Enraged About Corporate Greed? Kidnap Your Boss

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[Kidnapping or hanging -- decisions, decisions!]

> In answer to their own economic crisis, the French have taken up "bossnapping."
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> Here's how it works: An executive of a company, perhaps the CEO, stands before a group of his employees, puts his hands together, sighs, and then, with regret as smooth as brie, explains the fact that downsizing is needed to meet the exigencies of economic crisis (read: the preservation of profits in downturn).

The employees get pissed off -- and bum-rush the boss. They trap him in his office, barricade the door, feed him espresso and baguette, and demand a fair deal.It's a sort of soft-touch storming of the Bastille.

And lo, it works. A few weeks back, this happened at the FM Logistics Co. in Woippy, France, as 125 workers charged into a meeting of five company managers and held the poor creatures hostage for a day. At least 475 workers at FM Logistics, which is owned by Hewlett-Packard Co., were facing the specter of "redundancy" as HP sought to move its printer packaging operations to the cheaper labor pool in Malaysia.

By midnight, the company had turned tail, promising "new proposals on redundancy talks," according to Reuters. The news service quoted one of the bossnappers: "We've had enough. We have been negotiating for a year, if you can call it negotiating, and we haven't managed to make ourselves heard."

-- At 3M's pharmaceutical factory in Pithiviers, 50 miles from Paris, workers exploded upon hearing that 110 of them were to lose jobs. They surrounded the manager and forced him into his office, where he was held hostage for 24 hours until 3M agreed to resume negotiations.

-- The president of Sony France in March was locked in his office by employees who barricaded the doors and windows with tree trunks.

-- Angry factory workers at the Caterpillar plant in Grenoble took four managers hostage on April Fool's Day.

In the last month across France, at least a dozen such incidents have been reported, with no less than five CEOs of major corporations held in what the French are calling, with typical delicate aplomb, "sequestration." In each case, the sequestered bosses have been well-fed and well-treated -- though sometimes, alas, forced to sleep on the floor.

I called my family in France -- my ex lives in Paris with our daughter -- to get the home-fire take on these outrages.

"Most people are for it," my ex told me. "Because of les inegalites" -- the inequalities of the rich doing well as the rest of the country immolates.

I e-mailed her sister-in-law, a schoolteacher, who wrote back, "These bossnappings seem to be peaceful most of the time, and I'm not so shocked. Workers are totally desperate, and I don't blame them for wanting to be heard, as long as no one is hurt." (She also noted that she personally knows a company boss in the south of France who has taken to keeping a bedroll and extra food in his office, just in case.)

A poll this month found that 45 percent of French agree with the practice of bossnapping, while only 7 percent condemned it. A second poll found that 55 percent of French believe that "radical protest" under the current circumstances was justified, while 64 percent said that bossnapping should be depenalized. And perhaps most compelling is that authorities are listening: In most cases, they are declining to prosecute the bossnappers.

It's lovely to behold all this, and even lovelier to think my daughter is growing up weaned on the grand French tradition of raising hell. The habit goes back to the revolution -- its call signs, Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite -- to the Paris commune, the resistance, the Soisante-Huitards toppling the republic.

This is a country where, two weeks ago, fishermen at the ports of Calais, Boulogne and Dunkirk amassed a flotilla of 500 boats to blockade shipping in the major northern ports (their ire directed at European Union fishing quotas issued from on high for the benefit of corporate interests backed by the EU).The government answered the blockade by handing the fishing industry $66 million in loans to ride out hard times.

In January, over a million citizens on strike took to the streets in protest of government stimulus policies that appear to favor big business and special interests over average Frenchmen (sound familiar?). The country almost literally came to a halt: Flights canceled, the Paris metro paralyzed, commuter transit dead on the rails, schools and courts and post offices shut down.

When French President Nicolas Sarkozy recently visited the small town of Chatellerault, he was met not by the typically American crowd of corralled sheep but by thousands of protesters who pelted with eggs his cordon of teargas-firing police.

There is a reason the French enjoy the best health system in the world (according to the World Health Organization), some of the best unemployment benefits, a free education system and some of the shortest work weeks and most productive worker-per-hour output among developed countries.

They make noise, they marshal in the streets, they bossnap, sometimes they set things on fire, barricade roads, demolish infrastructure (as in the recent rash of railway sabotage in France).

Sheldon Wolin, a professor emeritus of politics at Princeton University, celebrates this kind of behavior among citizens as "the disorderliness that has always been the hallmark of a vibrant democracy" -- and in talking about "democracy," lame old word that it's become, he is cleaving to its earliest meaning in politics: rule and resistance by that dangerously unwashed thing the Greeks called the demos, the people themselves.

In his troubling book, Democracy Incorporated, published last year, Wolin, who was a bomber pilot during World War II, laments that disorderliness in the U.S. has been on the wane since the 1960s, helped along by the widening reach of an anti-democratic corporate-state apparatus -- "highly managed, money-saturated elections, the lobby-infested Congress, the imperial presidency, the class-biased judicial and penal system, [and not least], the media" -- that encourages docility, depoliticization, the shrugging-off of participation.

"One of the reasons why the '60s continues to be a favorite punching bag of neocons and neoliberals," he writes in Democracy Incorporated, "is that it represented a decade of prolonged popular political education unique in recent American history. The most frequent topics were racism, foreign policy, corporate power, higher education and threats to ecology -- each in one form or another a domain of elitism."

What Wolin is saying is perhaps a hard dose of the obvious: When Americans protest -- and they're not protesting very much (on the eve of the Iraq war, the French had more people in the streets than did the whole of the citizenry of the United States) -- the system today isn't geared to listen, or, rather, is geared more handily to ignore the noise.

The goal, of course, is "to isolate democratic resistance, to insulate society from hearing dissonant voices, and to hurry the process of depoliticization," says Wolin.

Americans, it appears, are good at depoliticization, certainly no good at bossnapping.

http://www.alternet.org/story/139052/
