments ruled by their mother parties. No one would have believed that now, four years later, social democracy has been reborn as a relevant oppositional force after having lost Austria, Denmark, France, Greece and Italy and suffering serious backlashes in Germany and Finland among others.

The wing of globalisation-critical movement Attac represents was a jackpot for the 110 year old movement in a complete ideological bankruptcy. With Attac, they do not have to regain their original Marxist and Kautskyist ideas of workers control over their workplaces, reclamation of wealth created by them. Ultra-moderate and ridiculous goals of Attac such as Tobin tax and busting tax heavens represent less than 1% of the original thing, the very minimal necessary to give rebirth to the dead movement. Sounds totally absurd, but it seems to be working, at least judging from the state of the globalisation critical movement.

There is no need to refoundate social-democracy in Eastern Europe, since there are other ways to maintain capitalism there. Editorial collective of Polish Obywatel (Citizen) paper includes Maciej Muskat, the chairman of Attac-Poland, and Stefan J Adamski, deputy chairman of Attac's Programming Board. The strong Attac involvement in Obywatel suggests that the magazine is a semi-official mouthpiece of the association. Obywatel regularly publishes materials from new-right and fascists ideologists, such as Horst Mahler, who is former RAF member but nowadays leading German neo-nazi ideologist. Since Polish Attac has not a clear social function, it is a completely confused entity which attracts people who attempt to create a sort of synthesis between some "progressive" and some fascist ideas. In international level, at least French Attac is aware of the situation in Poland, but has rebuffed the charges against Polish Attac, claiming that "changes of collaboration do not depend from ideas, but on the methods chosen to defend these ideas".

French Attac has followed this policy consistently, for example by inviting a bunch of violently anti-Semite patriots including Alexandr Nikolaev from Russian Communist Workers Party to events organised around G8 protests of Genoa. Another spice in that soup was Sergei Khramov from Sotsprof trade union, who organised illegal money laundering for Yeltsin's presidential campaign fund in 1996. In co-operation with these people, minuscule trotskist KRI (Russian section of Committee for a Workers' International, one of the dozens of fourth internationals) managed to set up Russian Attac in autumn of 2001. Organisation has not had social democrats as its trouble, but gaining some political coherence has been even more difficult – in Mayday 2003 Attac was another main organiser in free rock concert organised in Lubyanka square (they however called it Dzerzhinsky square according to infamous founder of Soviet secret service), where another main organiser was biggest Russian "communist" party, anti-Semite KPRF which supports war in Chechnya. Small Attac was necessary for big KPRF to get faintest idea what would attract youth, and Ilya Budraistkis from Attac was the announcer in concert, calling to stage groups such as Grazhdanskaya Oborona whose leader Yegor Letov was co-founding fascist National-Bolshevik Party 10 year ago and has since moved to even more extreme right-wing direction. Among organisers and supporters of the conference were some more hard-line racist initiatives, such as journal Duel.

Due to West-European character of the movement, it is not surprising to see occasional anti-American outbursts by some Attac figureheads, such as those of a longstanding Finnish minister of foreign affairs Erkki Tuomioja, another veteran of the Social Democratic Party and Attac member.

Anti-Americanism serves many functions for social democrat politics. At first, it gives a scapegoat for injustices of the global capitalism. Until 60's European states executed just as aggressive imperialist politics as US, and since then the problem has been mostly lack of force, not lack of will as the never-ending French adventures in Africa prove. At second, it legitimises European integration in defence and foreign policy issues, since we need "good" European military force

in order to defend our welfare state values against “evil American” neo-liberalism — as if European welfare states are not destroyed by Social Democrats themselves in the first place. At third, competition with USA serves well the Orwellian newspeak where Democrats call destruction of the welfare benefits as “saving the welfare state”, we must cut welfare as much as possible in order to be able to compete with the evil USA, who threatens our welfare services.

## **False credentials**

Relation of the globalisation critical movement to Attac, which has been branded as about the main subject of the movement by mainstream media, is a separate interesting story. Needless to say, Attac did not play much of a role in Seattle nor in any other events organised in USA. As for Prague, Attac boycotted protest actions because they did not receive in prior enough guarantees on keeping the event non-violent, I suppose that is their concept of solidarity. Dozens of Christian and other non-violent organisations showed up, and were maybe disappointed for the riots but not sorry for the fact that they came in the first place.

Besides social forums, Attac has played a role only in Western European events, which maybe have been massive but usually the most institutionalised and unvisionary among the global protests. During big anti-border camp of Strasbourg last summer for rights of illegal immigrants, local organisation of Attac decided not only not to give any help to camp organisation, but also to send press releases attacking the event. Sort of climax of this development were the anti-EU demonstrations of the Copenhagen in December 2002, here a small anarchist demonstration with few hundred participants was the only critical voice against xenophobic policies of Danish right-wing government and EU in general. Anarchist demonstrators suffered from serious police harassment and provocateurs (one of whom is currently charged), and four persons were facing trumped-up felony charges while large “coalition against violence” with Attac was serving cake to chief of local police as a reward for a “good co-operation”. I suppose their goal was to show that never mind tax evasion, financial speculation and war — the most serious problem of the planet are the violent demonstrators.

