

Austeritarianism in Europe: what options for resistance?

Richard Hyman

Introduction

In much of Europe, the social rights and social protections won by labour movements have recently been seriously eroded, and are further threatened by neoliberal austerity. Efforts to resist have been largely unsuccessful; but is an effective fight-back possible? In the next section I briefly outline how the ‘new economic governance’ of the European Union (EU) has reinforced this erosion, particularly with the economic crisis and the ensuing pursuit of austerity. I then survey a range of forms of protest and opposition, notably through trade union action (section 2), before turning to a discussion of ‘new’ social movements (section 3). In conclusion I suggest that a nuanced evaluation of success and failure is necessary, and I propose that the articulation of different forms of resistance – cross-nationally and between different actors – is essential in order to stem the neoliberal hegemony.

1. Brussels versus workers’ rights?

The sovereign debt crisis was facilitated, and at the same time reinforced by, the embrace of neoclassical fiscal orthodoxy within the institutions of the EU. Deflationary macroeconomic priorities date back to the establishment of EMU. The economic logic of ‘correction’ was simple: deflation in order to achieve ‘internal devaluation’ as a substitute for the unavailable option of currency devaluation. A priority was to attack public sector employment, pay and pensions, and to reduce and privatise public services. The recipe was both socially regressive and – in a context of stagnation or recession – negatively pro-cyclical: austerity fuels recession (ETUI 2013: 8; 2014: 17).

Though some see a softening of this process (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2014), most writers consider that the ‘new EU economic governance’, launched as part of the *Europe 2020* agenda in 2010, marginalised ‘social Europe’ even further (Bieler and Erne 2014; Degryse 2012; Jolivet *et al.* 2013; Pochet 2010). It institutionalised the ‘European Semester’, a process whereby Member States are required to submit draft budgetary plans which are assessed for compliance with the requirements of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), leading to Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) for both economic and structural ‘reforms’.

The effect was ‘a continuing shift of power away from national [level] as well as the European Parliament to the European Council [and] expert groups, which have no political legitimation’ (Pühlinger 2014: 9). In particular, the Compact and Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance (TSCG) include the principle of ‘reverse qualified majority voting’: sanctions against a Member State deemed in breach of the requirements can be prevented only by roughly three-quarters of the weighted votes in the Council.

Typically, fiscal ‘sustainability’ translates into pressures for pension cuts, wage restraint and cutbacks in social protection and public services (Stamati and Baeten 2015). This includes pressures to marketise health services. As Greer (2014: 13) concludes, ‘health care and policies in the EU are now incorporated into a new system of fiscal governance that is deliberately stacked in favor of fiscal objectives and finance ministries’. In addition, ‘modernisation’ of collective bargaining has become ‘a widely used euphemism that, in practical terms, points to a higher political pressure [for] wage restraint and...more decentralized wage-setting mechanisms’ (Rocha 2014: 15). The result, as Oberndorfer (2013) deemed it, has been ‘a Troika for everyone’.

More generally, the growing dominance of DG ECFIN over Commission policy in the social field, and its negative view of both public provision and employment protection, have made the crisis the occasion for attacks on established workers’ rights. Many governments, not only in the programme countries, have weakened statutory protections for standard employment contracts and encouraged the spread of precarious contracts (Heyes and Lewis 2014). Closely linked to that has been the erosion of mechanisms of social concertation between

governments, unions and employers which were previously widely acclaimed as a source of consensual adaptation to economic challenges.

Furthermore, ‘the core actors of the Eurozone are encouraging Member States to establish governments capable of acting *without* trade union support’ (Culpepper and Regan 2014: 724). In Cyprus, for example, ‘the onset of the economic crisis and the austerity policies that began in 2011 and intensified in 2012–2013 effectively undermined... the previously celebrated institution of the “social dialogue”’ (Ioannou and Sonan 2014: 15). The rejection of social dialogue in part reflects the increased weakness of trade unions, and also a belief that governments which impose radical change in the face of trade union resistance are more likely to win the ‘confidence’ of speculators, bond markets and ratings agencies.

The outcome is by now well documented. In many countries there has been a substantial decline in collective bargaining coverage: most dramatically in the case of Portugal, where the number of workers covered by collective agreements fell from 1.9 million in 2008 to 0.3 million in 2012 and 0.2 million in 2013 (Rocha and Stoleroff 2014: 168). The impact of ‘structural reforms’ has been in many countries a rapid growth of a low-wage sector with weak unionisation and little or no collective bargaining. Not surprisingly, inequality increased between 2008 and 2012 in the majority of EU Member States (ETUI 2014: 46), intensifying the risks of continuing recession and increasing the proportion of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion – whether through unemployment, in-work poverty caused by ‘atypical’ employment contracts, or loss of social benefits and services for those outside the labour market. In the Eurozone, those at persistent risk of poverty increased from 8.8% in 2008 to 10.1% in 2012, and those suffering severe material deprivation from 5.9% to 7.7% of the population (European Commission 2015: 300). In particular, loss of affordable healthcare services has been a major source of poverty for those in employment and outside employment alike (ETUI 2014: 51).

In such a context, the question then is: ‘Is resistance futile?’ (Bailey 2014). Bailey’s answer is, in effect, not necessarily. However, it is inadequate to rely on traditional repertoires of action. To fight back against the odds requires strategic imagination, new alliances and transnational learning and solidarity. In this respect, the resources of

modern information technology have created new opportunities. But the crisis, and the neoliberalism which provoked it, also creates a dilemma. As the former Greek finance minister has put it (Varoufakis 2015), ‘Europe’s crisis is far less likely to give birth to a better alternative to capitalism than it is to unleash dangerously regressive forces that have the capacity to cause a humanitarian bloodbath, while extinguishing the hope for any progressive moves for generations to come’.

