

An interview with Jacques Nikonoff, president of Attac

By David Walsh
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Jacques Nikonoff

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Jacques Nikonoff, president of Attac France, the anti-globalization movement, in Paris in late February. Attac has attracted a certain following since its founding in June 1998. It claims some 30,000 members in France and increasing international support, with national units formed in a number of other countries.

The organization has gained support on the crest of the wave of opposition to the consequences of global capitalism, expressed in the mass demonstrations against the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which began in earnest in Seattle in late 1999.

Attac, however, has impeccably establishment credentials. The case for the organization that became Attac was made in an article by the editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Ignazio Ramonet, in December 1997.

Ramonet wrote that the “globalization 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.” The journalist asserted that this “financial globalization” had created a “supranational state” with its own constellation of organizations (WTO, IMF, Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation [OECD], etc.).

His perspective? “The task of disarming this financial power must be given top priority if the law of the jungle is not to take over completely in the next century.”

Since the “absolute freedom of movement for capital undermines democracy,” mechanisms needed to be introduced to counter or limit its effects. One such, Ramonet argued, was the so-called Tobin tax, named after the American economist, who proposed (in 1972) the imposition of a 0.1 to 1 percent tax on all international currency transactions to slow down the speculative movement of capital and thus supposedly permit national governments more room for maneuver. Attac takes its name—Association pour la taxation des transactions financières pour l’aide aux citoyens (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens)—from this proposal.

As the character of this and other similar proposals demonstrate, Attac does not support an assault on the foundations of the profit system, but argues rather for restraints to be placed on its operations by the various

national governments. It would like the “ugly face” of capitalism worked upon, improved, and the world returned to the era in which national economy and policy played significant roles.

In a revealing debate with *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman in the Fall 1999 issue of *Foreign Policy*, Ramonet passionately denounced the inequities and cruelties of “neo-liberal” globalization from the point of view that current economic trends, if not checked, would propel masses of people into revolutionary struggle.

He wrote: “Capitalism inexorably leads to the concentration of wealth and economic power in the hands of a small group. And this in turn leads to a fundamental question: How much redistribution will it take to make the domination of the rich minority acceptable to the majority of the world’s population? The problem, my dear Mr. Friedman, is that the market is incapable of responding. All over the world, globalization is destroying the welfare state. What can we do? How do we keep half of humanity from revolting and choosing violence?”

The Tobin tax, as Nick Beams has explained on the WWSW [“Globalisation, Jospin and the political program of Attac”], is both utopian and retrograde. The amount of money passing through international currency markets has reached \$1.5 trillion a day. A transaction tax—which, in any case, the various self-interested bourgeois regimes will never agree to—would be powerless in the face of such a flow, exponentially higher than in Tobin’s day.

Furthermore, the proposal is characteristic of petty bourgeois opponents of capitalism who seek to separate the “bad” aspects of the system (the uncontrolled operation of the financial markets) from its supposedly “good” side—the production of goods and services. Such a view fails to take into account that the present globally-integrated state of affairs, in both its “good” and “bad” sides, dominated by the actions of transnational corporations functioning as a law unto themselves, has grown organically out of the previous relatively regulated international order.

This reflects, above all, the growth of the productive forces beyond the framework of the nation-state system. This worldwide economic development has an enormously progressive potential and provides the material substratum for a higher social order. The problem confronting the working population of the world is not globalization as such, but the subordination of this international economy to the profit drive of private corporate and financial giants. The central political task of our time is establishing genuinely democratic control of this immense and complex global organism by the producers of wealth, the international working class.

Attac works in an opposed direction, functioning politically to divert layers of middle class youth in particular, seeking a means to fight social injustice and inequality, onto a path—the application of pressure on national governments to introduce anti-globalization measures—that is ultimately harmless to the status quo.

Attac’s view of the war on Iraq

In his interview with the WSWS in February, Jacques Nikonoff articulated the viewpoint of Attac and its leadership in regard to the current international crisis arising from the drive of the US to wage war on Iraq.

