

A REVIEW OF MALTESE TRADE UNIONISM

Analysis based on the annual reports of the registrar of Trade Unions

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INTRODUCTION

Trade unions in Malta have been in existence for over a century in some form or other. However, for many decades after the first attempt to establish a fitters' union at the Dockyard in 1884, trade unions made little headway. The general social climate of the day was still strongly anti-combinationist, viewing trade unions and other forms of worker organization as outrightly hostile and subversive activities, sabotaging the freedom of the free market mechanism. The non-existence of any institutional machinery for employer-worker negotiation made local unionism ineffective anyway¹.

This condition changed dramatically after 1945. A spate of supportive legislation was ushered in, no doubt partly fomented by the labour front established by the Malta Labour Party (MLP) and the newly established General Workers' Union (GWU), then enjoying a period of astronomical growth. The Trade Unions and Trade Disputes Ordinance (No 4 of 1945), in particular, gave trade unions a legitimate operative function in the rapidly industrializing society which was Malta at the time. Trade Unions in conformity with this new legislation were registered with the Registrar of Trade Unions who published their names and membership totals on an annual basis. Such registration was carried out by identifying "unions" as belonging to one of three possible, distinct categories: Combinations of workers; combinations of employers; mixed combinations of employers and workers. It was not until the Industrial Relations Act (IRA) of 1976 that this categorization was revised, introducing the concept of employers' associations (organizations consisting wholly or mainly of employers) distinct from trade unions proper. The Act made also clear the primary purpose for the existence of such bodies: the regulation of relations between them. The intermediate category (combinations of employers and workers) was written off, with the constituent associations being transferred to either trade union or employer association status. Other bodies whose *raison d'être* was not the regulation of industrial relations were struck off the register².

The Registrar of Trade Unions (a post which has been invariably occupied by the Director of Labour) has been submitting without fail an annual report to the Minister responsible for Labour Affairs, who then passes it on for publication in the Government Gazette, as per Section 14 of the IRA. The report, which compiles the number of trade unions and respective membership figures as at the end of June each year, is published usually in the autumn months³. This article discusses trends in local trade unionism and associated issues on the basis of a critical approach to these published reports.

The Report by the Registrar of Trade Unions reveals 34 trade union organizations with 39,132 members on the register as at June 1976. This

changed to 24 unions with approximately 68,638 members as at June 1990. During this 14-year spell the dynamics of the size, catchment area and number of trade union organizations can be looked upon as revealing indicators of the economic and political restructuring taking place in Malta at the time.

A MODEL FOR TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP?

Contemporary studies which seek to establish an econometric model for the growth of trade union membership on the basis of international comparison generally agree that a high rate of change of prices and a correspondingly high rate of change of wages and salaries in conditions of labour shortage are the conditions which tend to foster rapid labour unionization, until a saturation among unionizable workers is reached⁴. All three conditions were present in Malta during the years 1976 – 1980.

Yet, the number of unionized workers in Malta did not show the increase suggested by this theoretical model. Indeed, the local union membership figures actually fell marginally. In contrast, the period 1981 – 1986 saw high levels of unemployment, and a period of prices and wages frozen by dictat intended to contain the effects of an international recession. Rather than a dwindling interest by workers in seeking affiliation in trade unions, the period registered a vigorous boost of union membership levels, when the domestic labour supply (the total number of Maltese working or officially seeking work) remained approximately the same or actually *fell* over the epoch.

How can one explain this mismatch between predicted and actual behaviour? One suggestion is that the decision to seek trade union membership or otherwise is basically a psychological and personal one which is not readily amenable to either generalisation or prediction. Some individuals may seek trade union membership for the very same reasons which induce others *not* to join (such as high unemployment, likelihood of redundancy, rampant inflation). While it is appreciated that ultimately, all decisions are personal choices, general *laws of tendency* concerning decisions resulting in social behaviour may be nevertheless postulated on the basis of sound systematic arguments and supported by empirical evidence. In this particular case, significant general tendencies have been observed among workers in the market economies of the United Kingdom, the United States, Sweden and Australia, suggesting that labour unionization is positively correlated to market conditions which increase the lobbying power of trade unions. Workers in these countries have joined unions when they understood that market signals are in their favour and therefore union membership and action will be a profitable investment, hopefully yielding improvement in wages and other working conditions. They have conversely shown disinterest in union membership when the market conditions spelt out a loss of union bargaining power.

Perhaps a second, better explanation would be that, given that Malta is a developing economy with a state dominant in labour affairs (as the major employer, legislator and determiner of industrial relations practices), it is far more realistic to explain worker affiliation in trade unions on the basis of contextual, political events, particularly government actions and organized labour reactions to these. Politics, may thus serve as a more powerful explanatory variable for unionization dynamics⁵.

