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
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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 ⇒ economic crisis ⇒ jobs crisis ⇒ 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’?
There was a period of remorse and apology for banks. I think that period needs to be over.

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