

Worker resistance and response to the crisis of neo-liberal capitalism

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this editorial is to introduce the special edition on ‘Worker resistance and response to the crisis of neo-liberal capitalism’.

Design/methodology/approach – The editorial provides an overview and introduces the papers which make up the special issue.

Findings – The six papers facilitate a deeper understanding of the issues and dynamics involved in worker resistance and response to the crisis of neo-liberal capitalism.

Originality/value – The papers adds new insights into the topics at hand.

Article Type: General review

Keyword(s): Union, workplace conflict, restructuring, western Europe

Introduction

Since late 2007, capitalism in the global north has undergone its most profound crisis in a generation. This has taken the form of a sustained economic, ideological and political crisis for an advanced form of neo-liberalism. The financial crisis became an economic crisis precipitating an age of austerity, sending shockwaves through not just the financial services sector but also manufacturing, construction, retail and now the public services and state sectors. The crisis of - and for - capitalism is also equally a crisis of - and for - organised labour, rather than an opportunity, if organised labour is unable to effectively reject and resist capital's terms for resolving this crisis. When some critics initially thought they were living through the end of 'the end of history', to use Francis Fukuyama's well-known phrase, they were rudely jolted and, thus, informed shortly afterwards by the reality that there was to be no revenge of history for capitalism would not implode solely under the weight of its own contradictions. So thus far, even sympathetic and engaged observers would have to conclude that the ability of organised labour to offer widespread, let alone effective, resistance has been shown to be left badly wanting. For example, in Eire pay cuts and tax rises have been imposed upon working people, with the only signs of overt conflict being a number of large demonstrations in Dublin to protest this and the election of five far left members of the 166-strong lower house of the Irish Parliament in the February 2011 general election. A public sector-wide strike for March 2009 was called off by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in order to return to the social dialogue of social partnership. Revolution does not even seem to appear to be on the fringes of the radar screen of organised labour. Political reform been no more forthcoming as the mainstream political parties of the right, centre and left continue to win office and on platforms of quintessentially continued neo-liberalism. In western Europe, and in regard of the response from organised labour, the one exception that almost proves the rule here would appear to be Greece. But even with nine general strikes in 2010, the austerity onslaught has still continued under a formally social democratic government. It remains to be seen what the outcome of the bitter and

extensive workers' struggles of June and July 2011 are. One of the main jobs of social scientists is try to understand what has happened and why, no matter if the values and effects of the phenomenon clash with their personal held convictions and preferences. The edition of *Employee Relations* on worker resistance and response to the crisis of neo-liberal capitalism is a case in point.

Taking its starting point as the historical memory of earlier periods when worker and working class resistance was both more widespread and effective to previous crises, the underlying approach has been to pose the questions as to why resistance has been so timorous this time round while at the same time trying to use - in a counter-factual way - that resistance which has taken place to probe the absence of wider and more extensive resistance elsewhere. In this edition, not all countries and not all developments in and of western Europe have been covered (*sic*). Rather, and arising out of a symposium organised by myself at the European Congress of the International Industrial Relations Association in Copenhagen in July 2010, this edition comprises a selection of papers which examine some of the salient developments in Belgium, Britain, Ireland, France and Spain, with one paper providing a comparative analysis across Poland, Portugal, Britain, Italy and France. The initial stimulus to the organising of the symposium was the simultaneous occurrence of high-profile workplace occupations with bossnapping concerning 3M, Sony, Continental, Kleber-Michelin, Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard, and Scapa in France, and the occupations at the Visteon and Vestas factories in Britain. Given the historical transition of these and other western European economies from being significantly based upon manufacturing to being significantly based upon services (private and public), it became apparent that observers could rightly make the deduction old fashioned occupations of factories were neither possible nor practical despite the limited evidence to the contrary. This seemed all the more so to be the case when considering that the outputs of a service-based economy are often – though not always – infinitely more mobile and less tangible in the physical sense while the workplaces and worksites in which these services are created and distributed from are less spatially fixed. Herein lies a challenge to organised labour, especially in the

case of outsourcing and offshoring, as how to re-evaluate and re-configure the tactics which allow it to raise the costs of capital leaving one geographical site as well as raise the costs establishing operations in another.

The collection of papers looks at different aspects of resistance, with the evaluation of the application and outcomes of the tactic of the occupation running through many. In the paper on Belgium, innovations in how existing institutional rights are exercised and deployed by unions indicate not only creative thinking but the development of effective leverage. In the paper on Britain, the clutch of occupations studied need to be held in regard of the more widespread phenomenon of concession bargaining over pay and working time – in other words, compromises with employers which have resulted in extensive pay freezes, pay cuts and (uncompensated) short-time working. The paper on Eire (the Republic of Ireland) begins by advancing the conceptual understanding of the occupation tactic in terms of bargaining leverage before highlighting that even where occupations are deployed, the existence of third parties like the Labour Court and Labour Relations Commission are important in directly and indirectly exercising this leverage over employers. This contrasts with the situation regarding ACAS (the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) and the CAC (Central Arbitration Committee) in Britain which politically and legally are unable and unwilling to play such roles. The paper on France suggests that the existence of laws which subsequently prove to be weak in their protective capacity may be a significant trigger to collective action. The implication is that the dashing of expectations of protection from capital which arise as a result of the awareness of rights can precipitate collective anger and collective action rather than individual resignation and individual retreat.¹ This may be as or more important than any sense of collective memory arising from the waves of occupations in France in 1936 and 1968, or kidnapping of managers in the 1970s (Bintliff, 2009; Pernot, 2010), especially as the pervasiveness and persuasiveness of these is – all other things being equal – likely to decline over time. Nonetheless, there are still more deeply engrained traditions of direct collective action in the

political culture of French society than in Britain, for example. Bossnapping and occupation as a form of the physical sequestration of capital and the managers of capital appeared to also be seen as legitimate in France – according to Bintliff (2009): ‘A poll this week showed almost half of those interviewed believed that actions such as bossnapping were acceptable’. The existence of such rights enshrined in law – and then the dashing of the expectations that come with these – in France draws attention to a contrast with the situation in countries like Britain where such rights are fewer and less efficacious with the outcome that expectations of protection from capital are also correspondingly lower and lowered. Therefore, this offers as much purchase as the following:

Could ‘bossnapping’ à la française come to the UK? Brendan Barber, general secretary of the Trades Union Congress, thinks not. ‘The French have a certain way of doing things’ he says. Mr Barber says we cannot rule out more outbursts of anger such as the sit-ins by workers at Visteon, the car parts maker, over redundancy terms. Occupations are rare here, however. (Groom, 2009)

The paper on Spain emphasises that the cultural settings and connotations of tactics in the repertoire of workers are dynamic and develop across time and space. This is a response to the import of the collective memory of the past and its varied application by new groups and in new situations. Finally, the paper compares the use of collective and individual means of dispute resolution in five countries and how these can be best understood in relation to variance across and between these countries in regard of regimes of industrial relations and labour regulation. This again raises the issue of the inter-relationship between rights and expectations, on the one hand, and consciousness and action on the other.

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Note

¹ Here, it should be noted that there has been evidence of this as well in term of suicides and self-immolation. The cases of suicide at France Telecom in 2008 and 2009 are the most reported examples of the former.

References

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