Until the late 1970's, the large majority of Malta's unionized workers were engaged in the fortress economy, servicing the British naval, air and military presence on the island. Indeed, the drive behind the establishment of local trade unionism in the late 1880's and then again in the 1940's was precisely to offset the hardships of mainly manual, skilled and unskilled labour associated with the colonial administration as well as to stave off the threats of dismissal and redundancy. The latter blindly followed in the wake of colonial employment and labour policy revisions, often themselves influenced by the presence or likelihood of warfare in the Mediterranean basin. Other than teachers, it was only employees at the Dockyard (then run by the British Admiralty), and those in the employ of the U.K. Government who were unionized, the latter two groups being organized within the GWU. Thus when the services rundown took place, thousands of union members lost their jobs. The U.K. Government Section (GWU) – still strong with 3,953 members registered in June 1971 – was totally phased out by 1979. Of course, most of the workers made redundant from the wound up fortress economy found alternative local employment. Apparently, however, the urgency towards unionization was not so strongly felt. This would explain the moratorium on union membership registered over the epoch 1978 – 1980.

TABLE 1 TRADE UNION STATISTICS

Year	Trade Union Membership	Number of Unions	GWU (%)	CMTU (%)	Rest (%)
1975/6	39,132	34	69.8	20.8	9.4
1976/7	39,092	35	65.9	21.1	13.0
1977/8	38,915	37	66.2	21.4	12.5
1978/9	38,890	23	68.5	25.5	6.1
1979/80	39,238	19	68.7	26.4	4.8
1980/1	42,415	22	67.5	25.5	7.0
1981/2	49,912	20	65.8	30.2	4.0
1982/3	48,609	14	62.5	33.7	3.8
1983/4	46,434	13	60.6	37.2	2.2
1984/5	52,297	14	58.3	39.8	1.9
1985/6	53,008	16	58.7	40.0	1.4
1986/7	60,872	21	59.3	38.2	2.5
1987/8	63,413	21	57.3	40.2	2.5
1988/9	67,301	23	56.9	40.9	2.2
1989/90	68,368*	25	57.4	40.8	1.9

* Provisional figure likely to be revised upwards

Source: Report of the Registrar of Trade Unions, Dept. of Labour (various years)

With respect to surges in union membership figures, a cursory look at the published statistics (See Table 1) reveals four 'peaks' of association, and these are all discernible in the second epoch: 1981 – 1988.

LOCAL GENERAL ELECTIONS

Two of these peaks are directly coincident with local general elections. Given the intense mobilization of support carried out by political parties during election campaigns, it is to be expected that a partial repercussion of this campaign is an increased mobilization by trade union organizations for registering new members. And this is accompanied by a heightened interest among workers in registering their solidarity by associating themselves with a particular union. Of course, this is mixing politics with trade unionism. But neither of the main political parties in Malta has spared its efforts in advising workers in the choice of union affiliation. The GWU, already at its inception closely associated with the Malta Labour Party, cemented the labour front with a polemical statutory fusion in 1978. In the meantime, the Nationalist Party, then in opposition, has since advised workers to leave the union "which has lost its teeth" and to join the "free trade unions". The main and obvious beneficiary in this case being (since 1979) the only other general union in Malta, the Union Haddiema Maghqudin (UHM).

In the building up to the December 1981 and May 1987 elections, membership in Maltese trade unions rose by 10,674 (July 1980 – June 1982) and by 7,868 (July 1986 – June 1987). The membership increases in the General Workers' Union were 5,683 (1980 – 82) and 5,003 (1986 – 87) respectively. In both instances the major recruiting areas were the public and parastatal sectors. In spite of an expected saturation effect, these sectors had witnessed considerable new employment, particularly in the months prior to the 1987 elections. In this latter case the union membership increase was supplemented with the opening of a new market for trade union membership that of pensioners.

Although traditionally less trade union conscious, workers with mainly Nationalist sympathy are likely to have rallied to the ranks of the UHM. It is plausible to consider that this enthusiasm was a result of the perceived systematic encroachment by the MLP – GWU tandem in major areas of social, economic and political concern. The materialization of such a "Big Brother" corporate entity loomed even larger and truer to life following the Labour Government's tough reaction to a series of industrial actions organized by non-GWU unions in 1977. UHM membership doubled from 5,851 in July 1980 to 10,906 in June 1982, 75% of this increase being to the credit of private industry. A further increase of 2,002 was registered from July 1986 to June 1987. It is to be noted however that, in spite of lower saturation levels among such a group of workers, lower increases than those enjoyed by the GWU during the same period were registered.

SURGES IN INDUSTRIAL ACTION

The other two increases in trade union membership figures within the period under review are coincident with two "industrial actions" which are

particular because of their strong political overtones. The first was held on June 29th 1982, a traditional holiday among the Maltese – Imnarja – but which had been among the public holidays lost when the number had been cut down drastically by the Labour Government in the name of national productivity and industriousness. The Nationalist Party had directed workers not to report for work on that day in protest against the loss of traditional holidays but primarily in protest at the ‘perverse’ election result of 1981, when the NP found itself for a third term in opposition in spite of (this time) gaining a slim but absolute majority of votes. Workers joined either of the two general unions in those tense days perhaps as a concrete expression of solidarity, under pressure from more acutely mobilized workmates and/or friends, and also as “insurance” in case of possible reprisal action for participating in industrial action. The extent to which this particular event *per se* contributed to trade union membership increases cannot unfortunately be isolated because the statistics relating to this particular event also include membership increases reported just before and after the December 1981 general elections.

