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School Children in Malta's Twilight Economy

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Introduction

Malta's economy is characterised by a very active 'underground' sector that produces between ten to twenty per cent of the country's GDP (Delia, 1987). This article reports on an aspect which has received little attention from researchers or from policy makers: the activity of under-age ('child') workers who labour in what Finn (1984) has called the 'twilight economy'.¹

¹ Readers interested in situating the data within a more elaborate theoretical context and in exploring the implications of the study for the development of social policy in Malta are referred to Sultana (1993).

In order to draw up any statistics regarding the extent which child labour is present in a country, one must first define the words 'child' and 'labour'. According to Convention No. 138 the International Labour Organisation, 'child' refers to persons below fifteen years of age.² The same convention (Article 2) also states that the basic minimum age for employment or work shall not be less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling and in any case not less than 15 years. It is important to note that Recommendation No. 146 (Paragraph 7) states that the objective of ILO 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 taken into consideration, 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).

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).

It is important to point out that the ILO Convention does not impose a blanket prohibition on 'child labour'. What it does do is to regulate the conditions under which these young people may be allowed to work. It prohibits the imposition

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See the 67th Session of the International Labour Conference (Convention No. 138, 1973 - ratified by Malta in 1988). The Convention takes into account the fact that there are large differences between countries when it comes to economic development as well as to the availability of compulsory schooling. The Convention therefore allows the minimum age to be set at a higher level 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.

children of labour which calls for greater physical and mental resources than they normally possess or which interferes with their education and development.

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 international 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), New Zealand (Sultana, 1990), and the United States (Bingham, 1990), to mention only three.

Child Labour in Malta

The problem of child labour within the terms outlined above prevails in Malta, and indeed it has surfaced as a public issue of some importance over the past few years. Evidence of this is the fact that the Minister for Social Policy pointed out in Parliament that measures were being taken to intensify inspections to check child labour practice. So far, however, only 7 children were reported to have been working in 1984, another 7 in 1985, 11 in 1986, 12 in 1987, and 16 in 1988 (*It-Torċa*, 12th August, 1990, p.16). Thirty cases were reported in 1989 (*Il-Gens*, 24th August, 1990, p.4). It would appear therefore that there is no cause of alarm regarding 'child labour' in Malta.

However, the figures quoted above fail to reflect the real situation. The data which I shall present in this essay will show:

- The possible number of young people who hold jobs;
- The kinds of jobs they do;
- The reason why young people seek to work;

The age at which they commence work;
The number of hours they put in and the wages they receive
The working conditions and experiences.

Two empirical studies have been carried out regarding the extent of child labour practice in the Maltese islands. 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 (Sultana, 1992).

The first study was carried out by the present author in 1990. It focuses on participation in paid employment on the part of third year Trade School³ students (age = 15 years) in Malta. The data are drawn from The Trade School Project, intended to focus on building a complex profile of trade school students.

For this study, a questionnaire form was distributed among the third year trade school students found in their classroom during the survey period between October and December of 1989. According to official lists of trade school population supplied the Department of Education for the year 1989/1990, 1182 students should have been present. In actual fact only 680 students (male = 486; female = 194) were present to answer the questionnaire.

A 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.

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 part-time and full-time work these students had experienced during term and/or holiday time.

Cremona (1989) reports on questionnaire data collected from 905 Gozitan students (male = 434; female = 471) attending last three years of academic and technical secondary schools.

³ Trade Schools were set up in Malta in 1972, and in 1989 were catering for 2,868 boys and 1,509 girls, or about 17.5% of all secondary school students attending government schools (Central Office of Statistics, 1990).

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. It also shows that participation in paid employment on the part of minors differs depending on whether they are in academic or technical schools. Cremona's findings also help to highlight similarities and differences in child labour in Malta and Gozo.

Number of Young People Holding Jobs

Starting first with data which emerged from the Trade School Project, 378 students – or over 55% of those who answered the questionnaire – said that they had worked for money at some stage or other in their life. Of these 330 were male students. In other words, almost 70% of the respondents from boys' trade schools had found some sort of paid job.

Only 48 female students, or close to 25% of the total number of girls sampled, admitted 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 and technical 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 the above statistics are conservative ones. This is due to a number of reasons. 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.