Hostility of Attac against protests for rights of illegal immigrants complies with hostile attitude of many prominent Attac members towards immigrants. For example Oskar Lafontaine, prominent Attac member, former German Social Democratic Party chairman and briefly economics minister in the SPD-Green Party coalition under Gerhard Schroeder has been demanding more tighter measures against immigration. He has for example claimed in German Bild-paper that the German green card program, which granted working permission to few well-trained foreign professionals was a measure which “facilitated the training of potential terrorists in Germany”.

In the same article, Lafontaine went on barricades for the cause of the nation states: “We have to put an end to the belittling of the state. We are the state!”. Creation of the homogenous nation states in Europe began in suppressing the French minority languages since the 1789 revolution, and was finished in the Balkan bloodbath of the 1990’s, climax being the 1916 genocide of the Armenians and the Holocaust. This process went always hand in hand with the capital accumulation. Division of the working class by national lines, state protectionist measures and subsidies were the foundations on which the global economic system of today has been built, although lately latter two have disappeared from rhetorics, but not from political practice of the rich countries.

Attac seems to be deeply confused whether we should turn back the wheel of the history to return to the not so glorious era of the nation states, or to create a global government. For example the already mentioned goals of “democratisation of the international institutions” and “closing tax heavens” are in a total controversy with the state sovereignty called by Lafontaine, since this “democratisation” translated to normal language would mean that subject of the decisionmaking were not anymore nation states but individual citizens. But these two wings seems to have a consensus that we should fight against power of “international capital” and “transnational corporations” – but private corporate armies are nowhere to be seen, all wars for the interests of the capital are waged by good old nation states. Nation states are also subjects of decisionmaking in all the official international institutions, such as WTO and Bretton Woods institutions. They have not lost their power and they will never be replaced by corporations, these two just may not do without each other. “Corporate power” and “neoliberalism” are fake enemies meant to fool idiots and to win votes for the Social democrats.

## **Porto Alegre**

Porto Alegre is capital of the southmost Brazilian province, Rio Grande do Sul. Brazilian Worker’s Party PT governed province until very recently, and during time of its governance it set up a moderate experiment of direct democracy, so called “participatory budgets”. In the case of Porto Alegre, 17% of the city budget is earmarked for discussion and allocation by the assemblies of representatives of popular organisations. As resources are very limited and only a small share of the budget, there is constant in-fighting among activist groups over how the priorities should be set. The “participatory budget” councillors are forced to choose which they prefer: the creation of a school or a health clinic, pavement of the roads, or childcare centres, etc. This is how the responsibility for not meeting the demands of the population is shifted onto the backs of the participants in the “participatory budget” themselves. Vast majority of budget is untouched, especially payment of foreign debt should never be questioned.

Subject making decisions about the participatory budget is “the civil society”. In the case of a participatory budget assembly in the municipality of Camacua, a businessperson sent “his” representatives as delegates and won close to 70% of the votes to prioritise the pavement of a road – to the detriment of all the other demands. Concept of society which lies behind this participatory budget is that of a society without conflicts, without contradictions, based on “consensus among equals.” But such an equality exists nowhere, and the whole concept of the “civil society” has been developed in order to undermine workers movement and the right of the exploited and oppressed to independent organisation in the face of the state and the exploiters.

## **Social forums**

Experiments in Rio Grande do Sul have gained international attention, and city government together with Attac, trade unions and other organisations organised first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001, 50 000–60 000 people participated. Since then, two even bigger events have been organised in Porto Alegre and forum of the next year will be organised in India. Besides these, there have been regional and national forums, such as European Social Forum in Florence 2002. World Social Forum is a sort of alternative event to much older World Economic Forum,

where business and political elites gather since 1971 usually in Davos of Switzerland for informal discussions about their plans for the future.

Concept of forums is a vast variety of lectures, discussions and workshops combined with street actions and festivities. Open events with minimal political coherence have served the original purpose of the event, legitimisation of the PT (Workers' Party) governance of Porto Alegre and promotion of NGOs and trade unions co-organising the events. But since organisers are hierarchical themselves, it is not surprising to see attempts to create more closed and authoritarian structures to govern the movement. The decision-making body of the WSF, the Organising Committee (OC), is controlled by eight persons whom no-one really knows from two movements and six NGOs. They are not really known even to members of the International Council of the WSF which has 90–100 members from NGO's, unions and women's networks. IC was created top-down by invitation from the OC and is so far a rubberstamp of the OC. Members of OC and IC are not accountable to their organisations, only to themselves. IC does not operate behind closed doors, but its proceedings are barely reported to interested public.

European Social Forum follows the same model of organisation, first decisions on the ESF were made by six persons in the Rimini congress of the Italian Refounded Communist Party. These six individuals took important decisions about the ESF's structure, ultimately deciding who spoke in Florence, when and on which topic. All the main speakers were chosen in advance by the organisers — anyone else got a maximum of three minutes speaking time and international NGOs such as Amnesty International were prioritised. More moderate Left Democrats party helped to set up and arrange the ESF, their policies in regional government have included privatisation of local services and entailed environmental destruction.