The second industrial action can be diagnosed more properly. In spite of occurring in the relatively calm inter-election period, trade union membership figures jumped a staggering 5,863 upwards in the twelve month period July 1984 – June 1985. The main explanatory condition in this case was the Church Schools – Labour Government dispute. It incorporated a seven week crippling lock-out cum strike by teachers (the longest ever by the local teaching profession) and a solidarity strike by the Confederation of Malta Trade Unions (CMTU) on October 10th 1984. Once again, the pressure was on for workers to take sides. Both the GWU and UHM registered increases of approximately 2,400 each. The Movement of United Teachers, already heavily saturated with 3,452 members, increased its membership nevertheless by 223.

An equally impressive increase among trade union membership has been reported by the Registrar of Trade Unions in his latest three annual reports covering the period July 87 – June 90. An overall increase of 7,766 is reported, with the GWU and the UHM again stealing the show with substantial membership increases each. This time, the increase can be credited to a cluster of diverse factors. The rallying of MLP sympathizers within the GWU can be seen as a defence mechanism to insure against the MLP defeat in the 1987 general elections and the alleged discriminatory measures against known MLP activists by the new superordinates. These also included a further 935 pensioners. Still others have joined unions grouped within the CMTU, possibly sensing that these would gain an upper hand in individual or collective negotiation outcomes, given that there was now a more sympathetic political party in power.

Such, however, may not explain the whole picture: It may be that various workers with Labour sympathies have joined nevertheless the UHM, for the same reason of riding the bandwagon as mentioned above. Possibly (but less likely) workers who voted Nationalist in 1987 may have joined the GWU arguing that this union, more than any other, is likely to fight tooth and nail

for improving conditions of work, now that the Nationalist Party is in power. Events since then have probably lent weight to such an argument.

Of course, such statements are not backed by hard and fast evidence. Unfortunately the subject matter is sensitive and highly confidential. Nationwide surveys on matters relating, directly or indirectly, to political party affairs have never been validly collected in Malta. Nevertheless, if one looks for corroborative evidence elsewhere, a similar switching of trade union affiliation according to the government of the day has been observed in other countries with a pluralist trade union structure such as India and Spain. It is also likely that the correlation between partisan sympathy and trade union association will improve once again as yet another general election campaign sets in.

THE UNIONIZABLE LABOUR FORCE

The analysis of changes in trade union membership levels must also take into consideration the size of the unionizable labour force. Trade unions are defined by law as associations consisting wholly or mainly of workers. This means that a union may register as members individuals who are not recognised as workers – in the sense of participating in productive remunerated employment – as long as these are not in a majority within the union. Such non-workers include pensioners, students, employers, housewives, the unemployed and others with informal or temporary work contracts – homeworkers, part-timers, student-workers, casual labourers.

Given that the primary objective of trade unions remains that of influencing the regulation of relations at the workplace, trade union bodies have been generally neither successful nor enthusiastic in recruiting non-working members into their fold. No doubt, this resistance is matched by equally diffident and disinterested citizens who, as non-workers, perceive few if any advantages to be gained from trade union affiliation. (Witness, for example, the fruitless attempts by the UHM at establishing a section for the unemployed in 1982–83). Nevertheless, the outcome of industrial relations spills over beyond the workplace and influences by and large all sections of the population as dependents on wage-earners, as consumers and/or as beneficiaries of a given social order or economic policy. There are therefore ample justifications for inviting non-workers within trade union ranks just as much as there are reasons for trade unions being concerned with issues wider than industrial relations proper – such as housing, health, education, development policy or inflation. The GWU has followed in the footsteps of other trade union bodies on the European continent by establishing a fully-fledged Pensioners' Section. In three years, this section can boast of 3,018 members.

The UHM, though tempted, has as yet not followed suit: one main reason being that such a move is likely to disrupt the healthy activities of the Pensioners' Association, a national organization. The Association of Pensioners of the Nationalist Party (APAN) is a second competitor. Both of these are not registered as trade unions.

THE SIZE OF THE GAINFULLY OCCUPIED POPULATION

A noteworthy variable in considering the size of the unionizable labour force is definitely the size of the gainfully occupied population. This is the section of the population which is likely to be on the forefront of union recruitment drives. It is also that section of the population most likely to seek and desire union affiliation, by virtue of its occupational status.

The corrected end-of-year official statistics indicate (see Table 3) that while employment rose steadily until 1980, the period 1980 – 83 is characterised by a shedding of over 8,000 workers (of which 5,000 from manufacturing industry) in response to an international contraction of trade. The trend resumed a comforting, upward character after 1984, matching and exceeding the record employment figures of 1979 – 80 by 1987. Given that the major contraction of Maltese wage employment in the last 14 years coincided with a surge in trade union membership (as discussed above), the composite effect has been a considerable increase in the unionization rate or, as it is alternatively referred to, the level of trade union density (measured as the percentage of the economically active population which is unionized). In spite of a contraction of the labour supply by 2,000 between 1980 – 82, trade union membership figures increased by 10,674. The resulting change in unionization rate is therefore from 32.5% (1980) to 42.0% (1982). Other rapid increases in union density are witnessable for 1984/85 and for 1986/87. Union density now stands at all time high of about 51%.