A second reason which suggests that the statistics/percentages should in fact be higher is that both questionnaires measured only 'paid employment'. In 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 their classroom during the survey months. A study by Scicluna Calleja et al. (1988) found that on average, girls attending trade schools absented themselves 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 1987-88, the Department of Education had approved 861 requests for permission to leave school before students had reached the age of 16 (cf. It-Torċa, 12th August, 1990).

The high rates of early school-leaving and of absenteeism are a clear indication of the students’ readiness to start working, possibly with a work permit (as in the case of early school-leavers) but not necessarily so.

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 Rugby schools 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 ‘academic’ ones, and more boys than girls tend to be in paid employment.

Type of Work

The range of jobs reported in the Trade Schools Project questionnaire was very wide. However, most were involved in work in the 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 farm-hands (n = 13). Before and after school hours as well as during weekends students cleaned wood, helped builders and butchers, acted as salespersons, 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 Attending (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), auto mechanical work (n = 13), panel beating (n = 8), and electrical installation (n = 11). Student summer work also consisted in 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), take-away operators (n = 9), 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 Attending (n = 26). It is indicative that during holiday time, 17 students were involved in some form 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.

Another point worth noting is 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 take into account all student work done during term and holi time, these included quarrying (n = 2), electrical works (n = construction (n = 22) and transport and storage (n = 5). Conven No. 138 also identifies manufacturing as a form of danger employment which could not be excluded from its applicat Eight students worked in a factory during term time, while did so during the holiday season. A number of ILO Conventi regarding work done by minors have been careful to specify t certain forms of employment – such as work in restaurants . in bars – present particular problems for the moral safety of yo persons. It is therefore relevant to point out the large numk of students employed as barmen/barmaids, and as wait waitresses. The reason why so many students are absorbec the catering industry reflects not only the importance of tourist service sector in the overall economy of Malta but a the nature of this sector characterised as it is by the 'need' cheap labour that can be easily employed and easily shed.

A general point that can be made about the kind of jobs d by these young workers is its reflection of the different destir in the sexual division of labour. Hence, in both the Maltese : Gozitan studies, girls tended to be found in what are loc: considered to be traditionally female jobs such as cleani tailoring, hairdressing and baby-sitting. Another fact that ne to be highlighted is the large number of students employed their adult family members. Of the 196 trade school stude who replied to the question regarding details about employ: 62 – or 31.6% – answered that employment was provided b family member. Cremona (1989) found a similar pattern for sample in Gozo, and reports that 104 children work for tl parents, while 30 were employed by somebody related to family. As in many other areas in the world, children often w in familial contexts (Bequele & Boyden, 1988).

Reasons for Seeking Work

It is commonly believed in Malta that trade school students s to work in the trade they are following at school. My resea however does not bear this out to any large extent. Of the students who worked during the holiday season, only 43 – 12.6% – were employed in a sector where they could practise

trade skills they were learning at school. With regards to the group of 203 students who worked during term time only 49 students – or 24.1% – were involved in work which could help them make progress in the skills they were studying at school. In another question, students were asked to identify what they liked about the work they did. Only 28 said that learning a trade was a positive aspect of their experience in paid employment.

The major reason for working was undoubtedly related to financial remuneration. Thirty-eight students explicitly stated that what they liked about the work they did during term or holiday time had to do with '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 that 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 it, and whether it is formally remunerated or not, should therefore be considered as an economic contribution to the household economy rather than an educational experience. 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 economic recession and high rates of unemployment have put even greater pressure on young people to contribute to the family budget (see Finn, 1984; Howieson, 1990; Sultana, 1990). While Malta has not gone through the same kind of economic problems experienced in other countries, and while Malta enjoys a highly developed social service system, it is nonetheless postulated that high taxation levels, relatively low wages, and the current increases in the cost-of-living have very much the same effect. It is held 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. Twenty-six trade-school students mentioned this factor as a pleasant thing about their work experience. Meeting tourists or members of the opposite sex 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 also encouraged, to some extent, the mixing of genders. Despite the fact that boys and girls were involved in work roles which generally revealed the sexual division of labour in Malta, 181 students worked in a mixed sex environment, while 111 were in a single-gender workplace. Working alongside adults of the same or different gender can have both positive and negative effects on young students. One such negative effect is the tendency 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, 1990).