Some of the same organisations that control the WSF to a great extent, Attac France, main Brazilian trade union CUT, movement of landless in Brazil MST, Focus on the Global South (Thailand) and the World March of Women (Quebec), have engaged in the creation of a Social Movement's World Network (SMWN) and its youth chapter, "Network of the Youth of the WSF". The members of hierarchical political organisations and NGOs try to convince the rest of us that the network they were trying to set up is going to be horizontal and decentralised. But if they now suddenly believe in horizontal organising, why don't they start by reforming their own organisations?

## **Cracks in the facade**

And indeed, there are also some cracks in "the spirit of Porto Alegre". At the World Social Forum of 2001, anarchists and ecologists loosely affiliated with People's Global Action protested against their exclusion from the decisionmaking. In 2002 600 attendees of the alternative Anarchist Journeys occupied a three-storey house in order to emphasise that, as one IMC (Independent Media Centre) poster put it, "Porto Alegre isn't the social democratic paradise that the PT makes it out to be". Later IMC posts reported that local police, under the command of the PT and dressed in full riot gear, quickly surrounded the house, nearly running over one squatter in their attempts to clear it. In 2003 an indigenous Mapuche woman delegate of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre bathed nude in a river to cool off from the warm temperatures of the Brazilian summer-time, only to find herself arrested under charges of "obscene acts". Her arrest then sparked a



non-violent naked protest by 400 activists. Police attacked the protesters arresting and injuring an unknown number of them and then turned on fully clothed journalists and bystanders.

European Social Forum is about to follow the same pattern. Next European Social Forum will be organised in November in Saint-Denis, a suburb of Paris governed by Patrick Braouezec of the Communist Party. Obviously Braouezec tries to follow success formula of Lula by inviting ESF to “his city”. More early this year group “Solidarité Sans Papiers 93”(part of movement of undocumented immigrants) of Saint-Denis made an action of occupying a building without the authorisation of the departmental co-ordination to which the group belonged. The action was condemned by the “democratically elected” board of the co-ordination and a split followed. When board took one of the decisions on condemnation, 34 people were present, among whom 9 sans-papiers and at least a dozen members of the CP and the trotskist LCR. Thus Saint-Papiers were a minority in their own co-ordination! As a revenge, municipality ruled by communists decided to take back a building which had been provided to the sans-papiers in 1996 and where the Solidarité Sans Papiers 93 had an office. Mayor promised that the building would not be evacuated until another place was provided, but 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 2003 he sent police to evict the building.

In Florence ESF Spanish group Yomango presented a truly anti-capitalist alternative to Tobin tax, “100% Robin tax” where poor are allowed to expropriate necessary goods they may not afford from supermarket. A huge party with expropriated food left no participator hungry.

## **Spectacle as a tool of pacifying the opposition**

Goal of social forums and Porto Alegre in general is first of all spectacle and identity politics, idea that 100 000 people could just gather and “plan alternatives to global capitalism” is just absurd. With such mass of people in one place, communication is always uni-directional, where lectures with “stars” of the globalisation critical movement get the biggest audiences. Immediate results are harvested only by those who made those 10 000 Che Guevara t-shirts sold there, and those who could present themselves as successful organisers. In year 2003 Porto Alegre spectacle developed to such level, that 3 French candidates of presidential elections were present — more than in the WEF of Davos. Newly elected president of Brazil, Lula from Workers’ party quickly fled from WSF to Davos in order to “build a bridge between two forums”. In Davos he spoke: “We want free trade, but free trade with reciprocity. It’s useless to make an effort to develop exportation when rich countries preach free trade and practice protectionism.” Lula went there to criticise people in Davos for not being neoliberal enough, and his speech was greeted with an ovation. As a reaction, in social forum of 2003 a pie flung to the face of Jose Genoino, the president of the PT.

WSF and ESF have been financed for example by Norwegian Foreign Ministry, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and — World Bank. World Bank even promotes WSF in its website, and has translated, published and distributed the book “The Participatory Budget: The Experience of Porto Alegre,” written by Tarso Genro (former mayor of Porto Alegre) and Ubirata de Souza. A very convenient strategy, world where “participation” is reserved for self-appointed corrupted NGO elite (so called “civil society”) and where a total chaos of 100 000 strong festival is called “a dialogue” fits Bretton Woods interests very well.

Formula of Porto Alegre has been successful to such extent, that radicals who originally created the globalisation critical movement have had no cue whatsoever how to oppose this take-over attempt. Some texts have been circulating around, there has been various slogans such as “abandon or contaminate”, but this is just wishful thinking – Porto Alegre is so much bigger than we are that we have no chance nor to abandon, nor to contaminate it with our presence. In contrary, attempts of radicals to be present in Social Forums (such as Hub in Florence ESF, and Intergalactika and Life after capitalism in WSF 2003) have had little success in changing character of the event. Where they have not been marginalised altogether, they have just increased legitimisation of the event as “presenting all of us”, thus just being one spice of the spectacle. Where a presence in any events where tens of thousands of discontent people gather is always necessary, the real task in front of us is that of organising our autonomous network and events.

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