2. Trade unions: between opposition and damage limitation

2.1 Contradictions of union activism

With often depleted resources as a result of a long-term loss of membership, unions at the national level have not been well placed to respond to the crisis: ‘generally they have been in disarray when confronted by a historical process in which they no longer feel involved’ (Dufresne and Pernot 2013: 14). There is evidence both of radical or conflictual initiatives, and of a reinforcement of cooperation and partnership; often the two types of response have been paradoxically interconnected. Radical actions, whether company-level conflicts or national strikes, have often been defensive in their objectives.

As suggested above, governments seeking to impress international creditors may welcome confrontation with trade unions as a demonstration of fiscal rectitude. Conversely, efforts to seek consensual solutions through social dialogue have confronted an intensified opposition of class interests (who will pay for the crisis?) and diminished space for positive-sum outcomes.

‘There can be no return to business as usual’ was an almost unanimous trade union reaction when the crisis first hit. Yet historically, trade unions have consolidated their institutional status as pragmatic negotiators, and their predominant aim has seemed to be to negotiate with those wielding political and economic power for a tighter regulatory architecture for financialised capitalism rather than leading an oppositional movement for an alternative socio-economic order. Two familiar and intersecting contradictions of union action have been

evident. One – articulated by Varoufakis – is the dilemma of short-term imperatives versus long-term objectives. A Belgian union leader commented: ‘it is easy to say: we need to change the balance of forces. But that does not tell us how to proceed.... Our members expect us to look after their immediate interests’ (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013: 124-125).

The second contradiction is between the global economic crisis and trade union action that is essentially national or indeed sub-national in character. The supranational trade union organisations – the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) at global level, and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) – were largely consigned by the unexpected crisis to primarily the role of spectators, with little impact on the evolving policy responses at national and supranational levels. Both confederations produced sound analyses of the economic roots of the crisis and proposals for expansionary policy responses. In the case of the ETUC, this involved a frontal critique of the ‘new economic governance’ introduced by the EU. In a statement entitled *Solidarity in the Crisis* (2011), it denounced EU policies as ‘totally unacceptable to the trade unions of Europe’ and called for a radical reversal. This denunciation was followed by an analytically impressive call for a ‘social compact for Europe’, adopted in 2012. However, the crisis and its aftermath have brought a radical shift in the balance of forces, gravely weakening trade unions. Indeed the dominant response at national level has been to defend and enhance competitiveness, meaning a struggle of country against country, workplace against workplace, intensifying the downwards pressure on wages and conditions.

The onset of the crisis provoked a variety of conflictual responses at the workplace level, including a spate of sit-ins against job cuts and plant closures reminiscent of the struggles of the 1970s. France in 2009 saw a number of episodes of ‘boss-napping’, a situation where senior managers were held hostage by workers. In three cases, workers threatened to blow up their factories with gas cylinders. This radicalism, however, was consistent with ‘the presence of a strong, generalised cultural acceptance of direct action in labour issues’ (Hayes 2012: 190), which can be traced back to the French revolutionary tradition. Such actions were typically spontaneous initiatives from below, not coordinated and often not supported by the official national

unions. Nor did radical forms of action imply similar radicalism of objectives. In most cases, such workplace struggles seemed gestures of defiance and despair, with little belief that they would prevent announced closures or job losses (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013).

Another outcome of the crisis has been a widespread reinforcement of wage moderation, with employers, in some cases pressing for downwards renegotiation of existing pay agreements. Negotiations over restructuring and job reductions, with the aim of agreeing on some form of ‘social plan’, were common across most countries. Even in conjunction with symbolic protest action, unions have often endeavoured to manage the crisis through peak-level social dialogue. This dialogue is what Urban (2012) has called ‘crisis corporatism’. Most unions have accepted, tacitly or explicitly, the dictates of national ‘competitiveness’ (Marginson and Welz 2014), becoming ‘responsible co-designers of austerity’ (Bohle 2011: 100). As noted above, this has intensified downwards pressures on wages and conditions.

Crisis corporatism is inevitably antipathetic to cross-national solidarity. It may also erode *within-country* solidarity: the most forceful resistance has typically involved public sector unions, whose members have borne the brunt of austerity but have often been deprived of private sector support. In Ireland, for example, there was barely concealed antagonism between public and private sector unions. In Italy and Portugal, there were major divisions between the main confederations. To a lesser extent, the same has been true in Belgium. Italy has seen a number of coordinated national strikes and protest actions, but in most cases these protests have not involved cooperation between all three main confederations.

2.2 The contradictions of crisis corporatism

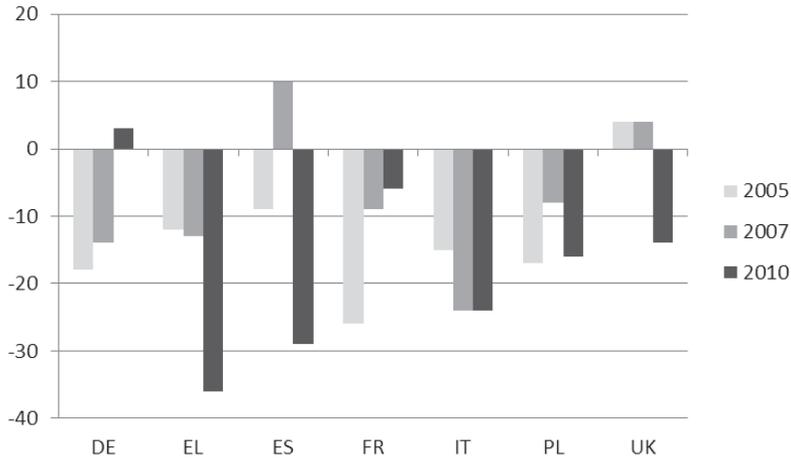
The contradiction between national conceptions of economic self-interest and a politically informed rhetoric of cross-border solidarity has been very apparent in the aftermath of the crisis. Despite official awareness at national levels that (at least in the medium term) ‘European policy is national policy’ (Foglar 2011: 8), short-term preoccupation with challenges at the national level has assumed

