

## **CHILD WORKERS IN MALTA: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON A NEW UNDERCLASS**

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### INTRODUCTION

The problem of "child labour" has, at least ever since the 19th century, surfaced and submerged in the eyes of public opinion and policy makers as a 'scourge' and 'a blot on the conscience of the developing countries' (Unesco Courier, 1973, p.7). Schildkrout (1980, p.480), reviewing a large number of European studies which report on child labour during the industrial revolution, concludes that '*the exploitation of child labour in its most brutal form occurs during periods of transition from one mode of production to another, usually from the familial to the industrial one*'. The reason for this is partly structural. Marx, who so thoroughly denounced the exploitation of children in the inhuman conditions of the mills and mines in the nineteenth century, clearly indentified the structural economic and social conditions which arose with industrial capitalism and which rendered children ripe for exploitation by the employing class:

*'In so far as machinery dispenses with muscular power, it becomes a means of employing labourers of slight muscular strength, and those whose bodily development is incomplete, but whose limbs are more supple. The labour of women and children was, therefore, the first thing sought for by capitalists who used machinery....Compulsory work for the capitalist usurped the place, not only of children's play but also of free labour at home within moderate limits for the support of the family' (Capital. Volume I in Tucker, 1978, p.404).*

While the excesses we usually associate with the 19th century have been curbed through legislative means and the pressure of social and economic transformation, it is quite clear that the problem of child labour prevails in Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, parts of southern Europe and in depressed areas of more industrialised regions (cf. Anti-Slavery Reporter, 1989).

The purpose of this paper is to present original data on the extent of child labour in Malta, and to situate that data within a context which does justice to the complexity of the issues involved, the international dimensions of the problem, as well as to the legislative and other recommendations made by such bodies as the International Labour Organisation, Unesco and the Anti-Slavery Society in order to promote and protect the rights of children. In this paper I will therefore provide evidence to show that a high percentage of young students from one stream of Malta's secondary school system, namely Trade

Schools<sup>1</sup> have experienced work on a part-time and/or full-time basis. The focus of this paper will be on the conditions under which these students labour in what has been called the 'twilight economy' (Finn, 1984). More specifically, this study will address the following issues:

- I. Child labour in an international context.
- II. Child labour in Malta: legislative history.
- III. Factors which influence the extent of child labour.
- IV. Contemporary research on child labour in Malta.
  - (a) How many young people hold jobs ?
  - (b) What kinds of jobs do they do?
  - (c) Why do young people seek to work?
  - (d) At what age do they commence work?
  - (e) Number of hours worked and wages received.
  - (f) The experience of work.
  - (g) Child labour and schooling.
- V. Policy recommendations for combating child labour.

Each of these issues will be considered in turn in the following sections.

## I. CHILD LABOUR IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Statistics on the extent of child labour at a national and international level depend on the way 'child' and 'labour' are in fact defined. It is useful here to follow the usage employed by the International Labour Organisation which since the First Conference Session in 1919, adopted the first of 11 Conventions on minimum age for employment, as well as a number of others to regulate the conditions of work of children and young persons when they do work. Swepston (1982, p.578) notes that '*these Conventions and their accompanying recommendations have formed the basis for much of the legislation on child labour adopted by most of the Member States of the ILO*'. Hence, according to the 67th Session of the International Labour Conference (Convention No.138, 1973) 'child' refers to persons below fifteen years of age. Convention No.138 (Article 2) also states that the basic minimum age for employment or work shall be not less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling and in any case not less than 15 years.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that Recommendation No.146 (Paragraph 7) states that the objective of Members should be to raise this minimum age to 16.

The same Convention attaches great importance to the term '*employment or work*'. Swepston (1982) notes that this definition of labour ensures that all economic activity done by children is covered, regardless of their formal employment status. He notes that in many countries '*many young persons who do not work under a contract of employment simply are not covered by the legislation. They therefore have no protection in regard to the minimum wage*

at which they may work, nor in such basic matters as wages, hours of work and social security benefits'. (Swepston, 1982, p.581). This is further complicated by the fact that '*measuring the productivity of children's economic activities is very difficult, since their contribution is so often indirect, and their activity may not be considered as work*' (Schildkrout, 1980, p.484).

It is important to point out that the ILO Convention does not impose a blanket prohibition on 'child labour' – what it does set out to do is to prohibit the imposition on children of labour which calls for greater physical and mental resources than they normally possess or which interferes with their education and development. It also sets out to regulate the conditions under which these young people may be allowed to work.

'If we take into consideration the above clarification regarding the meaning of 'child labour', and if we look at the results of statistical surveys carried out by a number of organisations, it becomes immediately clear that the incidence of children's involvement in industrial and non-industrial work is very high indeed. ILO statistics (Swepston, 1982, p.591) estimate the number of working children under 15 to be 55 million for the world as a whole. However, as Schildkrout (1980, p.379) points out, such figures are often based on census reports which take only the formal wage sector into account. In fact, a United Nations study (Economic and Social Council, 1981) considers that the figure of 145 million children is much closer to the mark. While the problem is clearly more prevalent in developing countries such as India, Colombia and a number of African nations, it is also present in economically developed countries such as the United Kingdom (MacLennan, 1980) and New Zealand (Sultana, 1990a,b), to mention only two. The issue of child labour has been highlighted in the United States. Bingham (1990, p.36) reports that as part of 'Operation Child-watch', a series of 3,000 raids were conducted all over the United States in a week in March of 1990. 7,000 minors were found to be working illegally. This was the tip of an iceberg, and indicated the extent to which child-labour laws were being ignored. In fact Labour Department inspectors reported 22,500 violations of such laws in 1989. Bingham also quotes a Government Accounting Office report which showed that 128,000 minors were injured in work-related accidents during 1987 and 1988.