Such a trade union density figure compares very well with that achieved by other countries: (Refer to Table 2) Centrally planned economies now undergoing transition are excluded). Note that the reliability of statistics and the meaning of trade union membership is contextually variable:

TABLE 2 UNIONIZATION RATES IN SELECTED MARKET ECONOMIES

AUSTRIA, BELGIUM, DENMARK, NORWAY, SWEDEN	Over 50%
ALGERIA, GERMANY, ITALY, TANZANIA, UNITED KINGDOM	40 – 50%
ARGENTINA, BARBADOS, CHILE, ETHIOPIA, FIJI, GREECE, GUYANA, PORTUGAL, SINGAPORE, SRI LANKA, SWITZERLAND, VENEZUELA	30 – 40%
BAHAMAS, COLOMBIA, EGYPT, GABON, HONDURAS, JAMAICA, MEXICO, THE NETHERLANDS, TRINIDAD & TOBAGO	20 – 30%
BOTSWANA, BRAZIL, COSTA RICA, ECUADOR, FRANCE, KENYA, MALAYSIA, NIGERIA, PANAMA, PERU, PHILIPPINES, UNITED STATES, ZAMBIA	10 – 20%
BANGLADESH, BELIZE, EL SALVADOR, HAITI, INDIA, INDONESIA, NEPAL, PALESTINE, PAPUA NEW GUINEA, SENEGAL, SIERRA LEONE, THAILAND, TOGO.	less than 10%

Sources: *World Labour Report* (1985) I.L.O. Geneva. p. 11 *European Trade Union Institute*, Info Series, (various issues) Data relates to 1983 – 85

TABLE 2 LOCAL LABOUR MARKET STATISTICS

	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
1. Gainfully Occupied Population	108418	112315	114298	116741	116732	113061	108353	108512	109189	110623	115109	121921	124973	126564
2. Registered Unemployment	4831	5057	4196	3294	4039	5680	10356	10283	10448	9938	8499	5630	5153	4659
3. Labour Supply or EAP (GOP + U)	113249	117372	118494	120035	120771	118741	118709	118795	119637	120561	123608	127551	130126	131223
4. T.U. Membership	39132	39092	38915	38890	39238	42415	49912	48609	46434	52297	53008	60872	63413	66868
5. T.U. Density: % of (4 + 3)	34.6	33.3	32.8	32.4	32.5	35.7	42.0	40.9	38.8	43.4	42.9	47.7	48.7	51.0
6. Unionizable Labour Force**	103890	108580	110339	115520	118115	115595	115372	115371	116279	116198	118309	120400	123410	127800*
7. Corrected T.U. Density: % of (4 + 6)	37.7	36.0	35.3	33.7	33.2	36.7	43.4	42.1	39.9	45.0	44.8	50.6	51.4	52.3*

Sources: Report of Registrar of Trade Unions, Department of Labour (various years)
: Economic Survey, Office of the Prime Minister (various years)

* = estimate

** = The difference between Item 3 and Item 6 above is due to non-unionizable workers explained further below in the text. The numerical difference is worked out in Table 4 below.

UNIONIZATION AND INDUSTRIALIZATION

Clearly there is a link between the level of socio-economic development and the degree of trade union density. Industrializing economies which still have the bulk of their labour force engaged in agriculture and/or petty urban self-employment – areas traditionally immune to trade union infiltration – have low unionization rates, though these may be expected to peak-up in the medium term if and when industrialization strategies bring about increased job opportunities. On the other hand, de-industrializing economies such as the United States are switching primarily towards a tertiary, small scale, service orientation, which sector is again traditionally relatively disinterested in trade union affiliation. Obviously, nation specific factors (such as legislation, state labour policy, labour movement history and/or cultural traits) help to explain inter-country differences.

The high rate of unionization in the context of industry-rich economies (as is contemporary Malta) is not coincidental. International research has established that certain areas of employment are much more trade union prone than others. Specific power relations, operation in strategic areas, relative spatial concentration and isolation tend to foster high levels of work group consciousness and solidarity and, consequently, high levels of union affiliation. Occupational categories located in such an environment include miners, dockworkers, shipbuilders & repairers, drivers and railwaymen. These are traditionally and internationally the most militant workers and they exhibit the highest degree of unionization across national frontiers. Their counterparts in the Maltese scenario are the Drydocks and the Port Workers. Although the economic restructuring going on over the last decade has caused some decline in employment levels of such traditional union strongholds, state intervention has staved off further redundancies.

NON UNIONIZABLE WORKERS

Yet another item of consideration which must not be missed is that, while both workers and non-workers are generally eligible for trade union membership, some occupational groups are expressly barred from joining a trade union. The main reason for this is the application of military discipline. Thus in Malta, the Police, the Armed Forces and other labour corps established under such conditions – such as the Dejma Corps and the disbanded Pioneer Corps and Task Force – prohibit their members from joining trade unions, since such is deemed to interfere with the necessarily autocratic management of these organizations.

Thus, the unionizable labour force and the gainfully occupied population are not one and the same. Nor has the difference between them exhibited any constancy or regularity over the years. (See Table 4).