priority. Beyond largely ineffectual protests, there has been little coordinated cross-national response. 'Since 2008-2009, increasingly massive mobilisations have essentially been organised at national level without taking account of the timetable proposed by the ETUC... and most often lack a transnational dimension' (Dufresne and Pernet 2013: 21). Hence resistance to austerity has tended to involve a 'patchwork of often uncoordinated action' with 'no thought-through strategic plan for getting mass support to bring down the plans of the Commission' (Scherrer 2011: 36). There has been an evident contradiction between the global nature of the economic crisis on the one hand, and trade union action that is essentially national or indeed sub-national in character.

Lemb and Urban (2014: 50-1) conclude that while unions attempt 'in especially crisis-torn countries to brace themselves against the economically, politically, and socially disastrous crisis policy...there is little sign of a broad Europe-wide trade union resistance'. In Germany, 'the European crisis and the far-reaching economic, social, and political dislocations that neoliberal austerity policy has unleashed appears from those employed here as problems occurring far away [and] a solidary management of the crisis in Europe is less important or unimportant'. This is despite the efforts of most northern trade union movements, including those in Germany, to express their support for their counterparts in the south, and particularly in Greece. In a Europe dominated by the hegemony of neoliberalism, however, unions have been largely unable to win over public opinion by highlighting the common 'risk community' and pointing to progressive, solidaristic solutions.

This reflects a more general failure of trade unions to win the battle of ideas. In general, Eurobarometer surveys show a rather low level of trust in trade unions, and overall that level has deteriorated since the crisis. Figure 1 shows the net trust expressed in the six largest EU countries, together with Greece, from 2005-2010. Most countries had negative net trust before the crisis and it only became more and more accentuated in most countries; only in Germany does trust remain positive. The countries worst affected by the crisis have tended to show the greatest decline.

Figure 1 Net trust in trade unions (tend to trust - tend not to trust)

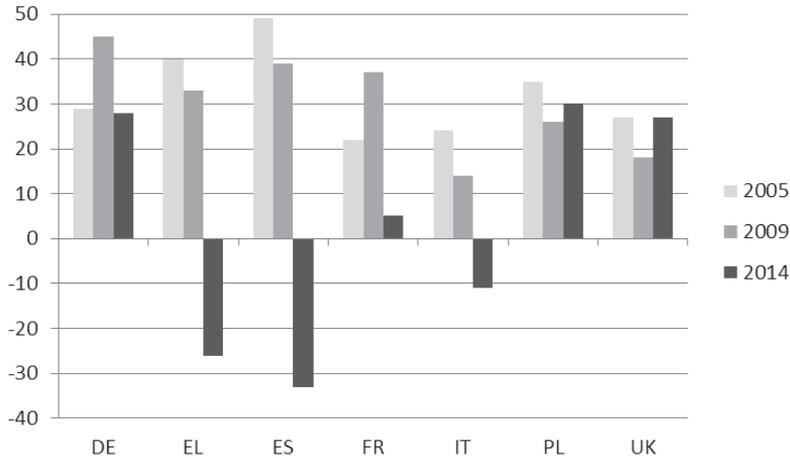


Source: Eurobarometer 64, 68 and 74.

Three caveats are, however, in order. First, there is a general increasing distrust in most national institutions. For example, in the autumn 2010 Eurobarometer, net trust in unions across the EU 27 was -11. Net trust in political parties was -65, and in national government it was -39. The national parliament had a net trust rating of -31, big business one of -29 and religious institutions were at -10. Second, the meaning of the Eurobarometer survey results may be questioned. As Figure 2 indicates, a different pattern emerges when respondents are asked whether the concept of a trade union brings to mind something positive or negative: in most countries the responses are positive, though indeed the crisis countries stand out as more negative. Third, it is unclear why respondents distrust trade unions: is it because their militancy is blamed for the crisis, or because they are regarded as not militant enough in defending the victims of the crisis? In some of the worst affected countries, the latter may be a plausible explanation.

Those worst affected by the crisis – in particular young people, those with precarious contracts, women, immigrants – are least likely to be unionised. However, in many countries trade unions have made serious

Figure 2 Net positive connotation of 'trade union' (positive - negative)



Source: Eurobarometer 67, 72 and 82.

efforts in recent years to recruit such groups and to represent their interests (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013; Pedersini 2010). To give just one example: at the 2011 congress of the German metalworkers' union *IG Metall*, its president, Berthold Huber, made youth policies the first item in his address, declaring that '*IG Metall* with over 200,000 young members is the biggest youth organization in Germany'. Temporary agency work, which has grown very rapidly among new workers in German metal-working, has been a major union theme since 2008, with a campaign for equal pay and for transition to permanent employment. Another initiative launched in 2009 in response to the declining opportunities for apprentices to secure permanent jobs at the end of their training, was *Operation Übernahme*. Young members themselves devised the campaign themes, materials and actions for *Operation Übernahme*. The demand for them to be 'taken on' into permanent employment was a key issue in the 2012 bargaining round, and it achieved at least partial success. As a result of these initiatives, young workers' membership in Germany seems to have stabilized or even increased (Dobbert 2010).

