

3. ARTICLES

3.1 A National Trade Union Forum



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This short contribution is a series of candid, mainly autobiographical reflections on the inspiration, launch and early operations of the national forum for trade unions, set up on the initiative of Her Excellency Marie Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, in association with the Centre for Labour Studies at the University of Malta. This provides an important historical record for this significant task entrusted to the CLS, and puts it in a broader context that speaks to the consistent contribution that the CLS has delivered as a platform for all trade unions in Malta over previous decades.

3.1.2 Prologue

For so many years, the Centre for Labour Studies (CLS) at the University of Malta, and the Workers' Participation Development Centre (WPDC) before it, have organised many activities that offered a rare opportunity for local trade union officials and members to meet and discuss relevant issues amongst themselves with academics, usually in the company of a guest 'resource person' from abroad. In times when relations between some major trade unions were fraught with tension, often fuelled by partisan political piques, these events were exceptional and stimulating educational encounters, as well as a welcome reprieve from otherwise strained times. Some of these events took the form of a series of tripartite weekend seminars, when the spouses of the delegates were also invited to attend and enjoy a relaxing weekend. In other instances, they were scaled down but more intimate sofa conversations for smaller and more select audiences. The CLS takes pride in having offered such, otherwise rare, opportunities for the various trade union organisations to meet and engage in a healthy and frank debate on current themes in industrial and labour relations.

By 2013, however, most of these activities had ground to a halt. The bulk of these activities had been held thanks to the generous sponsorship of the Freidrich-Ebert Stiftung (FES). The FES is Germany's oldest political organisation, set up in 1925 to promote democracy, political education, and promote students of outstanding intellectual abilities and personality. FES' focus is decidedly on developing countries: so, with Malta switching from being a net aid recipient to a net aid donor in 1994, the justification for an FES office in Malta, let alone an ongoing programme of financially supported activities, had become increasingly tenuous. Moreover, the country had also acceded to the European Union by 2004, and the tacit understanding was that there would be European funding available to locally promote the EU's social chapter, inclusive of work and industrial relations. Hence a dawning awareness that the FES presence, and sponsorship, in Malta, could be deployed for other uses, and in other countries. Thus, the FES office in Sliema was closed and funding was reduced. Still, thanks to Ms Ebba von Fersen Balzan, the intrepid and long-standing FES representative in Malta, a significant programme of activities by the CLS continued to benefit from FES sponsorship for some years. However, her untimely death in 2008 put paid even to these initiatives.

3.1.3 A fresh burst of energy

Nevertheless, by late 2013, what had appeared to be a successful but closed chapter in the history of the WPDC-CLS received an injection of energy and interest from what can only be described as an unlikely quarter.

Since 1995, the CLS has been responsible for the University of Malta's first programme in gender and development studies, offered at diploma level. Given the recognition that the Maltese state assigns to gender equality, the CLS has consistently invited the Maltese Government to support this programme financially. Government Ministers, of diverse political persuasions, have stepped up to the challenge, thus benefitting the Centre's gender programme. With a fresh intake of students ready to start in February 2014, a similar request had gone out to the newly elected Labour Government. Given the division of responsibilities for gender in the Cabinet, part of the request for sponsorship was tabled to the Ministry for Social Solidarity. Indeed, the Minister responsible had even registered for this diploma programme herself

some time ago, and had attended some sessions before she was obliged to resign and concentrate on other pressing commitments. The decision by this Ministry to (once again) offer its financial support to help run this flagship programme led to a decision by the CLS staff to invite the same minister (and former student) to officially inaugurate the course on 4 February 2014. As CLS Board Chair, I was tasked to meet the Minister a few weeks before the launch and extend the invitation personally.

We are talking here of Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca. To those who did not know her personally, she was a seasoned politician, very popular with the grassroots membership of the Labour Party, and credited with being a humanitarian, with a strong social conscience. To those who got to work more closely with her, she was a bundle of energy that would draw in those around her and turn them into accomplices in her many social projects. With an entrepreneurial family background, she also has considerable business sense.

I, and the CLS, were quickly swept up by the halcyon days of early 2014. The inauguration of the Diploma course proceeded without incident, the Minister leaving a strong impression on the students. I was asked by the same Minister to involve myself, in a personal capacity, in a number of social initiatives that she was enthusiastically pursuing, including a national anti-poverty strategy. There was soon talk, however, of a new role for the Minister. By early April 2014, she had been sworn in as Malta's ninth President of the Republic.

My first feelings - probably shared by many - were ones of loss and resignation. We at the CLS had briefly experienced a strong supporter for our work amongst the government ranks. But, just as we had struck this great working relationship, it appeared that she had been snatched away. To perform a higher and important office, of course; but the Office of the Presidency felt somewhat distant: is that not how it should be?