TABLE 4 NON-UNIONIZABLE WORKERS IN MALTA

	Dec 1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988
Police Civilian & Uniformed	1562	1454	1440	1687	1365	1262	1446	1451	1414	1420	1538	1726	1839
AFM Civilian & Uniformed	827	843	818	950	869	812	401	376	406	371	372	535	1199
Revenue Security Corps			13	45	44	42	42	41	42	42	175	204	197
Dejma						889	895	988	924	1831	2534	3739	3297
Task Force							416	427	438	518	497	767	-
Airport Company				125	139	141	137	141	134	181	183	180	184
Iżra u Rabbi	386	385	372	347	239	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Dirghajn il-Maltin	4250	4095	3861	954	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Malta Pioneer Corps	2334	2015	1651	407	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	9359	8792	8155	4515	2656	3146	3337	3424	3358	4363	5299	7151	6716

Sources: *Annual Abstract of Statistics (various years)*

The statistics indicate that, apart from 2,000 odd regular members in the Police Force and Armed Forces, workers in labour corps were gradually being phased out as new, regular employment options were becoming available in the period 1976 – 1981. Since then, however, the figures have shot up again, reflecting the excess labour supply of the epoch. (The data excludes the Auxiliary Workers & Training Scheme whose members could seek trade union affiliation). Subtracting such non-unionizable workers from the gainfully occupied population (refer again to Table 3) shows that the corrected unionization rate in Malta is even higher than it appears to be: Current corrected union density may thus be close to 53%.

DUAL UNION MEMBERSHIP

A final, critical consideration to be made with respect to trade union membership statistics is that these are disguising to an unknown degree an element of dual union membership. Thus, while the Registrar of Trade Unions reported 68,638 members on his register in June 1990, the actual number of workers who are members of a trade union is less than that figure. Dual union membership, particularly in the GWU and a CMTU affiliate, is a phenomenon which trade unions claim undermines their negotiating strength and bargaining platform. The phenomenon can lead to situations whereby more than one union enjoys an absolute majority of workers (50% + 1) as members in a particular workplace. This is also to the consternation of the respective management staff, who is thus faced with the prospect of unwarranted industrial action intended merely to secure or clarify a particular union's recognition as the sole bargaining agent. Industrial relations legislation has nothing to say about this phenomenon of dual allegiance. Probably, the condition barely existed at the time when the Industrial Relations Act (1976) was formulated and therefore did not warrant particular attention within that act. Yet no trade union body, other than the MUT, expressly bars its members from being members of any other trade union. Given the prevalent defensive orientation with which Maltese workers perceive trade union affiliation, dual union membership may be seen as analogous to opening savings accounts in two different banks, thus withdrawing rewards from either according to the exigencies of the moment. Otherwise, dual union membership may serve as a compromise between joining the union of one's choice and joining the union which commands majority representation at one's workplace and which therefore exercises the right of collective worker representation. Once again, hard and fast evidence on this phenomenon is scant.

UNION FORMS...

The term "trade union" is really a generic expression for a collection of different structures and organizing principles, each of which has its own peculiar merits and deficiencies. Three such organizing principles explain the structure of trade unions in Malta:

The *craft or occupational union* is that which organizes workers on the

basis of these sharing the same skill, occupational grade or job description. The craft union remains the basic organising principle for union bodies in the United Kingdom. The arrangement makes for inter-industry solidarity and standardization of wages and working conditions for workers sharing a similar occupational placement, irrespective of the particular enterprise environment in which they work. This, however, is also impervious to the particular enterprise's "ability to pay": it has a tendency for penalising poor performers by forcing them to accept wages and conditions higher than they would otherwise concede in bilateral negotiation: and rewarding successful companies by settling for working conditions less than they would be willing or anxious to achieve. The system also generates at times chaotic multi-unionism at the enterprise, with no limit to the number of represented unions.

The opposite arrangement is the *house or company union*, whose catchment area is restricted usually to a single territorial unit (a particular factory) or a small number of units in the case of a chain of firms operating under the same ownership. Workers of different skill levels, aptitudes, responsibilities and wage structures are lumped together under the same union banner. The inspiration behind the structure is to provide a unitary, integrating dimension to trade unionism, promoting commitment to the enterprise ethic and to "team spirit" even in the pursuit of union demands. Such a system is indeed common in Japan and an integral part of the "Japanisation" process underway in many industrialized market economies today⁶. Management and union officials would thus operate in a neater, one-against-one situation. A house/company union gives its officials the best opportunities for receiving company information and taking action.

Company unions may thus pester managements incessantly with trivial demands and petty disputes. However, house/company unions tend to be isolated bodies with few or no solidarity links with unions beyond their enterprise gates. Thus, the extent to which they can escalate industrial action (actually and potentially) is severely curtailed. Such unions may also have a hard time reconciling the different (and at times contradictory) demands of their motley membership. They may thus end up alienating different sections of the workforce.