## II. CHILD LABOUR IN MALTA: LEGISLATIVE HISTORY

Child labour in Malta, as in many other countries, has a long history. Prior to the nineteenth century and throughout the slow industrialisation of the Islands, it is clear that children were an economic asset as unpaid, or underpaid family workers (cf Busuttill, 1965, p.9). Serious attention was given to the issue of child labour in Malta when legislative measures were taken in relation to the employment of minors in 1924 when the school leaving age was fixed at

twelve. It was then stipulated that these students were to attend school at least 75% of the time. Borg (1983, p.86 ff.) provides a useful critical account of the development of Maltese industrial law in relation to this problem, and notes that the 1924 Compulsory Attendance Act, while making it illegal for employers to take on minors during school hours, was only addressed to those children registered in the few State schools then available. The 1911 Census shows that out of 48,302 school-age children, only 24,963 were in fact attending schools. Part of the problem was that the educational infrastructure had not developed sufficiently to absorb all the children under fourteen years of age, who were thus eligible for employment. Furthermore, *'in an age where poverty was rampant in Malta, parents had little or no incentive to register their children especially where child labour was a supplement to the bread winners' wage'* ( Borg, 1983, p.86) .

Some of the loopholes of the 1924 Act were addressed two years later in the Factories' Regulation Act which specified more clearly some of the conditions under which minors could work when they were legally entitled to do so. Thus employers were prohibited from employing minors (under fourteen years of age) in industrial establishments, quarries and building construction sites. Following ILO Conventions and Recommendations of the time, the 1926 Act prohibited the employment of minors during the night and in work that endangered their health and safety such as quarries, tobacco manufacture, dyeworks, and tile manufacture. The Act also specified that those minors who were legally entitled to work could not work more than eight hours a day over a six-day week. They could work on one of two 'days of obligation' if both days fell in the same week and if the ecclesiastical authorities had given the necessary dispensation.

Further restrictions were imposed on the employment of minors by the 1944 Ordinance, which clearly stipulated that children under twelve years of age could not be employed by anyone. It was moreover established that it was illegal to:

- (a) employ school children during school hours and before six o'clock in the evening;
- (b) employ minors for more than two hours on school days and on Sundays;
- (c) employ minors in places of public entertainment, in transport work and in street trading and during night shifts.

These provisions reflected an ILO concern that children ought not to engage in work which could have a significant negative impact not only on their health and safety, but also on their moral and overall development.

Significantly, the 1944 Ordinance provided a system of inspection of industrial and commercial premises, although Borg (1983, p.88), drawing on a variety of reports, concludes that such measures were not effective in eradicating child labour in such areas as night work in restaurants, cafes, and public transport.

The 1946 Compulsory Education Ordinance established that the primary education of children was the responsibility of their parents and guardians, and set up 'School Attendance Officers' to ensure the enforcement of the ordinance. School-leaving age was set at fourteen in the case of attendance at a public primary school, and the age of sixteen in the case of attendance at a technical school.

Much more effective in terms of enforcement was the Industrial Training Act of 1952 which provided legislation for the regulation of minors entering apprenticeship schemes. This Act encouraged the setting up of an educational infrastructure which taught minors work skills so that these could eventually find more remunerative and satisfying employment. The conditions of employment and training of apprenticeships were clearly established and fell under the supervisory capacity of the Minister and Director of Labour. Regulatory mechanisms covered such issues as duration of the apprenticeship, the rates of pay, working hours, the nature adequacy of the practical training, the maximum period of overtime and the number of paid holidays. It also established the Director of Labour as an arbitrator in the case of litigations between employer and apprentice, with the possibility of appeal before an Appeals Committee.

Further provisions for the regulation of the employment of children and young persons appeared in 1973. The Merchant Shipping Act established the conditions under which minors could be employed on sea craft, and adopted two of the three enforcement mechanisms suggested by a number of ILO Conventions, namely the clear identification of the persons responsible for compliance and the keeping of a register of young persons employed, open to inspection by the Minister of Labour. A third enforcement mechanism, namely the establishment of measures to ensure enforcement – such as penalties for contraventions – was also nominally established: but, as Borg (1983, p.92) correctly points out, '*a fine not exceeding ten pounds for first offenders and not exceeding twenty pounds for second offenders is not a very formidable deterrent*'.

Two further pieces of legislation were enacted recently. The first was the 1974 Education Act which established free and compulsory education for all children from six to sixteen years of age. The Act gave full powers to the Minister of Education to refuse the work permit to those who fell under the compulsory school attendance: '*the Minister shall not grant such permission and shall withdraw any permission granted where it appears to the Minister that the employment would be or is prejudicial to the health of the child or otherwise such as to render the child unfit to obtain the full benefit of the education provided for him*'. The Minister was also responsible for the regulation of the employment and conditions of work of such children as were permitted to work before the statutory age of sixteen. Such regulations included

the requirement of information or returns, the keeping of registers, and the inspection of premises. Those who contravened these provisions were liable to a fine not exceeding fifty pounds and to an additional fine not exceeding five pounds for each day during which the offence continues in the case of a continuing offence. The Department of Labour, together with welfare officers, were to help the Minister of Education in the task of enforcing the provisions of the Act. The 1988 Education Act ratified the 1974 provisions, but reduced the fines to between Lm3 and Lm25 for contravention, with an additional Lm1 every day in the case of a continuing offence.<sup>3</sup> In May 1988, Malta ratified a number of ILO conventions, among which was Minimum Age Convention No. 138 of 1973 (*Industry Today*, 1988, p.47).

