

**TRADE UNIONS, INDUSTRIAL  
RELATIONS AND THE CRISIS:  
THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT**

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# OVERVIEW

- **the crisis (or rather, crises):  
diversity of national experience**
- **resurgence of conflict**
- **reinforcement of partnership**
- **bankruptcy of an economic model**
- **complex and contradictory  
developments**

# DIVERSITY OF NATIONAL EXPERIENCE

- **key cross-national differences**
  - **exposure to global financial crisis**
  - **state will and capacity to manage fall-out: it takes three to tango**
  - **legislative protections against dismissal**
  - **trade union strength and cohesion**
  - **... and now, extent of austerity**
- **work-sharing strategies and labour market dualism**
- **volatile patterns of trade union confidence or demoralisation**

# UNEMPLOYMENT RATE (%)

	Q4 2008	Q4 2009	Q4 2010
SE	6.7	8.8	7.9
DK	3.7	7.0	7.7
DE	7.1	7.5	6.6
AT	4.1	4.8	4.2
BE	7.1	8.1	8.2
NL	3.0	4.2	4.4
FR	8.2	9.9	9.7
IT	6.9	8.3	8.6
ES	14.0	19.0	20.5
UK	6.3	7.8	7.9
IE	8.0	12.9	13.8
CZ	4.5	7.3	7.4
HU	8.2	10.8	11.6
PL	7.0	8.9	9.7
EE	7.9	16.1	14.3

# RESURGENT CONFLICTS ?

- public anger: *noi la crisi non la paghiamo !*
- revival of anti-capitalist class rhetoric
- militant struggles: general strikes, occupations, 'boss-napping'... but modest, defensive aims
- and also: varieties of protectionism and xenophobia
- though does protection always mean protectionism ?



# REINFORCED DIALOGUE AND PARTNERSHIP ?

- **some parallels to responses to past crises:**
  - **national level: 'competitive corporatism' and social pacts**
  - **company level: concession bargaining and co-management of restructuring – but also new methods of avoiding dismissals**
  - **reinforced decentralisation makes coordinated responses more difficult**
- **trade union 'realism': no alternative to negotiated solutions**
- **but strains and tensions, pushed to breakdown by brutal austerity measures**

# BANKRUPTCY OF THE NEOLIBERAL MODEL

- financial crisis  $\Rightarrow$  economic crisis  $\Rightarrow$  jobs crisis  $\Rightarrow$  sovereign debt crisis
- ... and social crisis and political crisis ?
- but framing the crisis: individual greed and/or systemic failings ?
- electoral successes of neoliberal parties (and far right) ...
- leading to more vicious forms of 'normality' ?



# EQUALITY OF SACRIFICE: BOB DIAMOND, BARCLAYS BANK: £6.5 MILLION BONUS



There was a period of remorse and apology for banks. I think that period needs to be over.





# COMPLEXITY AND CONTRADICTION

- **trade union responses: radical rhetoric without matching strategic vision ?**
- **contradictory imperatives: systemic change versus short-term damage limitation**
- **conflict and dialogue interact – and contradictions often expressed in inter-union disputes**
- **different dynamics of public and private sectors: major source of division**
- **disjuncture between global crisis and national responses:**
  - **demands for increased purchasing power, but negotiation of wage moderation**
  - **can everyone win the battle for competitiveness ?**
- **economic democracy: an idea whose time has come (again) ?**

# TO BE CONTINUED...