The *general union* seeks to combine the strength of territorial representation with inter-industry solidarity. A general union has therefore the largest potential for membership growth. It seeks to organise *all* workers in *all* enterprises. This gives it strength in numbers, including the possibility of carrying out secondary industrial action in furtherance of a trade dispute, as well as in the involvement of political (over and above industrial) concerns. This strength is however achieved only at some expense: individuals and small interest groups may feel lost in a large, gargantuan organization, where their problems are too insignificant relative to others for union officials to feel that they deserve any particular attention. Professional, technical, supervisory and managerial personnel may feel that the large unskilled, manual representation in the general union structure forces the union to act invariably in the interests of this majority segment of the membership. Aware

of these problems, general unions may seek to decentralise and to grant a limited degree of specific sectoral, territorial, industrial or skill representation by establishing apposite sections and/or branches, coordinated in a federative or confederative network.

... AND EMPLOYER STRATEGIES

Various employer (including State) and management strategies have been deployed to counter the power and influence of each of these three union organising principles. Some managers and employers may prefer not to have unions at all⁷; but once in a position to request recognition at the workplace, a union cannot be readily disregarded.

The most successful containment policy has been affected with respect to house/company unions, some of which are actually set up on the initiative or with the blessing of management. These unions may be systematically defused of militancy and transformed into more benign, docile, "social clubs" for workers. While maintaining a healthy channel for the articulation of demands and protests, they may thus actually serve to enhance enterprise productivity and profitability.

House or company unionism may also be used as a tactic to dissuade workers from joining general unions. General unions are less likely to resort to industrial action than house unions, given that they have a broader outlook. But, when they do, they are more problematic for management to deal with since they command support and membership from workers spread over many enterprises. Failing the existence of corresponding generally organised countervailing employer or management associations, it is often the task of States to impose some order and control on the potentially very powerful general brand of unionism. Such order may be implanted via corporatist arrangements, whereby the union sacrifices some powers for the sake of gaining others which, however, increase its responsibility in decision making and policy formulation and, consequently, its affinity with the status quo. Curbing legislation is a second option.

Strategies for coping with craft unions can be effective both at enterprise and sectoral level. 'Divide and rule' strategies may be instigated at the company level: Specific and strategic groups of workers may be pampered and privileged more than others to foster an elitist anti-collective consciousness among the select few; such pampering may cultivate feelings of jealousy among the rank and file⁸. Such workers may then be adamant in participating in industrial action instigated by 'their' union and this may help buffer effectively the extent of union influence. The same can occur at an industry level, whereby the conditions of work of one occupational grade (as advanced by one union) may be played off against those of another grade (as advanced by another union) which serves as a traditional referent group⁹. This leads to lateral struggles among workers rather than vertical ones by workers against managers or owners¹⁰. Otherwise, craft unionism may be tolerated because it acts as a spur for efficiency and profitability on the industry as a whole: the weak are weeded out; the powerful are rewarded by generating greater retained profits.

TABLE 5 TRADE UNIONS ON THE REGISTER IN JUNE 1977 AND JUNE 1985

Reg. No.	Name	Membership Declared (1977)	Membership Declared (1985)
1	Malta Union of Teachers	3,044	3,675c
4	Society of Technical Civil Servants	116	d
15	Established Employees Association	72	d
16	General Workers' Union	26,267	30,528
24	Malta Public Service Association	22	d
25	Government Printers Union	38	d
32	Malta Govt. Prof. Officers' Assn.	72	d
51	Medical Association of Malta	432	109 c (1)
52	Ghaqda Ghalliema Universita	71	d
55	Society of Administrative Civil Servants	205	d
58	Public Officers Union	79	d
73	Musicians Union	106	d
75	Society of Civil & Public Servants Malta	38	d
103	The Lotto Receivers Union	138	160 c
123	Malta Union of Assistant Chemists	20	d
128	Secondary School Teachers Association	497	d
130	Malta Govt. Employees Union	3,712	15,821 c (2)
140	Unjon Nazzjonal tad-Dwana	146	d
142	Agric. Produce Brokers & Packers Union	39	d
144	Drydocks Senior & Exec. Staff Union	99	86 c
146	Malta Library Association	73	d
147	The Civil & Public Service Assoc. - Malta Branch	262	d
155	Malta Film Artistes Association	195	d
164	Malta Union of Bank Employees	845	988 c
166	Simonds Farsons Cisk Staff Association	76	d
167	University Technicians Association	34	d
169	Central Bank Executives Union	105	d
172	The Civil Service Pensioners' Alliance - Malta Branch	823	d
176	Haddiema u Studenti Ghawdxin Maghquda	660	d
180	Malta Union of Nurses	542	d
181	Unjon Impjegati Ndustrijali S.F.C. 1977	263	314 (3)
189	Chamber of Pharmacists - Trade Union	-	70
199	Ghaqda Haddiema Bluebell	-	275
200	Airline Pilots & Flight Engineers Union	-	31
205	Union of Govt. Licensed Tourist Guides	-	181
212	Union of Assistant Chemists	-	59
219	Union of Flight Attendants	-	-
Total No. of Unions		31	14
Mean No. of Members per Union		1,261	3,735

Notes: (1) The Medical Association of Malta was cancelled from the register in 1979 for not conforming in constitution to the I.R.A. It was however reregistered (No. 209) in 1981.

(2) In 1985 the MGEU had been re-deployed as the UHM.