The problem of child labour has again surfaced as an issue over the past two years. A series of tragic accidents – among them the electrocution of two minors – raised public consciousness and anger. Articles about child labour appeared in *Labour Post*, a publication of the local General Workers' Union (March, 1988 and January/February 1989), in *il-Ġens* (24th August, 1990), a publication of the Catholic Church; in *it – Torċa*, a weekly publication of Malta's General Workers' Union (12th August, 1990); in *il – Haddiem*, a publication of the Young Christian Workers' Organisation (June/July, 1980); and in *Alternattiva* (November, 1990), a publication of the Green's political movement. While, with the exception of the latter two write-ups, most of the articles featured denounced child labour but brought forward little proof regarding its extent, the media coverage the problem received helped to bring it to the attention of the relevant authorities. The Bishop on the island of Gozo encouraged this by actually writing a letter to the people in his diocese pointing out the social and moral problems connected with child labour practices. A number of public officials were interviewed by press reporters, and parliamentary questions were asked on the subject.

Thus, for instance, the Director of Work was reported as saying that while inspections were made on a regular basis, he did not have enough staff available to do the job thoroughly (*il – Ġens*, 24th August, 1990, p.1,4). The 'Minister of Social Policy pointed out in Parliament that inspections to check child labour practice were being intensified, and that 7 children were found to be working in 1984, another 7 in 1985, 11 in 1986, 12 in 1987 and 16 in 1988 (*it-Torċa*, 12th August, 1990, p.16). 30 cases were reported in 1989 (*il-Ġens*, 24th August, 1990, p.4). The data presented in this study show the extent to which the problem of child labour is not simply a question of legislation, but also of enforcement.

### III. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE EXTENT OF CHILD LABOUR

Schildkrout (1980 p.480) argues that in order to better understand the nature and extent of child labour, one needs to look closely at the specific economic, cultural, and social contexts in which it occurs. Child labour seems to prevail in

competitive, highly volatile and seasonal markets where *'it is more advantageous to employ children than adults: they can be easily laid off when business is slack; they cost less; and they have no rights as workers and cannot join trade unions* (Bequele and Boyden, 1988, p.153). Due to legislation and to the setting up of international standards, child labour is least apparent in large-scale and modern industrial establishments. Here, *'the high level of capitalization, advanced technology, and an abundance of a relatively mobile adult work force, are all factors which militate against the continued employment of children'* (Schildkrout, 1980, p.379). Child labour is consequently more prevalent in small and marginal factories where their size and underdeveloped technical sophistication renders them uncompetitive with the larger industries, which fact can drive them to resort to child employment to keep the wages low. Typically such industries are textiles, clothing manufacture, food processing and canning (Unesco Courier, 1973, p.7).

The practice of employing children is most pronounced in those unregistered and undercapitalised enterprises which require casual labour, in that informal sector where it is very difficult for legal enforcers to supervise and control labour standards adequately. Thus child labour is very common in small-scale retail shops, hotels, restaurants, services, street trades and domestic service, and agriculture.

The economic and socio-cultural context in Malta encourages the practice of child labour in a number of ways. One of the key industries in Malta is characterised by its seasonal nature. In 1986, for instance, earnings from tourism amounted to about 22% of all earnings from exports of goods and services, but the major part of these earnings were made during the summer months (Briguglio, 1988, pp.20 – 1). The seasonal nature of this industry encourages the employment of labour which can be easily shed: as we shall see, children are easily tempted into this sector. A second characteristic of the Maltese economic structure is the fact that the most common type of industrial set-up is the small firm. In 1987 for instance, 88.5% of workers in manufacturing, quarrying and construction and non-manufacturing industries were to be found in establishments employing less than 20 people (Central Office of Statistics, 1988, p.200). 75% of all establishments employed 5 persons or less each. Again, in view of what has been said above, such establishments strive to remain competitive by employing casual and cheap labour. Many of these enterprises involve members of the same family. Much the same comments can be made with regards the agricultural sector in Malta, which employs close to 3,000 persons in the private sector alone. The Working Committee's report on Occupational Health and Safety noted that many of those working in the agricultural sector *'are self-employed persons and family-concerns, (and) the employment of children cannot be ruled out altogether'* (1988, p.24)

A third economic characteristic is a highly developed 'underground economy'; Delia (1987) has estimated that the hidden economy in Malta could be as high as 10- 20% of the GDP. Money earned through this kind of activity is obviously not declared or even invested in banks out of fear of raising suspicion. This partly explains why a large percentage of the currency is held in circulation: 50% of GNP in 1985, compared to 5-10% in many other countries in the same year (Briguglio, 1988, p.94). Needless to say, such 'underground' economic activity attracts those who, like students, prefer to work in establishments which, by their very nature, are hidden from the public scrutiny of the Labour Office. Finally, as Cremona ( 1989, p.3) notes, the fact that until recently Malta's tax rate was the highest in Europe, but its wage rate one of the lowest meant that parents were pressurised into one or other or both of the following strategies: seeking a second job in the underground economy to boost income, and/or rely directly or indirectly for financial help from the wages earned by their children.

There are also socio-cultural factors which encourage child labour practices in Malta. One such factor which is peculiar to Malta is the adoption, since 1978, of a student-worker scheme for students at sixth form and University levels, i.e. for ages 16 onwards. Based on similar attempts in other socialist countries such as China and Cuba to link productive work with education (cf Carnoy and Samoff, 1990), this scheme (see Schembri, 1982) gave a certain degree of legitimacy to the idea that students who were at school could – and indeed should – work. While perhaps few understood the ideological underpinnings of such a scheme, it is here postulated that it certainly did not discourage the idea – and perhaps actually encouraged the practice – of child labour. A second socio-cultural factor peculiar to Malta and which needs to be highlighted is the competitive work ethic which is engrained in children from an early age. Even at a primary school level, Falzon and Busuttill (1988) report that 70.7% of students in state schools had attended private tuition after school hours. The percentage was even higher at a secondary school level, where 82.9% said that they attended private lessons over and above their schooling. Leisure for leisure's sake is strangely missing or severely curtailed for children in what is, for tourists, a leisure island. It would appear that if students are not labouring away in the catering or manufacturing industries, they are to be found busily employed striving for better grades or more credentials to ensure survival in the official labour market.