Despite a widespread assumption that young people see trade unions as conservative, boring and old-fashioned, and prefer the greater

spontaneity and openness of other forms of social action, hard evidence for this assumption is limited. Recent Eurobarometer data displayed suggest that while young people (age 15-24) are considerably more likely than others to consider demonstrations an effective means of making their views felt, they are also more likely to consider strikes effective; they are less likely to think that voting makes a difference, but no less likely to think it useful to join a political party; they are somewhat more likely to consider joining a non-governmental organisation (NGO) an effective step, while roughly average in thinking the same of joining a union. Of course, there is a gap between attitudes and actions. But this Eurobarometer result points to an openness in perspectives and also implies that there is no clear dichotomy between being pro-union and pro-NGO. Indeed a key question is how far trade unionism and new social movements may interact.

3. New social movements, new social protests?

3.1 Trade unions versus social movements?

It is common to contrast trade unions with their elaborate formal decision-making structures, and more spontaneous, often activist-led social movements and NGOs. As I discussed in the previous section, such a dichotomy is questionable. Almost universally, unions emerged as social movements that challenged key principles of the prevailing social and economic order. With time, however, unions became increasingly dependent for their survival on institutionalised internal routines and formalised external relationships with employers and governments. As Gramsci noted (1977), negotiation with external interlocutors could yield an ‘industrial legality’ which could bring organisational (and material) advantages, yet could also weaken the organic, ideational resonance with those whose aspirations unions sought to voice. Trade unions are themselves – or at least should be – ‘non-governmental’ organisations; there is a considerable literature which insists, as did Herberg (1943: 406) long ago, that any trade union is *at one and the same time* ‘a business-like service organization, operating a variety of agencies under a complicated system of industrial relations’ and ‘an expression and vehicle of the historical movement of the submerged laboring masses for social recognition and democratic

self-determination... The union, as an institution, is thus in the grip of a very real contradiction'. The task of sustaining collective commitment and organisational effectiveness – within the limits imposed by a hostile environment – required a delicate alternation between encouraging militancy and containing it. Much recent debate on the prospects and character of 'social movement unionism' is precisely an effort to identify a progressive reconciliation of this contradiction.

One should also note that an analogous tension applies to all NGOs. McIlroy (2000: 3) highlights a distinction in the literature 'between insider and outsider groups. Insider groups are accepted as legitimate by government and regularly consulted over policy... Insiders feel pressure to distance themselves from direct action and may become prisoner groups, dependent upon government. Outsider groups, in contrast, have no wish to become involved in routine relations or are unable to achieve recognition by government. They may lack the skills and resources to take the inside track or eschew it because of radical ideology and objectives. Outsider groups rely on mass protest and strikes or civil disobedience'. Trade unions in many countries shifted from primarily outsider status to an insider role in the twentieth century (though this became jeopardised under neoliberalism), but many other NGOs (for example, in the field of social policy, women's rights or the environment) have followed a similar trajectory. At the European level, a domestication of contention was extended beyond trade unions to other representatives of 'civil society' through the 'civil dialogue' launched in 1994: a project to gain the EU some of the legitimacy of popular social movements drawn into 'partnership', while also diminishing the latter's spontaneity and accentuating their bureaucratic aspects. Just as in trade unions, insider status has provoked internal conflict, with battles (as among the German Greens in the 1980s) between 'fundamentalists' and 'realists'.

A notable feature of the crisis has been the emergence of a range of new 'outsider' movements, particularly in the worst affected countries, generating a form of 'subterranean politics' (Pianta and Gerbaudo 2014). The actions have tended to display a high participation of young people, often with a focus on the predicament of the 'precarious generation' most affected by the crisis.

3.2 Spain

Certainly the best known example is constituted by the Spanish *Indignados* or *Movimiento 15-M*, which developed from demonstrations on 15 May 2011, organised largely through social media. The *Indignados* have been described as ‘a movement with two souls’ (Taibo 2013): one soul comprising activists with a background in the alter-globalisation campaigns (as in many other European countries, supporters of *ATTAC* were prominent in the protests) or in demonstrations against the Iraq war (of which the right-wing Spanish government was a strong supporter); the other soul comprising young people, mainly highly educated and with little or no background in political activism, whose hopes of a comfortable career have been dashed.

A particularly important issue in Spain (though also evident elsewhere) has been the impact of the crisis on families previously encouraged to take out mortgages to buy their homes but no longer able to sustain repayments on properties the value of which had collapsed. The *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (Platform of Mortgage Victims, PAH), created in 2009 in Barcelona, soon became a nation-wide movement, in particular organising occupations of vacant properties for those made homeless by the banks (García Lamarca 2014). Another development which overlapped with the *M-15* movement was the formation of different coloured ‘tides’ of public employees and users of their services, such as the *Marea Blanca* in the health sector and the *Marea Verde* in education: the colours worn in mass on demonstrations against cuts and privatisation.

Spanish trade unionism is numerically weak by west European standards (density around 15%) but the two main confederations, *Comisiones Obreras* (CC.OO) and *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT), became entrenched in public policy-making after the fall of the dictatorship in the 1970s. For many *Indignados*, they were as much part of the problem as were the mainstream political parties, at best negotiating the terms of austerity rather than leading forceful opposition. ‘The politicians rob us, the unions sell us, the employers enslave us, the banks swindle us and the press lies to us’ ran one slogan. Yet ‘the divide between the world of trade union activists and that of the *Indignados* was less clear-cut than claimed by some’ (Bérout 2014: 29), and by 2012 there were signs of a growing rapprochement. Key sections

of *M-15* decided to support the general strikes called by the main confederations in that year, while the confederations for their part began to play an important role in the *Mareas*. The *Indignados*, in turn, helped enlarge the repertoire of trade union action, calling for 'inclusive' strikes in which the unemployed, students, precarious workers and other citizens could participate (Cerrillo Vidal 2013: 43).