Nikonoff took over the leading position in the organization on December 1, 2002. The grandson of a Russian émigré, whose parents were Communist Party (PCF) members, the future Attac leader worked as a welder in a suburban Paris factory and began climbing the ladder of the CGT (Stalinist-dominated union) officialdom in the 1970s, a career cut short by losing his job. In the following decade he attended the prestigious École nationale d'administration, the French national school of public administration, training ground for French bureaucrats and politicians. Upon graduation he went to work for the state-operated financial services group Caisse des dépôts et consignations (Consignments and Loans Fund). Between 1989 and 1992 he worked in New York City, conducting "strategic monitoring" of the financial markets. He later took part briefly in the leadership of the PCF.

Nikonoff was elevated to the leadership of Attac in the summer of 2002 and nominated by the organization's first president, Bernard Cassen, to be his successor.

Outlining Attac's position on the war against Iraq, Nikonoff first indicated the organization's "geopolitical" consideration. He suggested that the world as a whole was emerging from a cycle of "neo-liberal," free market ideology.

He commented: "We consider that this hegemony is being contested as never before, contested firstly because the promises which had been made by this conservative revolution were not kept. Promises that there would be full employment, the reduction of inequalities between countries, that the freeing of trade would facilitate world economic and social progress, that financial deregulation was going to facilitate the development of growth, monetary and economic stability."

The Bush administration, however, confronted with the failure of the "conservative counterrevolution" and the growing opposition of "millions and millions of people," was entering a new cycle of its own, a return to the "law of the jungle." He noted the "very particular characteristics" of the Bush administration, with its share of "right-wing extremists" and "religious fundamentalists."

Nikonoff's explanation of the current crisis (one "cycle" encountering another) is distinctly ahistorical and avoids critical questions. The characterization of Bush, Rumsfeld and company as "people devoid of culture," who "do not know much" and who "function with very crude concepts" is entirely accurate, but it fails to explain why this criminal layer has risen to such prominence and why the American ruling elite as a whole has embarked on its present reckless course.

For that an historical analysis of the crisis of world and American capitalism, as well as the specific forms of this crisis, would be in order. One would have to take into account the loss of economic hegemony of US capitalism and its effort to overcome this through the use of its military might, concentrated in the far-reaching political aims of the most predatory sections of the ruling elite. Moreover, one would have to draw out the intimate link between the war fever of the political and media establishment and the internal situation in the US: the malignant growth of social inequality and the attendant social ills for which the powers that be have no answers.

Early on in the conversation Nikonoff introduced a theme that runs throughout: a US war on Iraq would have the negative consequence of destabilizing world affairs. "Whatever Iraq does," he observed, "the Arab world could only see this war carried out by the US and others as a war of civilizations.... For this first reason then this war must be stopped. It would provoke an unleashing of hate and violence throughout the planet."

In the same vein, replying to a question about the consequences of the Bush administration going to war in the face of international public

opinion, Nikonoff said, "The consequences will be absolutely terrible." The Attac leader reasoned that either the war would produce a worldwide radicalization, as the Vietnam conflict did, or American imperialism would intimidate and crush any opposition. What will happen? "No one can tell.... We are deeply uncertain."

Nikonoff suggested that there were political forces who would consider a US attack on Iraq a "good thing" because it would bring about the aforementioned radicalization. "We would not make this deadly calculation," he commented. Indeed such a position, callously indifferent to the suffering of the Iraqi population, would be contemptible. Every effort must be made to mobilize the international working class against the US war plans.

Nonetheless, Nikonoff's attitude toward the destabilization of the existing political and economic set-up is essentially that of one of its defenders, rather than a revolutionary socialist opponent. He seemed taken aback by the possibility that the set of postwar international relations, which includes the UN and related organizations, was coming apart at the seams. He spoke favorably of "the efforts being made for more than 50 years now to construct an international architecture ruled by law and in particular involving the UN."