#### IV. CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH ON CHILD LABOUR IN MALTA

Two empirical studies have been carried out regarding the extent of child labour practice in the Maltese islands. The first study by the present author focuses on participation in paid employment on the part of all third year Trade School students (age = 15 years) on the main island of Malta. The second study.

that carried out by Cremona (1989), focuses on all secondary level students in their last three years of compulsory schooling (ages = 13 to 17 years) on the smaller island of Gozo. Both research projects are of a statistical nature and further research needs to be done to explore, through qualitative means, the phenomenological significance of this work for minors (see Sultana, 1990a for an example).

With regards to the study carried out by the present author, a questionnaire form was distributed among all the third year trade school students found in their classrooms during the survey period between October and December of 1989. 680 students (male = 486; female = 194) were present to answer the questionnaire, and this represents 57.53% of the total of 1182 students (male = 725; female = 457) that should have been present according to official lists of population in trade schools for 1989/1990 (Department of Education, July 1990). Students not present were generally habitual absentees, with the exception of 6 male students who were involved in an extra-curricular project and were absent from school for long periods of time, and one male who preferred not to fill in the questionnaire. The questionnaire schedule is one of the research tools used in a *Trade Schools Research Project* intended to build a complex profile of trade school students. The questionnaire set out to collect data on the socio-economic background of these students, their educational and occupational experiences and aspirations, as well as information on their leisure activities. Part III of the questionnaire focused specifically on the part-time and full-time work these students had experienced during term and/or holiday time.

A second study by Cremona (1989) reports on questionnaire data collected from 905 Gozitan students (male = 434; female = 471) attending the last three years of academic and technical secondary schools. While Cremona's research offers less details than that provided by the Trade School Research Project, it is useful in that it shows that similar patterns of child labour exist in Gozo as in Malta, and that participation in paid employment on the part of minors differs depending on whether they are in academic or technical schools. Different aspects of the practice of child labour in Malta will be explored in the sections below. References to Cremona's findings will be made throughout in order to highlight similarities and differences between the archipelago's two main islands.

### **(a) How many young people hold jobs?**

Starting first with data which emerged from the Trade School Project, 378 students – or over 55% of those who responded to the questionnaire – said that they had worked for money at some stage or other in their life. 330 of these were male students; in other words, almost 70% of those attending boys' trade schools have worked. Only 48 female students, or close to 25% of the total number of girls sampled, admitting to having worked either in term time

or during the holiday seasons. Of the total 378 students who worked, 203 did so before and/or after school hours, and on weekends in term time. 341 students worked during the holiday season, and 166 students worked both during term time and during holidays. Cremona (1989) reports similar patterns for his study of young people in Gozo. Thus, 46.8% of Gozitan boys and 16.4% of Gozitan girls were engaged in some form of waged employment. The lower percentages in Cremona's study are probably due to the fact that his sample included students attending both trade schools as well as modern secondary and junior lyceum schools. In the latter, more academic-oriented institutions, students were found to be less involved in paid employment, and this reduced the global percentage of working children.

It needs to be pointed out that for a number of reasons the above statistics are conservative ones. In the first place and with reference to both studies, it was clear that some students preferred to withhold information out of fear of being caught out by the authorities. They were quite aware that they were not entitled to work without a work book and the permission of the Minister of Education. In my research project for instance there were two occasions where groups of students told me they while they would answer most of the questionnaire, they would leave Part III blank. A second reason which suggests that the statistics are in fact higher is that both questionnaires measured only 'paid employment'. From another section of the Trade School questionnaire it became clear that girls, for instance, were often involved in carrying out domestic chores – such as taking care of younger children and doing housework – which were either remunerated by 'pocket money' allowances, or not at all. It will be argued that such activity has an economic function as it often releases adults so that these can work or reduces the need for such adults to employ domestic help. Finally, and again with reference to my research, 42.4% of trade school students were missing from the classroom during the survey months. A study by Scicluna Calleja *et al.* (1988) found that girls in trade schools, on average, absented themselves for 50.5 out of 148 days, an absence rate of 33%. The frequency for boys stood at 35 days out of 148, yielding an absence rate of 24%. For the academic year 1987-1988, the Department of Education had approved 861 requests for permission to leave school before 16 years of age (cf *It-Torċa*, 12th August, 1990, p.17). Both the high rates of absenteeism and early school-leaving are a sign of the readiness these students have to work, in the first case without, in the second with, a work permit.

It is instructive to compare the Maltese and Gozitan data with those emerging from other studies carried out in parts of England and Scotland. MacLennan (1980) for instance found that 20% to 30% of all 14 to 16 year-olds were in part-time employment in the United Kingdom. Finn (1984) reports that 75 of his sample of 150 boys and girls in their last year of compulsory schooling in 3 Coventry and 1 Rugby school had had some involvement in the juvenile

labour market. Griffin (1985) found that 50% of her Birmingham girls had experienced some form of part-time employment prior to leaving school. Howieson (1990) reports that 45% of a sample of school-leavers in Scotland had done part-time work during term time. The first three studies mentioned above confirm the patterns of child employment that have been found locally. In other words, more of the 'non-academic' students tend to be working than the 'academic' ones, and more boys than girls tend to be in paid employment. Howieson, however reports a different pattern. Howieson's study, which involved 10% of all school-leavers from 1979–1987, found that more girls (67%) than boys (41%) had worked, and that while the highest percentage of working students was to be found among middle-attaining pupils (34%), a higher proportion of the most academic pupils had a part-time job (29%) than the least academic (25%). Howieson is the only one to report on data collected longitudinally and it is interesting to note that the number of students who did part-time work increased between 1979 and 1987.