3.3 Portugal

In Portugal, as in Spain, 'trade unions have been involved in organizing mass protest action, although their capacity for mobilization was surpassed on various occasions by more spontaneous demonstrations of protest' (Rocha and Stoleroff 2014: 152). In particular, the two main confederations CGTP (*Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses*) and UGT (*União Geral de Trabalhadores*), unlike their Spanish counterparts, have been fundamentally divided. While the former has maintained 'all-out opposition' to the Memorandum of understanding (MoU), the latter 'has been more cautious' and was willing to negotiate the terms of austerity (Rocha and Stoleroff 2014: 172).

Union division increased the space for other vectors of resistance. Though unemployment has been less severe than in Spain, over half of young Portuguese workers had temporary contracts even before the crisis. In 2007 the movement *Precários Inflexíveis* (PI, Precarious but Inflexible) emerged as a virtual association of unemployed and precarious workers. Several hundred protestors took over the streets of Lisbon and other cities on 12 March 2011. This was one of the biggest demonstrations since the Portuguese revolution of 1974 (Estanque *et al.* 2013). The initiative helped inspire the May protests in Spain, which were in turn followed by the occupation of the *Praça do Rossio* in Lisbon in May, in part in solidarity with the Spanish *Indignados* (Baumgarten 2013). Created in June 2012 (with a strong involvement of activists from the CGTP and the *Partido Comunista Português*), the movement *Que se lixe a troika! Queremos as nossas vidas!* (Fuck the Troika, We Want Our Lives Back) has since played a major role in challenging externally imposed austerity, often coordinating protest demonstrations with the CGTP (Campos Lima and Martin Artiles 2014).

Although most initial protests occurred independently of the trade unions, as in Spain, there has been some subsequent convergence. PI cooperated with the CGTP in anti-government protests in October 2012, and helped mobilise the general strike in the following month. In its Manifesto, PI insists that trade unions remain the most representative associations of workers, but adds that the world of work has changed and that trade union structures must change to accommodate temporary workers, those forced into dependent self-employment and the unemployed. 'Insisting on an antagonism between those who, for various reasons, are remote from experience of organisation and the world of trade unionism helps nobody and weakens the working class as a whole'. And indeed, Accornero and Ramos Pinto (2015: 501) conclude from their study of protest events that 'labour has remained throughout the most significant protest actor'.

3.4 Greece

In Greece, resistance to Troika-imposed austerity was strongly influenced by the Spanish example, with *Amesi Dimokratia Tora!* (Direct Democracy Now!), formed in May 2011, helping initiate a mass occupation of *Plateia Syntagma* (Constitution Square, in front of the parliament) as a forum for direct discussion and debate. The label *Aganaktismenoi* was soon applied as a direct equivalent of *Indignados*. As in Portugal and Spain, Greek trade unions are weak in terms of membership, particularly in the private sector. Traditionally, they have had little financial need for members because of payments received from the welfare fund (*ergatikí estía*) to which all private sector workers are required to contribute.

As in Spain, those groups resisting austerity often dismissed the unions as components of the established institutional structure; but there also developed a certain rapprochement. Thus the unions 'were obliged...to invent new repertoires of collective action and to mobilise new power resources. Within this framework, more radical types of demand and new alliances have emerged' (Karakioulafis 2015).

One form of resistance, which has often involved coalitions of trade unions and other social actors, has been the mounting of legal challenges – in constitutional courts or supranational bodies – to

austerity measures. Kilpatrick and De Witte (2014: 5) suggest that ‘Greek unions and worker-pensioner associations have adopted the most active and multi-pronged approach to fundamental rights challenges’. This has included a complaint to the International Labour Organization (ILO) by the main union confederations, which resulted in an implicitly critical report (ETUI 2014: 65; ILO 2011). The Greek unions also submitted a successful complaint to the European Committee of Social Rights (an institution of the Council of Europe, a body completely separate from the EU), on the grounds that some of the legal changes were incompatible with its European Social Charter. Kilpatrick and De Witte (2014: 5) add that – in a broader European perspective – ‘the dominance of trade unions and associations of pensioners (former workers) in taking legal challenges has meant that work rights and occupational pensions have been central to many challenges whilst there are few traces of challenges to health and education cuts’. However, in Portugal and Spain, constitutional review mechanisms have been used in response to ‘cuts (or reduced coverage) of welfare benefits and health care services. Housing was a special focus of legal mobilisation in Spain.’ In Portugal in particular, legal challenges have successfully blocked a number of austerity measures (Rocha and Stoleroff 2014).

3.5 Italy and beyond

In Italy, almost 30% of workers aged 15-24 are unemployed and almost 40% of those in work are on temporary contracts. Perhaps for this reason, all three main confederations established special unions for precarious workers in the late 1990s (Burroni and Carrieri 2011; Leonardi 2001). Such initiatives were, however, double-edged: while offering a dedicated structure for mainly young workers with non-standard contracts, they risked segregating such workers from the unions’ ‘core’ membership (Murgia and Selmi 2012).

Some of the most prominent actions on behalf of these workers, however, have occurred outside the formal framework of trade unionism. The *San Precario* movement, named after the fictitious ‘patron saint’ of temporary workers, was created in 2004 to highlight the issue of labour market insecurity, in similar ways to PI in Portugal. But the methods were distinctive: mimicking Italian religiosity, activists

carried effigies of *San Precario* during their demonstrations, invented the prayer of *San Precario* and combined street theatre with political campaigning.