(3) Changed name to 'Unjon Impjegati SFC 1977' in 1979

c = a CMTU affiliate

d = dissolved

- = not yet established

THE SITUATION IN 1977

The 1976/77 Report by the Registrar of Trade Unions reveals 31 trade unions on the register in June 1977 (Refer to Table 5). Of these, 26 are craft unions, organising workers falling into a distinct occupational category. Some such unions (Registration Numbers 25, 52, 144, 166, 167, 169, 181) organised a specific group of workers in a specific private or public catchment area, and they therefore suffer from the territorial isolation experienced by house/company unions and discussed above. For a number of others, the area of operation is the large public sector. But the absence of a clear demarcation of the catchment areas worked out by the unions operating among the general service grades (of which there are not less than ten) leads to inter-union poaching and multi-union representation: In short, weak and ineffective trade unionism.

The Malta Union of Bank Employees (Reg. No. 164) is the only union on the register which corresponds to a fourth type of union, the *industry union*, seeking to organise all workers, from charwomen to managers, employed in the banking sector (which is made up of more than one banking establishment).

Three out of the remaining four on the 1977 register are general unions: One (Reg. No. 176) attempts at organising workers on the basis of their territorial origin: The Gozitan identity had served in the past also to foster political parties with this distinct character and agenda¹¹. But, similarly to such parties, Gozitan trade unions have not made much headway in the local scene. Apparently, being Gozitan is not a sufficiently strong organising principle where trade unions are concerned.

FIGHTING MIGHT WITH MIGHT

The remaining two general unions deserve a more elaborate discussion. The larger and older is the General Workers' Union (GWU) which remains to date Malta's only trade union which has been formed on truly general lines ever since its inception in 1943. The union in 1977 could boast of 67.7% of total union membership: Two out of every three unionised workers were GWU members. These were in turn organised under eight separate sections, divided equally among private industries and the public/UK Govt. sector.

Following far behind in terms of both history and membership is the Malta Government Employees Union. The MGEU, with 3,712 members was, in 1977, still in the transition from a craft to a general union. It had seen the light of day as the Malta Government Clerical Union in 1966 as an offshoot of the Malta Civil Service Union. It expanded its catchment area first to include all Government employees and subsequently, in 1978, to become a truly general union under the title Unjon Haddiema Maghqudin (Union of United Workers – UHM).

The reasons for the change of status can be understood in the light of the events taking place at the time. While the GWU, traditionally the most militant union, took a more acquiescing stance (especially in the public sector) during the 1970s, the non-GWU unions, traditionally uneasy in the pursuit of

industrial action, found themselves on the warpath in defence of various prerogatives, suddenly under threat: Bakers, farmers, doctors, professional public officers, bank clerks followed one another in pursuit of industrial action. Unfortunately for them, their actions were not concurrent: Government successfully isolated each belligerent faction until it spent itself out. The events were a lesson in the weakness of craft unions when in confrontation with the state.

The only alternative was to fight might with might. This took two general directions. One was to invest in a general union, hence the birth of the UHM in 1978. In the same year, the Registrar of Trade Unions reports a record 14 trade union dissolutions, among which were long established associations (See Table 6). These altogether relinquished a total of 1833 members for UHM absorption. (The UHM membership in the period 1978 – 79 actually increased 43% from 3,805 to 5,436, an increase of 1,631). The second strategy was the strengthening of a confederate structure which could combine separate unions and coordinate their action without these relinquishing their prized separate identity. Thus the Confederation of Malta Trade Unions (CMTU), established in 1959, became implicitly recognised as the countervailing instrument to the GWU. It acted as such however only once so far: in the one-day solidarity strike of October 10th 1984.

TABLE 6 TRADE UNION REGISTRATIONS & DISSOLUTIONS (1977 – 89)

	1976/7	77/8	78/9	79/80	80/1	81/2	82/3	83/4	84/5	85/6	86/7	87/8	88/9	Totals
No. of new union registrations	2	7	3	3	3	3	1	0	1	3	6	2	2	36
No. of union dissolutions	8	5	14	5	3	4	6	1	0	1	1	0	2	50
of which HOUSE UNIONS: registrations	1	5	2	3	–	–	–	–	–	1	4	1	–	17
Dissolutions	1	1	4	3	1	2	–	–	–	–	1	–	1	14

Source: Report by Registrar of Trade Unions (various years)

The stage was thus set for a rundown of the smaller craft unions. With one exception, the number of trade union dissolutions was never exceeded by the number of new union registrations over the period 1977 – 84. By June 1985 (and following the eventful episodes of Mnarja 1982 and October 1984 already referred to) the number of trade unions was down to a low ebb of 14 (See Table 5). Of these, six were grouped under the CMTU umbrella and reported 20,839 members. Another was the GWU, which also benefitted from the polarization of the period by shooting up to 30,528 members. Of the

remaining seven unions, one (Reg. No. 219) was dissolved without ever having its membership figures published. The density of members per union tripled in eight years. Only four autonomous craft unions, comprising 341 members, remain to be accounted for on the local trade union scene. Of these, the oldest dates back only to 1978. Except for those unions grouped within the CMTU, *not one* of the 26 craft unions on the 1977 register was still active in 1985. The overhaul of Maltese trade unionism was complete.