### **(b) What kind of work do these students do?**

The range of jobs reported in the *Trade Schools Project* questionnaire was very wide indeed. Most, however, were involved in work in an informal sector which afforded them little educational experience and practically no useful training for adult work roles other than 'conditioning' to form part of an unskilled, uneducated proletariat. Among the most common jobs done by the 203 students who worked during term time are: shop assistants (n = 32), and helpers in a variety of small-sized trade enterprises such as carpenters (n = 17), mechanics (n = 12), and electricians (n = 7). A substantial number were employed as farmhands (n = 13). Before and after school hours as well as during weekends students cleaned wood, helped builders and butchers, acted as sales persons, polished wood, sprayed wood and cars, worked in kitchens, painted houses, and sold produce. If we had to group these different jobs into larger categories, the top three work categories for term time jobs would be as follows: Trades (n = 64), Catering (n = 42) and Shop Attendance (n = 32).

Similar patterns can be found in the jobs done by students during holiday time. Some of the more popular jobs were, again, helping out in small trade establishments such as carpentry (n = 32), automechanical work (n = 13), panel beating (n = 8), and electrical installation (n = 11). Student summer work also consisted of street vending (n = 6), tile laying (n = 3), painting houses (n = 10), shop assisting (n = 26), and working in hotels and other catering establishments as waiters or waitresses (n = 27), barmen or barmaids (n = 17), pool attendants (n = 9), beach attendants (n = 5), in take-aways (n = 9), as kitchen hands (n = 7), cleaners and maids (n = 20) and confectioners (n = 3). If we again grouped the jobs into categories, summer time work would have the following profile: Catering (n = 130); Trades (n = 100) and Shop Attendance (n = 26). It is indicative that during holiday time, 17 students were involved in some form or other of factory work.

Gozitan students were employed in similar kinds of work and Cremona (1989) reports a concentration of children in the catering sector – which employs 29% of all male children who work – and in work related to shops. Fewer Gozitan than Maltese children and young persons were found working in the agricultural sector. It is interesting to note that 30% of Cremona's female sample were involved in knitting work for the textile industry. This form of home-based labour was not reported in the Maltese data.

It is important to point out that trade school students, for instance, were involved in work which has been specifically designated as dangerous by ILO Convention No.138, and which could not be excluded from the Convention's application. If we take into account all student work done during term and holiday time, this included quarrying (n=2), electrical works (n=18), construction (n=22) and transport and storage (n=5). Convention No.138 also identifies manufacturing as a form of dangerous employment which could not be excluded from its application. Eight students worked in a factory during term time, while 17 did so during the holiday season. A number of ILO Conventions on work done by minors have been careful to specify that some employment – such as work in restaurants and in bars – present particular problems for the moral safety of young persons. It is therefore relevant to point out the large numbers of students employed as barmen/barmaids, and as waiters/waitresses. This reflects the importance of the tourist service sector in the overall Maltese economy, as well as the nature of this sector characterised by the 'need' for cheap labour that can be easily employed and shed.

A general point that can be made about the kind of jobs done by these young workers is its reflection of different destinies in the sexual division of labour. Hence, in both the Maltese and Gozitan studies, girls tended to be found in what are locally considered to be traditionally female jobs such as cleaning, tailoring, hairdressing and babysitting. Another fact that needs to be highlighted is the large number of students employed by their adult family members. Of the 196 trade school students who replied to the question asking for details regarding employers, 62 – or 31.6% – answered that employment was provided by a family member. Cremona (1989) found a similar pattern for his sample in Gozo, and that 104 children work for their parents, while 30 were employed by somebody related to the family. As in many other areas in the world, children often work in familial contexts (Bequele and Boyden, 1988, p.158).

It is important to point out that a high percentage of trade school students reported that they helped out their parents in household chores. While this is not often seen to be work, Schildkrout (1980, p.484) is correct to point out that children are clearly economic assets since when they perform errands they are *'contributing to the maintenance of their households, as well as reducing the opportunity cost of women's (and men's) work, even though children may not*

*be directly generating income*'. In other words, were students not to perform these tasks, other help would have to be employed. It is also possible that children's work may release one or other or both of the parents for productive employment in a full-time or part-time capacity.

### **(c) Why do young people seek to work?**

It is commonly believed in Malta that trade school students seek to work in the trade that they intend to practice after they leave school. My research however does not bear this out to any large extent. Of the 341 students who worked during the holiday season, only 43 – or 12.6% – were employed in a sector where they could practice the trade skills they were learning at school. The percentage is almost twice as high for the group of 203 students who worked during term time: 49 out of 203 students – or 24.1% – were therefore involved in work which could help them make progress in the skill they were studying at school. In another question, students were asked to identify what they liked about the work they did. 28 said that learning a trade was a positive aspect of their experience in paid employment. Despite this there is agreement with Bequele and Boyden (1988, p.156) who, reflecting on child labour within an international context, conclude that *'ILO studies give little reason to believe that working children are gaining valuable skills and experience. The vast majority receive little or no preparation for the work they are given and consequently child labour tends to be concentrated in unskilled, simple jobs that offer little opportunity for moving to better paid, safer or more interesting jobs'*.

The major reason for working was undoubtedly related to financial remuneration. The highest number of students (n = 38) who expressed directly what they liked about the work they did during term or holiday time mentioned 'money' and 'pay'. Cremona (1989,p.60) notes that 35% of the boys and 32% of the girls in his sample of Gozitan students had remuneration in mind when they decided to work. 44% of the girls and 25% of the boys said they were pushed to work for 'family reasons', which Cremona interprets as helping out in family business or in augmenting the family budget. Child labour, both within the house and outside of it, and whether it is formally remunerated or not, should therefore be considered as an economic contribution to the household economy rather than for any educational experience that it might offer. This economic contribution is made in both direct and indirect forms. In the first instance, the Trade School questionnaire revealed that 145 out of the 378 students – or 38.3% – who worked throughout the year gave a percentage of the money they earned to their parents. Secondly, the fact that these young people were earning money meant that parents were not obliged to provide allowances to support expenses on clothes, travel, food, and entertainment and leisure activities. Some of these young people were therefore financing most if not all of their own leisure activities, besides helping out their parents.