Italy has been an important locus of resistance to the EU privatisation agenda. A long process of creeping privatisation of municipal water supplies provoked a number of local initiatives, which led to the formation in Florence in 2003 of the *Forum Alternatif Mondial de l'Eau* (FAME, Alternative World Water Forum). The *Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua* (FIMA, Italian Forum of Water Movements) was established three years later as an unusually broad alliance of local groups, NGOs, trade unions and religious organisations. When the Berlusconi government in 2009 adopted a law requiring municipalities to put water provision out to private tender, the movement used its constitutional right to organise a referendum, calling for a campaign of 'civil obedience' to overturn the legislation. The result of the vote in June 2011 was a 95% majority against privatisation on a 57% turnout (Berlusconi had hoped that abstentions by his supporters would prevent the required 50% threshold being met). Displaying its contempt for democratic process, the European Central Bank (ECB) in its 'secret letter' two months later effectively called on Berlusconi to ignore the result, demanding 'the full liberalisation of local public services... through large-scale privatisation' as a condition of a rescue package, but with the change of government the plans were dropped after the constitutional court ruled against regulations designed to circumvent the popular vote.

The Italian achievement, it has been said – with only a degree of hyperbole – 'really shook the whole of Europe' (Fattori 2013a: 378). In 2012, the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) launched a campaign for a European Citizens' Initiative – a mechanism introduced in the Lisbon Treaty, which took effect in 2009 – on the right to water (Fattori 2013b). Right2Water, a broad coalition of unions and NGOs, was established to manage the campaign, and succeeded in obtaining almost double the number of one million citizens necessary for demands to be discussed by the European Parliament (EP). In part, this initiative can be seen as a part of a longer-term struggle to defend public services (Marcon and Zola 2007), from the mobilisations against the 'Bolkestein Directive' for the liberalisation of services in 2005-6 to the current fight against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment

Partnership (TTIP). But the principle of ‘water as a human right’ acquired particular sensitivity, and the Italian experience has been replicated elsewhere. The Troika bail-out packages included a requirement, in the case of Portugal, to privatise the state-owned water company, *Agua do Portugal*; and in Greece, to sell off a large number of public assets, including the water companies for Athens and Thessaloniki. In the first case, a major campaign, *Agua de todos* (water for all), gathered 40,000 signatures, and achieved a parliamentary debate in October 2014. In Thessaloniki, a referendum was organised despite government attempts to block it. EPSU took a lead in coordinating financial support and volunteers to help as international observers. The referendum took place in May 2014, at the same time as local elections, and achieved a 97% vote against privatisation.

In France, as in the other countries discussed, labour market insecurity is a particular problem for young workers, with 23% unemployed in 2011 and 55% of those employed having temporary contracts. The term *Génération précaire* (‘precarious generation’) was coined by a young, minority ethnic worker in the fast-food sector in a book describing his efforts to build collective action and organisation among fellow workers (Mabrouki 2004).

Somewhat ironically, however, the label was adopted in the following year by graduates and university students protesting against the abuse of internships, often paid at a fraction of the minimum wage or else unpaid. ‘We have work but not employment’, they declared, and attempted to organise strike action by interns and demanded legislative reforms with some success.

In most countries, labour market insecurity does not create a homogeneous ‘precariat’ (Standing 2011) or a simple polarisation between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, but affects in different ways social groups with contrasting capacities for collective mobilisation. In France, there is a history of institutionalised student organisation and often ritualised protest, analogous to the impressive demonstrative actions of the numerically weak trade unions and at times undertaken jointly. If the tactics have sometimes been innovative, most of the time the protests of the highly educated but precariously employed have addressed familiar interlocutors through traditional channels. In some ways, suggest Bérout and Yon (2012: 175), the closest French equivalent to the outrage of the

Indignados has been the violent rioting in the impoverished *banlieues*, 'where the protests unfold outside the customary frameworks of collective action'.

3.6 Social protest in comparative perspective

Social protests have of course been a global phenomenon. Ortiz *et al.* (2013) document 843 events between 2006 and mid-2013, showing an upward trajectory. They also find a disproportionate prevalence of social protests in 'high-income countries'. Their data indicate that among these countries, the protests are dominated by Europe, with the majority of the largest taking place in France, Italy, Portugal and Spain (Ortiz *et al.* 2013: 34). Understandably, protest has been greatest in countries particularly affected by austerity. One notable early example was Iceland, which is not a member of the EU but was the first European casualty of the global financial crisis. The collapse in 2008 of the three main private – and deregulated – banks led to a devaluation of the *króna* by some 50% against the euro. Mass protests, with demonstrators banging pots and pans outside parliament, led to the resignation of the government. A grassroots movement emerged, known as *Maurabúfan* (the anthill), which convened an assembly of citizens to draft a new constitution (Castells 2012: 31-43). A subsequent grassroots campaign also ensured that in two referendums, in 2010 and 2011, voters rejected proposals to repay British and Dutch banks which had lost reserves invested at unrealistic interest rates in Iceland.

Ortiz *et al.* attempt to classify the reasons for protest. In the high-income countries, five broad but related issues predominate: inequality and the demand for fiscal justice; cuts in public services and pensions, and privatisation; corporate power and deregulation; the power of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), including the ECB; and the absence of 'real democracy'. Protests are most often directed against governments, but also against the IFIs, the EU, corporations and employers and the politico-economic system as a whole. Though trade unions, NGOs, political parties and established community groups are prominent in many of the protests, so are 'new agents for change', and 'mass middle-class involvement' which 'indicates a new dynamic' (Ortiz *et al.* 2013: 31). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume a simple dichotomy between 'old' and 'new' agents of protest: 'at least in part, the

agenda and the objectives of the newly emerged social movements and the trade unions coincide' (Campos Lima and Martin Artiles 2014: 142).