And later he supported the coalescing of forces, including European governments, opposed to US dominance, which would make "it possible to return international relations to equilibrium," i.e., the postwar norms. He decried Washington's desire for "the world to be unipolar, that is, an empire. Here [in the European opposition] there are perhaps the elements, the ingredients, to go towards a multipolar world, that is, several polarities." He was encouraged by the Security Council vote, "because we can see, contrary to all predictions, that the unipolar world which the US wants is not inevitable, that it is perfectly possible to give a new equilibrium to the world and to have groupings which avoid this imperial domination."

But this position represents in an almost pure form the conclusion obviously reached by the French and German bourgeoisies, a conclusion that is motivating their present opposition to the US-British war on Iraq. These European elites have come to view the impending war as part of an effort by America to establish a stranglehold over critical natural resources and generally advance closer to its goal of world domination.

In a recent article in *Le Figaro*, a leading figure in Jacques Chirac's UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), Pierre Lellouche—member of the National Assembly's foreign affairs committee and vice-president of NATO's parliamentary assembly—argued along the same lines. Lellouche wrote: "This crisis [over the Iraq war] has as its epicenter a single question: in this dangerous post-Cold War ... will the fate of the world be entrusted to America, first power on the planet ... helped by certain sure allies, or should the world rather be directed collectively by a group of powers, unequal certainly in terms of economic and military capacities, but equal in rights, in the bosom of the 'temple of multipolarity' which would be the United Nations Security Council?"

Saving Europe's "honor"

There are no doubt many who harbor illusions about the anti-capitalist dynamic of Attac, but Nikonoff went out of his way to solidarize himself and his organization with the bourgeois regimes in Paris, Berlin and Brussels.

"France, Germany and Belgium are saving Europe and its peoples' honor, because they are the only governments, massively supported by their peoples, who are defending law, who are defending intelligence, who can see beyond the end of their noses, even if there certainly is behind that some politicking, that is not the main point. The main point is that there are political positions which we consider of value and which could well form a sort of polarity of resistance to capitalist globalization."

Later, he declared that "Europe brings another voice to the world through Belgium, Germany and France ... Europe is the bearer of a

universal message of internationalism, of peace, of conciliation, of cooperation with the Arab world, [which] is something extremely positive for the building of that multipolar world which we need.”

He was particularly pleased by the Chirac government’s performance, aligning it with the “tradition of France’s greatness” and with what novelist (and cabinet minister) André Malraux described as that nation’s special “message for the world.” Nikonoff went on to lavish praise on Foreign Minister Dominique Villepin who, at the UN, had “provided a fine example of this tradition. It is a tradition of eloquence, of people of intelligence and culture.”

Far be it from us to suggest that all imperialisms are created equal. The Bush administration is the political representative of the most ruthless, criminal and bloodthirsty social elements on the planet. These are forces who will stop at nothing, including the launching of a nuclear attack, to have their way, that is, the reorganization of the world in their favor.

However, France has been a major imperialist power for more than a century, with a long and brutal history of enslaving peoples in Africa and Asia. It continues today to function as a neo-colonial power, as witnessed by its sordid operations in the Ivory Coast. If France is a “pacifist” in the current crisis, that is because it finds itself outgunned and has no choice at the moment but to pursue diplomatic efforts to curtail US ambitions. Given transformed circumstances, nothing would prevent Paris or Berlin from launching its own predatory wars of conquest.

In any event, the elementary reality that the great powers are not identical in their global designs and sociopolitical physiognomy is no argument for basing the policy of the working class on these differences. For French workers to align themselves with the Chirac regime due to its conflict of imperialist interests with Washington would be disastrous. It would politically paralyze workers and bind them to their class enemy, who would have a far freer hand to deal them any number of new blows. The only means by which the working population can advance its interests is by unifying internationally on a socialist program and establishing its political independence from all the sections of the bourgeoisie, temporarily “peace-loving” and otherwise.