Age at Which Students Commence Work

The Trade School questionnaire reveals that 'working' students had taken up a job before their fifteenth birthday. Indeed, 100 admitted that they had entered into paid employment at the age of ten or at a younger age, while 10 had started working at the age of eleven and 33 students had begun at the age of twelve. Seventy-six students had started working when they were thirteen years of age, and 130 when they were fourteen. Only 10 students admitted to having had their first work experience at the age of fifteen and 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%).

Hours of Work and Wages

In this section it is useful to distinguish between term and holiday jobs. An analysis of the Trade School questionnaire data shows that on average, both male and female students holding term jobs were involved in 4.7 hours' work per day. This they did before, during and/or after school on school days and weekends. There was very little difference in the number of hours of work between male and female students. Male students worked a mean 4.72 hours per day, while female students worked a mean of 4.59 hours daily. It needs to be pointed out however that these averages conceal a skewed distribution: 16 students reported working for six hours, 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 time jobs. Male and female students worked a mean of 8.42 hours per day, with males clocking up 8.6 hours and females 7.01 hours daily. Again, such averages conceal the fact that 47 students claimed to have 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 was reported by Cremona (1989, p.53) with regards to Gozitan students: 22.1% of his sample of boys who worked during the holiday season laboured between 31 and 40 hours per week, while 16.7% worked between 41 and 50 hours. 23.3% of the girls worked 10 hours 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 permit 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 for holiday jobs. During term time, the average was Lm1.18c per hour, with a difference of five cents between the average hourly pay for males and for females, in favour of the former.

The average conceals the fact that 83 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 their 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 which 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 earlier. Eighteen were getting only between 25c and 50c per hour; 26 were earning between 55c and 80c per hour. Other students were earning more than the average: 3 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 Lm18.⁴

Holiday work earned students 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 67c – if they worked five days a week – or 56c6 – 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). Few students were earning Lm100 per week in the holiday season. It needs to be noted that while the average weekly earnings from holiday work are higher than those for term time, students were working for much longer hours.

Cremona provides similar information, although it seems that Gozitan students are even more underpaid than Maltese students.

⁴ The minimum wage for a forty hour week was Lm34.37c at the time the study was carried out. One Maltese lira was then equivalent to around 2.5 ECUs (3.35 USD).

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.

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. Thirty students complained about the physical suffering that their job entailed, such as the long hours of standing on their feet, and the heavy loads they had to carry. Twenty-three students found fault with the hierarchical relationship with their boss or supervisor. Another 20 lamented about the work environment, such as dirt, foul smells, and exposure to extreme weather conditions. When responding to a question asking them whether they would like to do the same kind of job after they left school, 157 of the 267 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 (n = 46), was monotonous (n = 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. Nineteen 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. Nine 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 state whether they thought their conditions of work were good or bad. They were not asked to actually provide any indication of the specific conditions in question. In the 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 8% 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.

Conclusion

The data presented above show the urgency with which the problem of child labour should be treated in Malta. One important step forward would be the formulation of a strong social policy which ensures that the rights of the child for education and 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. A strong and effective policy with regards to child labour is necessary because, in Malta as elsewhere

- children are involved in doing repetitive, alienating and fragmented tasks, having little or no control over the work process and learning and using 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.

- 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.
- 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.
- 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 offered no fringe benefits, no insurance or social security and are thus cheaper to employ than are adults. Their low wages give employers an advantage in national – and in some cases, international – markets. In addition, these employers can often avoid the obligation of complying with national employment requirements.
- Employers do not generally take into account that most work-places, work tasks as well as tools and machinery 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' (Bequele & Boyden, 1988, p. 154).
- 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.
- It is moreover not often pointed out that child labour seems to initiate students into capitalist work relations and conditions, enveloping young people in a world of hard facts. Youngsters are made to assume the 'what is' as common-sense and are divorced 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 'improved' conditions of

their full time work. Such an experience produces ideas, feelings, desires and forms of consciousness which lead to an adapted mentality rather than to one which yearns – and struggles – for alternative arrangements in the social formation/structure.

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