It has been noted in a number of countries that the economic recession and high rates of unemployment have put even greater pressures on young people to contribute to the family budget (see Finn, 1984; Sultana, 1990a; Howieson, 1990). While Malta has not gone through the same kind of economic problems and there is a highly developed social service system, it is postulated that high taxation levels, relatively low wages, and the current increases in cost-of-living will have very much the same effect, and that parents actually encourage their children to find some form of paid employment. This proposition is borne out by the fact that 41% of the students who replied to the trade school questionnaire admitted that they had found their jobs with the help of parents, older siblings, or uncles and aunts.

Finally, it should be noted that work provided students with the possibility of socialising. 26 trade school students mentioned this factor as a pleasant thing about their work experience; meeting members of the opposite sex, tourists, and making friends with adult workers provided them with positive experiences. It became clear from my study that many students were working in jobs which allowed mixing with older workers. While 79 students claimed they worked with persons of their own age, 248 said that they did not. Work during term and holiday time to some extent also encouraged the mixing of genders: while boys and girls were involved in work roles which generally revealed the sexual division of labour in Malta, 181 worked in a mixed sex environment, while 148 were in a single workplace. Working alongside adults of the same or different gender can have both positive and negative effects on young students. Among the latter one can mention the tendency on the part of full-time, non-seasonal adult workers to impute a lower status on younger, casual labourers (cf Clark, 1986). Sexual harassment is also often reported when adult males work alongside young females (Sultana, 1990a).

#### **(d) At what age do young people commence work?**

The Trade School questionnaire reveals that students had started working before their fifteenth birthday. Indeed, 20 admitted that they had entered into paid employment at the age of ten or younger, while 10 and 33 had started at the age of eleven and twelve respectively. 76 students had started working when they were thirteen years of age, and 130 when they were fourteen. Only 79 students admitted to having had their first work experience at the age of fifteen or over. A similar pattern emerges if we examine the data presented by Cremona for his sample of Gozitan students. In this case, while there were a few who began work at 6 or 7 years of age, the majority entered into some form of paid employment at the age of 12 (15.7%), 13 (17.2%), or 14 years of age (21.6%)

### **(e) Number of hours worked and wages received.**

In this section it is useful to distinguish between term and holiday jobs. Starting with the former ones first, an analysis of the Trade School questionnaire data shows that on average, both male and female students were involved in 4.7 hours' work per day, before, during and after school on school days and weekends. There was very little difference between male and female students: on average, male students worked 4.7 hours per day, while female students worked 4.5 hours daily. It needs to be pointed out that these averages conceal the fact that 16 students did 6 hours work daily, 12 did 7 hours work or more per day, 18 laboured between 8 and 11 hours daily. Cremona (1989, p.54) reports that most of the Gozitan male and female students worked less than 10 hours per week during term time.

The average number of hours of work for students involved in holiday work was almost twice that for term jobs. Male and female students worked, on average, 8.4 hours per day, with males clocking up to 8.6 hours and females 7 hours daily. Again, averages conceal the fact that 47 students worked for 9 hours daily, 33 for 10 hours, 16 for 11 hours, another 16 for 12 hours, 3 for 14 hours, and 5 for 15 hours per day. Similar data were reported by Cremona (1989, p.53) with regards to Gozitan students: 22.2% of his sample of boys who worked during the holiday season laboured for between 31 and 40 hours per week, while 16.8% worked between 41 and 50 hours. 23.4% of the girls worked for 10 or less per week, while 19% of them worked between 41 and 50 hours per week. Fewer girls than boys worked more than 70 hours per week during the holiday season.

The Trade School questionnaire data permits the calculation of the average hourly and weekly wages that these students received, although it does not permit the identification of cases where there was a combination of cash and kind as remuneration. There is an important degree of difference between the average hourly rate of pay for term and holiday jobs. For the former, the average was Lm1.18c per hour, with a difference of five cents between the average hourly pay for male and for females, in favour of the former. The average conceals the fact that 83 of the students who worked during term time did not know their hourly rate of pay – this, it will be argued later, enhances the employers' possibility of exploitation of young workers. It is possible that rather than not knowing the hourly rate, students were unwilling to declare how much money they made out of fear of getting into trouble with the authorities. This is the reason Cremona (1989, p.55) advances in order to explain the non-response rate for this question. It could also be postulated, however, that flexible hourly rates of pay is a characteristic feature of the informal sector in which most of the students laboured.

The average hourly rates received by trade school students also hide the fact that some students were getting far below the Lm1.18c mentioned above: 18 were getting only between 25c and 50c per hour; 26 were earning between

55c and 80c an hour. Other students were earning more than the average: 15 were earning between Lm2 and Lm2.50c an hour, 3 were earning Lm4 and 2 were earning as much as Lm5 per hour. On average, the weekly earning for males who worked during term time was Lm23.20c while for females the figure was Lm18.

Holiday work earned students even less money, below the 86c per hour which constitutes the official minimum wage in Malta. On average, an hour's work gave trade school students between 67.9c – if they worked five days a week – or 56.6c – if they worked for six days a week. This meant that most students were earning between Lm30 and Lm50 a week (n = 122), while a minority were earning between Lm55 and Lm70 a week (n = 14). Five students were earning Lm100 per week in the holiday season. It needs to be noted that while the average weekly earnings for holiday work are higher than those for term time, students were involved in work for much longer hours. Cremona provides similar information, although it seems that Gozitan students are even more underpaid than Maltese students. Cremona (1989, p.55) notes that 52.5% of his respondents were earning between 51c and Lm1 per hour, while 27% were earning less than 50c per hour.