HOUSE UNIONISM

To be fair, there is yet another story to tell, though it is much less dramatic. There is one other union on the June 1977 register: The Unjon Impjegati Industrijali SFC 1977. It is the first example of a strict house/company union of which Malta had hardly seen the like before¹². It is likely that the emergence of such house/company unionism in the wider context of union polarization is not coincidental. In the same way that the cold war of superpower conflict fostered the emergence of a non-aligned movement, some workers and owners/managers, were trying to steer away from the inevitably charged politicised atmosphere of the GWU-CMTU local cold war. Or else, it may have been the experience of disillusionment within the mass ranks of the GWU or the UHM which led workers and/or employers to opt for a company/house union structure¹³.

The impact of house/company unionism in Malta as yet defies a definite assessment (See Table 6). Infiltration by the UHM and/or the GWU into enterprises which had established and recognised company unions has occurred: Both Farsons and Bluebell are cases in point. The Casino Employees Union, established in 1988, has from the start opted for CMTU affiliation. Nevertheless, house unions at Middle Sea Insurance., Medelec Switchgear and General Soft Drinks have so far survived unobtrusively, possibly because they were established during the less tempestuous post-1985 industrial relations climate¹⁴.

CONCLUSION

This exercise has skimmed the surface of many interesting issues relating to labour organization. A proper comparative manual of local trade union structure, function and mobilization has yet however to be written. The scrutiny of published statistics has permitted what is hopefully a fresh and original assessment of the local trade union scenario. While those who are incredulous of the usefulness of the painstaking collection of statistics, year in, year out, are certainly numerous (and may include the data compilers themselves), this study should serve to show that data *can* lend itself to useful research. Similar investigations may be carried out in other areas where a reliable and regular statistical base is available.

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Notes

1. The best account of the origins of Maltese trade unionism is Fino (1983). See also Kester (1980, pp. 23–7).
2. A recommended text on industrial relations in Malta is Attard (1984). The Industrial Relations Act is provided therein as an appendix, obviously without any amendments introduced after the date when the book was published.
3. The relevant reports are found in the Government Gazzette as follows:
 Report for 1976–77: 11th Oct. 1977, pp. 3022–5
 1977–78: 8th Sept. 1978, pp. 2530–3
 1978–79: 5th Oct. 1979, pp. 3134–8
 1979–80: 12th Sept. 1980, pp. 2180–2
 1980–81: 11th Sept. 1981, pp. 2539–41
 1981–82: 10th Sept. 1982, pp. 2411–3
 1982–83: 9th Sept. 1983, pp. 2661–3
 1983–84: 7th Sept. 1984, pp. 2753–5
 1984–85: 27th Sept. 1985, pp. 2897–9
 1985–86: 2nd Sept. 1986, pp. 2841–3
 1986–87: 6th Oct. 1987, pp. 4251–3
 1987–88: 30th Sept. 1988, pp. 3834–6
 1988–89: 3rd Nov. 1989, pp. 4870–2
 1989–90: 28th Dec. 1990, pp. 5901–3
4. The econometric model developed by Bain & Elsheikh (1976) is expressed as follows:
 $\Delta T = f(\Delta P, \Delta W, U_{t-1}, D_{t-1}, \epsilon)$ where
 ΔT = proportional rate of change of union membership
 ΔP = rate of change in prices (+ve relationship)
 ΔW = rate of change in wages (+ve)
 U_{t-1} = the level/rate of change of unemployment (–ve)
 D_{t-1} = the lagged level of union density, to account for saturation effects (–ve).
 ϵ = a random disturbance term
5. Interestingly, Cohn & Eaton (1989) suggest that a cluster of socio-political variables (national elections, inter-union rivalry, ideological distinctions) are more likely to explain strike activity than models invoking market variables (such as business cycles and trends in economic growth).
6. Refer to Dore (1983). See Kelly & Richardson (1989) for an assessment of the extent of Japanisation in British Industrial Relations over the last decade.
7. Some employers in the United States commission professional “union busters” to break up or prevent a union foothold in their firm. Other firms, like computer giant IBM, may prefer being non-union and take pains to develop a particular industrial relations climate which generates employee acceptance of this policy. See Dickson et. al. (1988).
8. A tactic which worked against British miners in their eventful one-year strike of 1984–5.
9. As is the contemporary outcry by the GWU on behalf of instructors, an occupational group whose traditional reference group is that of teachers, represented by the MUT. See, for example, the comment and sketch in *L-Orizzonti* (Union Press) 12/4/91, p. 10.
10. A point elaborated upon by Burawoy (1979).
11. The Gozo Party and the Jones Party fielded candidates for the 1947 general elections.

12. The Simonds-Farsons-Cisk Union dropped the 'industrial' appellative to become a pure house union in 1979.
13. Or with both the GWU and UHM, as in the case of Maldiam employees.
14. The slackened pressure on a clear GWU-CMTU polarity in the post-1985 epoch has also contributed to the emergence of small, breakway unions: The New Lyceum Teachers' Union (a splinter from the MUT) and the Union of Cabin Crew (a splinter from the GWU's Port & Transport Section) are cases in point from 1989 Report by the Registrar of Trade Unions.

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