3.7 Social movements: six variations on a theme

From a cross-national comparative perspective, six key features of social movements can be addressed. The first is the complex interconnection between national and supranational dynamics. On the one hand, there has been a rapid process of mutual learning across frontiers. The 'Arab Spring' provided an inspiration for many of the mass protests from 2011 onwards. 'Occupy Wall Street' informed the Blockupy protests against the ECB in Frankfurt and the actions of UK Uncut in London. The *Indignados* were emulated across southern Europe. There was 'a kind of contagion effect, suggesting the presence of learning processes and the modular character of the mobilization' (Fonseca 2014: 47). Yet 'on the other hand, institutional differences, different traditions of political and social participation and the degree of trust in the political institutions help explain some of the marked differences of the protests in European countries, in particular as to their relationship to conventional channels such as political parties and trade unions' (Campos Lima and Martin Artiles 2014: 145). The national prevalence of most protest activity has meant that there has been only limited coordination at the EU level, where the key decisions underlying austerity are taken (Pianta and Gerbaudo 2014). But there are exceptions: notably, the campaigns against water privatisation mentioned above.

A second key theme is the central role of social media in the 'new' forms of protest and resistance (Estanque and Fonseca 2014; Loader *et al.* 2014). Social media provides a channel for discussing grievances, formulating demands and coordinating action, and for disseminating the initiatives – and any incidents of repression by the authorities – to a mass public. For some, such as Castells (2012) or Mason (2012), this new means of communication – taken for granted by the generation which is worst affected by austerity – permits autonomy rather than authority and explosive spontaneity rather than the routines of traditional organised negotiation with governments and employers. However, Gerbaudo cautions against uncritical 'techno-optimism'. Social media channels are fragmented and individualised, and do not

automatically generate collective identities and collective action. What is necessary, argues Gerbaudo (2012: 12), is a 'choreography of assembly' which functions in 'directing people towards specific protest events, in providing participants with suggestions and instructions about how to act, and in the construction of an emotional narration to sustain their coming together in a public space'. Such choreography is typically undertaken by an often invisible and perhaps reluctant core of activists who provide a form of 'soft' leadership.

The third key feature of social movements is that the 'choreography of assembly' involves reclaiming public spaces as arenas for discussion and debate as well as demonstration. Drawing from the Egyptian example of Tahrir in January 2011, the 'movements of the squares' in southern Europe claimed a space for new forms of participative democracy (Gerbaudo 2014). While the first actions were directed against governments (national but also supranational), it was a logical step to target the financial institutions which both initiated the crisis and drove the austere response. Occupy Wall Street in September 2011 achieved echoes not only across North America but also in Europe, with the first Blockupy protest in Frankfurt in May 2012. In London, an occupation began in October 2011 outside St Paul's Cathedral, the nearest location to the Stock Exchange that protestors could use.

A fourth, but related, aspect of the protests is the 'defence of the commons'. As outlined above, this has involved, most obviously, resistance to privatisation, particularly when imposed by the Troika. But there is also a less defensive dimension, as proposed in the series of World and European Social Forums since 2001, to 'reinvent the world'. The link between the quality of work, the quality of living and the environment is made explicit: neoliberal global capital destroys nature as it destroys workers. Some protests have demanded what Fattori (2013a: 385) calls 'commonification: the introduction of elements of self-government of the good by the citizens'. This accords with the spirit of many of the 'new' forms of protest: it seeks to assert elements of participative democracy which in some ways are novel but in others can be traced back to ancient traditions.

Fifth, the notion of 'commonification' links in some respects to the idea of a 'social and solidarity economy'. This concept is sometimes used primarily to encompass producer and consumer cooperatives, which

have a very long history (ILO 2010). But the newer understanding of *économie solidaire* or *economia solidária* points to a more specifically political strategy to resist neoliberal globalisation (Draperi 2007; Laville 2007).

The crisis and austerity have generated a range of grassroots initiatives in response to the dual effects of the loss of jobs and income, and cutbacks in public services. This has been evident, for example, in Spain and Greece. Sotiropoulos and Bourikos (2014) describe a rich variety of ‘exchange and distribution networks’ involving not only ‘social groceries’ but also networks of non-monetary distribution and exchange and informal healthcare networks providing ‘make-shift clinics’ and a range of other social services. Most notably, the Syriza party took a strategic decision to focus on developing such networks. Its leader, Alexis Tsipras, declared (Dericquebourg 2013) that ‘in these times of crisis, resistance and solidarity are both necessary, but solidarity is more important’, and the party directed its efforts to the collective provision of food, medicine and housing. Syriza created an initiative entitled Solidarity4all (2013), which was in part an appeal for international support but also explained in detail how the party was helping build self-organised collectives covering pharmacies, social kitchens, social groceries, evening classes, cultural clubs and legal support teams.

A sixth feature common to all the movements is the need to build cohesion out of diversity. Mason (2012: 66-79) identifies the social roots of the revolts as ‘the graduate with no future’ and ‘the Jacobin with a laptop’. Yet as already noted, the constituencies of deprivation and anger are more heterogeneous. They include the young, unskilled and poorly educated whose protests in some countries have been particularly violent but with no clear political focus. Also important are older workers who are victims of workplace closures or public sector job cuts, and who in most countries no longer have trade union representation (Faniel 2012). As Andritsos and Velegrakis argue (2014: 1), in Greece, the ‘struggles have their origins in different social strata, geographical scales, political views and perspectives’.

3.8 Making sense of diversity

The diversity reflected in these six key features results in obvious problems of aggregation of interests and objectives. In this context, Gerbaudo (2014: 2) argues that a distinctive feature of recent mass protests has been the effort to reclaim ‘the ancient belief that there is such a thing as “the people”, and that this collective actor is the ultimate source of sovereignty and legitimate power’. The slogan ‘we are the 99%’ coined by the Occupy movement similarly expresses a thesis that might be termed progressive populism. Yet clearly the oppositions underlying crisis and austerity are more complex than 99% versus 1%. A substantial proportion of the population, even in the worst affected countries, see themselves as at least partial beneficiaries of the existing system, whatever its irrationalities and degradations. At least they believe that they have more to lose than to gain in contesting it. At best, the notion of the 99% can be considered a myth which inspires self-confidence and solidarity and so might eventually make the slogan self-fulfilling. Yet the downside, as Juris *et al.* point out (2012: 436), is that ‘the Occupy movements with their majoritarian populist impulse and organizational logic of massing large numbers of individuals in concrete physical spaces have had difficulty recognizing and addressing internal specificity and difference’. Hence, the divisions and potential conflicts of interest according to class, gender and ethnicity can easily be disregarded, whereas a genuinely popular movement needs to admit and negotiate these. I return to this issue in the conclusions.