#### **(f) The experience of work.**

One needs to look beyond wages to have a better understanding of the exploitative conditions under which child labour is usually carried out. With regards to remuneration, both Cremona's study and mine indicate quite clearly that young persons are satisfied with very little: Cremona (1989, pp.56 – 57) notes that only 25% of the girls and 12% of the boys claimed that their wages were low for the type of work they performed; 47% of the girls and 63% of the boys claimed that the remuneration was good while 19.5% of the boys and 19.2% of the girls claimed that their wages were very good. In my survey, 38 students identified money as the main thing they liked about work; only 4 complained about the low pay! Trade schools students were clearly more alert to exploitative work conditions outside of the wage realm. 30 students complained about such things as the physical suffering the job cost them, the long hours of standing on their feet, and the heavy loads they had to carry. 23 students highlighted the hierarchical relationship with their boss or supervisor. Another 20 complained about the work environment, such as dirt, foul smells, and exposure to extreme weather conditions. When responding to a question which asked them whether they would like to do the same kind of job after they left school, 157 of the 167 who answered the question (or 58.8%) said that they would not. The major reasons they gave were that this work caused too much suffering (46), was monotonous (6), had low pay (n = 15), and offered very bad conditions of work (n = 15).

Despite the generally exploitative conditions in which these trade school children laboured, it is worrying that as many as a 110 out of 267 or (41.2.%) who responded to the same question felt ready to continue with the same work they were doing after they left school. 50 students said that they felt that they were 'happy' and were 'good' at what they were doing, 19 were keen to remain in the trade they were practising, while another 19 believed that they were making enough money in that job as to warrant their staying on. 9 felt that their job offered them opportunities to socialise, and they felt accepted and respected at work, while 4 mentioned that their particular job did not cause them any physical stress, and therefore they found no reason to leave it on reaching compulsory school-leaving age. Whatever the reason, it is significant that so many students did not desire – possibly not even foresee the possibility of – a better working future with improved conditions of work, better salaries, and enjoying more rights and/or responsibilities.

Cremona's data is limited when it comes to providing information on the Gozitan students' experience of work. The latter were simply asked to say whether they thought their conditions of work were good or not without actually providing any indication of the specific conditions in question. In his sample (Cremona, 1989, p.58), 62% of the boys and 49% of the girls claimed that their conditions at work were good; 30% of the boys and 39% of the girls said the conditions were fair, while 4% of the boys and 5% of the girls admitted that the conditions were bad. Again, it becomes apparent that these students were basically satisfied with their work experience, and were largely unaware of the exploitative conditions they were labouring under.

### **(g) Child labour and schooling.**

Childhood and youth, as Tucker (1977) among others has pointed out, are not mere biological constructs. They are also, and perhaps above all, projections of particular historical social formations. What appears at one point in time to be atrocious or totally unacceptable can be found to be common practice at another point in time. Suchodolski (1979, p.37), a Polish philosopher who has published extensively on the question of the rights of the child, notes that *'According to their circumstances, children in the past experienced either the joy of a carefree existence with plenty of opportunities for play in the fresh air, or a life of hardship and struggle characterized by poverty, homelessness, dependence on private persons, charitable institutions and even the State, and employment in adult work, which resulted in the exploitation and premature death of the children who made up this cheap labour force'*. Reflecting on the status of the child today, Schildkrout (1980, p.484) argues that in many societies, children's economic contribution is insignificant, and *'childhood is defined as the very antithesis of work. Childhood is assumed to be a rehearsal for adult*

life, and childhood experiences are then evaluated in terms of their educational importance'. It is therefore in the context of education and schooling rather than of labour and work that children develop and grow in modern social formations.

There are a number of relationships that can be played out between child labour and schooling. It could be concluded from Schildkrout's excerpt above that there is value in child labour when this offers educational experiences to children. This proposition has taken hold in a number of countries, and secondary schools in countries as far apart as the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand actually organise work experience or work exploration placements for their students so that these can learn about the world of work (cf Watts, 1983). The educational value of such programmes is doubtful (cf Sultana, 1989), especially since the sector in which students are placed often reinforces the social and sexual division of labour, reproducing class, racial, ethnic and gendered economic destinies. Besides, it has already been pointed out in a previous section that many of the tasks performed by students are relatively simple and allow little opportunity for learning.

Earlier it was argued that one of the most successful ways of controlling child labour has been the raising of compulsory schooling to the age of fifteen or, as in Malta, sixteen. The presence of an educational infrastructure which can cater for all students up to a given age does not of course guarantee the complete disappearance of child labour. In the first place, as we have seen, many students are involved in part-time and full-time work during school holidays. Secondly, a large number of students manage to combine schooling with work by labouring before or/and after school hours and during weekends. Others simply do not turn up at school and prefer to work. All of these options have definite and negative effects on students' performance at school. Students begin associating school with loss of earnings, and this drastically reduces the little motivation there might be to invest in education. This process is bound to happen if, as Willis (1977) and Sultana (1990b) suggest, students from a working class background somehow penetrate the credentialling ideology and perceive that schooling will have little if any relationship between investment in schooling and future employment prospects.

When work is carried on outside school hours, the result is exposure to fatigue. Bequele and Boyden (1988, p.157) draw on a number of studies and report that '*Grossly overworked, the children are found to be less alert, less arduous and less regular in school attendance, and consequently are at a constant disadvantage throughout their school years and even later*'. School work should indeed be considered to be work for a number of reasons. Qvortrup (1989, p.10) correctly argues that from a historical perspective, '*school work is child labour under modern conditions. The social importance of children's school work is just as great as child labour was for parents and the local community in former*

times'. Over and above this, political economy of education after Bowles and Gintis (1976) stresses the correspondence between school and work, arguing that school children experience a number of the social relations of production – including, for instance, the bifurcation between the spheres of work and leisure – at school (cf Apple and King, 1977; Cole, 1988; Sultana, 1990c). Indeed, if one adopts a structuralist and conflict perspective, and if one accepts the premises behind the 'correspondence theory', one could well argue that it is quite enough that young people are exposed to the hierarchical and alienating social relations – typical of capitalism – within the school. To allow the reinforcement of such relations within a context of labour would only serve to further humankind from fulfilling one of its most basic duties, namely offering '*the child the best it has to give*' (Declaration of the Rights of the Child, United Nations, November 1959).