This latter notion has come under particularly sustained attack in France over the past year. Last spring, after ultra-rightist Jean-Marie Le Pen unexpectedly finished second in the first round of the presidential election—eliminating Socialist Party (PS) candidate Lionel Jospin from the runoff—the official left (PS, PCF, Greens) and sections of the “far left” called for a vote for incumbent president Chirac, on the grounds that he would defend the “Republic” against the neo-fascist threat. Nine months later, the French left, including Attac, is by and large congratulating the Chirac government for its stand on the Iraq war.

The left parties have abandoned any conception of class politics. According to their reasoning, one can pick and choose among the policies of the ruling elite: against Le Pen, we are with Chirac; on pensions, no, we oppose him; on war with Iraq, we agree again. This crass opportunism only disorients the population and makes the more backward layers susceptible to the appeals of the right-wing parties.

The identification of Nikonoff and Attac with the French ruling elite is inevitable given their attitude toward the nation and nation-states. The Attac leader was at his most emphatic in response to a question as to whether there continued to be a progressive role for the nation-state:

“Absolutely—and I believe that one of the lessons which we must draw is the idea that the nations have an international role and that globalization has not extinguished the role of nations. However, it is the contrary argument that we’ve been hearing for some years. They tell us that with globalization states, nations no longer have any weight and that everything takes place at an international level, that the US is much too big for anyone to be able to shift and, in the end, we have to get into line.

“Well, what is happening is that three, on a planetary scale, medium-sized countries, adding up to some 150 million inhabitants, are

standing up intelligently and questioning this commonplace. For the moment we can see that these countries are capable, with others, of placing limits [on the US].... This puts the role of nations in a completely different light. It should give rise to hope on the economic and social issues, because if nations can counter the military aspect of free-market globalization, then nations can counter the policies which apply in the social and economic domain.”

In the first place, it would be the height of political naiveté to imagine that the opposition of France and Germany can force the US to abandon its war plan. If the role of nations is to be justified on the basis that it obliged American imperialism to wait a few weeks before inflicting mass suffering on the Iraqi people, that would be scant justification indeed.

More fundamentally, Nikonoff is incapable of seeing that the Iraq crisis and the drive to war by US imperialism are caused, in the final analysis, by the growth of the productive forces which find the nation-state system too constricting for their development. The American corporate elite, in its own thoroughly reactionary fashion, is responding to that very problem, seeking to break the fetters imposed by national restrictions on economic life by placing the entire world under its imperial-military sway. The contradiction between humanity’s productive capacities and their constraint within the national form and private property has been the driving force for two world wars and threatens to become one for a third.

Turning to the political situation in France, Nikonoff criticized the left parties (PS, PCF) for having learned nothing as of yet from their electoral defeat in 2002. He noted that the Socialist Party had turned “to austerity” after its 1981 electoral victory and lined up “with the new free market economics.... A complete *risorgimento* [rebirth] is required,” but the necessary analysis on the left had not even begun to be made. “So now we are at a standstill: the only attitudes there are circumstantial, artificial.”

As for the “far left” (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, Lutte Ouvrière), its organizations were living “on an illusion, that produced by the result they got in the last elections [nearly 10 percent of the vote in the first round of the presidential election], which can lead them to believe that there is a radicalisation of the masses. Such a radicalisation is far from proven.... If the PCF and the PS get back on their feet the voters will come back to them.” All in all, a thoroughly skeptical and conservative perspective, one largely shared by the “far left” parties themselves, in fact.

In objective class terms, Nikonoff and the leadership of Attac speak for those sections of small and not-so-small business in France and Europe who feel mortally threatened by the growth of the global economy. Unable to mobilize any significant sector of the population around their real, narrow class concerns, they attempt instead to gather professional and other layers around the more politically appealing platform of defending French and European social conquests against the Yankee barbarians.

However, notwithstanding his sometimes sharp attacks on global capitalism and the French left for its right-wing record, Nikonoff advances a program on behalf of Attac thoroughly rooted in the reactionary defense of the political power and economic sovereignty of the capitalist nation-state. Nothing progressive can emerge from such a program.

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