The ultimate question is this: can mass protest overcome austeritarianism? Waves of protest fade, either because of repression by the authorities or protest fatigue among the participants, or both. Accornero and Ramos Pinto (2015: 508-509) emphasise the potential of the developing cooperation between ‘old old’ and ‘new new’ movements of resistance. ‘Time will tell, but we would emphasise two aspects: it is evident that neither the massive demonstrations, nor the multiplication of the general strikes, nor the months-long strike of the dockworkers seem to have had much effect in reversing the application of austerity measures. The weapons of anti-austerity mobilisation are, at first sight, blunt. Yet intriguing synergies have emerged from the participation of these two types of actor in anti-austerity protests.’ From a broader perspective, Ortiz *et al.* (2013: 36-37) conclude that some two-thirds of the protests

examined ‘achieved neither their intended demands (when demands are stated) nor results toward alleviating the expressed grievances’.

Yet this implies that the other one-third do achieve some success; as Bailey (2014: 8) suggests, ‘the less malleable and containable nature of innovative, elite-challenging forms of contention – provided they are carried out by a sufficiently large number of participants to avoid straightforward repression – are more likely to prompt concessions from policy makers seeking to maintain or bolster their own governing capacity.’ Moreover, Ortiz *et al.* add that ‘many of the protests are engaged with long-term structural issues that may yield results in time, while incremental, short-term or symbolic achievements may prove to be precursors to a comprehensive shift in power structures’. Indeed, the aim of many of the mobilisations has been to shift the political agenda by redefining the discourse of crisis to demonstrate that there is indeed an alternative to austeritarianism.

Conclusion: the variable geometry of resistance

A number of conclusions stem from the discussion that has preceded. First, to return to a previous point, the focus of resistance to austeritarianism must be international, even though it occurs in nationally specific contexts. This is one of the central arguments developed in recent decades by the alter-globalisation movements. Trade unions have their own, more institutionalised international structures, but internationalism is less embedded in everyday trade union action. Generalising international solidarities – I use the plural deliberately – has to be a priority. And internationalism means little if it is purely a concern of ‘international experts’; it must be built into the routine discourse and practice of labour movements.

Second, building solidarity is also a challenging task *within* countries. As already argued, different social and economic groups have been affected in significantly different ways by crisis and austerity. An understanding of a common fate and common interests, is not objectively given but is an objective requiring a difficult struggle. Unity cannot be built by a linguistic sleight-of-hand – ‘the people united’ – but requires sustained dialogue and debate. Otherwise, the interests of the weakest are easily submerged beneath a spurious conception of

commonality. The same is true in the case of attempts to build coalitions between trade unions and other NGOs, for example, in order to mobilise and organise precarious workers, or to build effective political campaigns. In many countries one can identify a trajectory in trade union relations with social movement NGOs: first, unions tended to dismiss them as unrepresentative challengers to their own status as encompassing workers' organisations; then, they often adopted an instrumental approach, turning to NGOs when they needed allies; finally, in at least some countries, accepting that real coalition-building must involve mutual respect and a willingness to enable NGO partners to help shape the agenda in the light of their own priorities (Frege *et al.* 2004; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013).

Third, it follows that the construction of solidarities at both national and international levels involves vital cognitive and discursive elements. In this context, della Porta (2012: 276) notes that 'the proposals and practices of the *Indignados* and occupying movement – as well as those spread in and by the Arab Spring – resonate in fact with (more traditional) participatory visions, but also with new deliberative conceptions that underline the importance of creating multiple public spaces, egalitarian but plural'. For Melucci (1989), the creation of a collective identity is a process of negotiation over time which contains three aspects: shaping a cognitive framework within which the environment is understood and goals and tactics are formulated; fostering social relationships among participants; and stimulating an emotional dynamic among those involved. Such processes are somewhat alien to most trade unions (or have been lost over time), but have been vital for many of the 'new' social movements.

Fourth, it is necessary to address the systemic nature of the crisis, but in comprehensible terms. A century ago, Rosa Luxemburg wrote that 'bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism'. The lineaments of the second alternative – economic subjugation, political oppression, environmental devastation, military aggression – are even starker today than when she wrote. Movements of resistance must embrace the principle that 'capitalism is the reality, but not our perspective' (Urban 2014: 41). To be effective, different modes of resistance must be mutually supportive, and informed by a vision of an alternative. The challenge, as always for those pursuing a different socio-economic order, is to formulate

alternatives which are concrete, comprehensible and attractive. Iglesias of *Podemos* said recently: ‘this is what the enemy expects of us, that we use words that nobody can understand, that we remain a minority in the shelter of our traditional symbols. This way we would pose no threat’ (Lambert 2015). The issue is partly one of language, which should simplify without trivialising; but it is also to provide concrete examples of economic solidarity outside the market. Some of these examples were discussed above.

Finally, today’s barbarians rely on the demoralisation of their victims. Resistance may well draw its inspiration from anger, but to be translated into constructive action it requires self-confidence in the capacity to initiate change. ‘To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing’, wrote Raymond Williams (1989: 118). ‘Hope is coming!’ was Syriza’s election slogan. In dark times, to build hope is perhaps the most difficult challenge, and not only because hopes can so easily be disappointed. But fatalism and surrender should not be the only options. Another world – and another Europe – is possible.

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