## V. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

One important step towards the achievement of that goal is the formulations of a strong policy which ensures that the rights of the child for education and for freedom from material constraints are guaranteed. Such a policy would also ensure that children will no longer need to labour – at least not in situations which permit exploitation. To summarise a number of points argued throughout the paper, a strong and effective policy with regards to child labour is necessary because, in Malta as elsewhere:

- a. Children are involved in doing repetitive, alienating and fragmented tasks; have little or no control over the work process, and learn and use few skills. These unskilled and often simple jobs offer little opportunity to move on to other, better paid, safer or more interesting occupations. Children are therefore often trapped in fluctuating or unstable labour markets characterised by low pay and insecurity of employment.
- b. These working children have few rights, and the few they do have are not clearly stipulated. They are thus more subject to the whims of their employers.
- c. Their vulnerability is emphasised by the fact that they have no collective representation and thus little protection from exploitation or harassment. The fact that they are voluntarily working illegally means that they will be even more hesitant to complain to authorities as this would mean admitting to having broken the law. They have few alternatives for employment, and this fact renders them even more dependent on their employers.
- d. Children are often expected to do adult work for a wage far below that normally given to adults, even when they are involved in doing the same tasks. There are no fringe benefits, insurance or social security costs. Such low wages give employers an advantage in national – and in some cases, international – markets. In addition, these employers can often avoid the obligation to comply with the national employment requirements.

e. Employers do not generally take into account that most workplaces and most work tasks were designed with adults in mind. Hence, when children perform the same work they are more likely *'to suffer occupational injuries due to inattention, fatigue, poor judgement or insufficient knowledge of work processes and also to the fact that the equipment, machinery, tools and layout of most workplaces are designed for adults'* (Bequele and Boyden, 1988, p.154).

f. These children are involved in long hours of work, especially if we consider school to be work. Many labour on through the weekends, attracted by the added incentive of special rates of pay.

g. It is moreover not often pointed out that more remotely but perhaps very importantly for the employing class, child labour seems to initiate students into capitalist work relations and conditions, enveloping young people in a world of hard facts where the 'what is' assumes a common-sense and taken-for-granted quality, divorcing it from the alternative and humane vision of the 'what could' and the 'what should' be. Experience in the twilight economy therefore seems to mould young persons into the future workers who will find naive joy in the in the 'improved' conditions of their full time work. Such an experience produces ideas, feelings, desires and forms of consciousness which lead to an adaptive mentality rather than to one which yearns – and struggles – for alternative arrangements in the social formation.

What form would a child labour policy take in view of all that has been said this far? Swepston (1982, p.590) notes that a key factor is enforcement, and that this depends on three basic requirements: first, the identification of the persons responsible for compliance; second, the establishment of enforcement measures, including penalties, and third, the keeping of registers of young persons employed or working. He concludes (ibid., p.591) that *'the most indispensable enforcement mechanism in this field is an adequate labour inspection service'*.

I would however tend to agree with Bequele and Boyden (1988, p.163) when they note that legislation and enforcement on their own have their disadvantages in that they can force children to *'work clandestinely in unregulated sectors of the economy where it is impossible either to detect or to protect them'*. They therefore favour a multi-prolonged approach which includes legislation and law-enforcement, but goes beyond that to embrace action in areas such as income and employment, formal and informal education, welfare and the promotion of children's rights. They also highlight the role that unions can play by including young persons in their struggle to improve – if not change – the social relations and conditions of labour.

Bequele and Boyden (ibid., p.163) also note that incentives are also effective in curbing the incidence of child labour. The authors present Hong Kong as an example of a country which has developed an efficient and diverse approach which goes beyond legislation. This includes regular and thorough inspections;

yearly special campaigns to detect child employment and to raise public awareness; requiring all young workers to have an identification card with a photograph which facilitates inspection and enforcement of rules; and the introduction of social security contributions in respect of young workers. The latter fact has reduced employers' reliance on child labour in that country. Depending on the resources of a country, there could be the payment of a cash allowance for children withdrawn from prohibited employment.

Educators too have a part to play. Transformative teachers intent on engaging the world in order to change the oppressive conditions in which life is lived need to help students develop a critical social intelligence, enabling them to penetrate the structures of domination and injustice in which they already live in a multiple of social sites, and most of all at work. Such teachers would develop a critical literacy (Freire, 1972) in their students, who would thus be able to read and decode not only 'words' but 'the world'. It is only by awakening in these students a full consciousness of the extent of their exploited condition that they will prove willing to cooperate with those who are struggling on their behalf.

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### **Notes:**

1. Trade Schools were set up in Malta in 1972 and in 1989 they were catering for 2868 boys and 1509 girls, or about 17.5% of all secondary school students attending government schools (Central Office of Statistics, 1990). For a full account of the development of trade schools in Malta, see Sultana (1992)
2. The Convention takes into account that there are large differences between countries when it comes to economic development as well as to the availability of compulsory mass schooling. The Convention therefore allows the minimum age to be set at 14 initially. Malta has the necessary educational infrastructure to provide schooling up to and beyond that age, and indeed compulsory schooling was extended to 16 in 1974.
3. In 1989 the minimum wage for a forty hour week was Lm34.37c. Depending on fluctuations in exchange rates, one Maltese lira is equivalent to around 2.5 ECUs (or 3.35 U.S. dollars).

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