Not with (now) Her Excellency. A phone call on my mobile phone confirmed that there were other projects afoot. The intention was to set up a Foundation for the Well-being of Society, under the auspices of the Office of the President. As part of this grand initiative, and fully aware of her office as an opportunity to serve as a truly national platform, Her Excellency wanted to

set up a National Forum for Trade Unions (FNTU, in Maltese). Not just that, but to do so in association with the CLS.

A most cordial informal meeting with Her Excellency followed at the Palace in Valletta. The blessing of the University Rector was sought and secured. This led to a meeting by Her Excellency with the CLS Board members, again at the Palace in Valletta: the Board unanimously approved her vision and agreed to cooperate in bringing it to fruition. The first event, where the idea of an FNTU was broached and discussed with all 31 trade union organisations registered in Malta occurred, quite suitably, on May Day 2014. The idea was welcomed and the official launch of the Forum took place in 22 July 2014, where an FNTU charter was signed and a programme for the first year was presented and approved.

3.1.4 What has been done so far

We now appear to have in place a mechanism where Malta's trade union movement, divided into three 'fronts' – the General Workers' Union, the Confederation of Malta Trade Unions and the Forum Unions Maltin – appreciates the space offered by the highest office of the land, and the interest shown by its incumbent, in securing an environment for a free exchange of ideas. The Forum is essentially a meeting place, a national institution whose significance stands out in the relative absence of any other organisation that manages to bring *all* local trade unions together. Veteran trade unionist Anthony Busuttil, in a letter to the editor of a local newspaper, claimed that he had never witnessed such a 'special gathering' in 70 years.

The specific functions of the Forum are spelt out in Article 4 of its founding Charter – see appendix – as follows:

The *National Forum of Trade Unions* serves as a high-profile platform for the promotion, dissemination of current and envisaged work-related themes and topics. The *National Forum of Trade Unions* will champion deserving issues and utilise the clout, good will and respect associated with both the Office of the Head of State, as well as the expertise and knowledge base associated with the Centre for Labour Studies at the country's national university, in order to solicit attention, promote interest, encourage support and/or foster awareness and education in issues related to work and working life, as the need may be.

Within the Forum, the Centre for Labour Studies thus plays to its strengths, providing the required academic and research expertise, and assisting in the running and input of the Forum's activities, advising on suitable expert involvement. Staff and students of the CLS have already been involved in FNTU activities. A timely seminar on the challenges of trade union recognition was held in January 2015; and a second seminar on active ageing followed in April 2015. Meanwhile, the CLS is analysing the results of the first national sample survey on trade union perceptions, undertaken in association with the National Statistics Office. These results will be disseminated and discussed at another FNTU meeting, scheduled for October 2015.

The Office of the President, on the other hand, is deeply involved in the logistics that go into the organisation of such events: confirming venues, printing and sending invitations, offering refreshments. A nudge or a word by Her Excellency also helps in order to secure the participation of key spokespersons at Forum events; just as much as her desire to promote national unity sees her following up on the momentum of Forum events to encourage problem-solving developments. The most auspicious locations of the Office of the President – including the Grandmaster's Palace in Valletta and Verdala Palace in Buskett, limits of Rabat – have been placed at the Forum's disposal. Could we have hoped for anything better?

3.1.5 And what is there to do?

It is still too early to say how, and in which directions, the Forum will evolve; whether it will outlive the Coleiro Preca Presidency (now already one year old); and whether it is generating any deeper, lingering responses amongst its beneficiaries. Could it possibly lead (as some have expressed) to a Trade Union Council? What we can surely say is that, at least for the next few years, the Head of State has made it her commitment to advance solidarity and unity amongst all factions and sections of Maltese society, trade unions featuring prominently among these. Large and small trade unions get to sit and participate together, without squabbling over representation.

Realistically, the launch of the Forum has not brought an end to inter-trade union disputes; that would have been a remarkable achievement in itself. So, for example, a few days after the signing of the FNTU Charter in July

2014, trade unions continued with their threats and claims with respect to union representation and the right to represent some interest groups for the purpose of collective bargaining.

I am confident that the Forum is already creating some fertile ground for trade union officials to mingle, converse and discuss freely and openly, possibly developing a better appreciation of each other and their policy positions. As one trade union commented after a Forum event, it proved to be a “healthy discussion by all participants” and “was intended to stimulate thinking and provide feedback”.

The CLS feels quite privileged to have rediscovered this mandate of being a catalyst for trade unions, and to be practising it responsibly. We see this Forum development as a vote of confidence in the Centre’s work, and we look forward to continuing to provide such a facility to Malta’s trade unions and their members. The initiative also speaks to the University of Malta’s desire to work more closely with the population that it serves.

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H.E. President of Malta Marie Louise Coleiro Preca speaking at a National Forum for Trade Unions activity



Dr Manwel Debono, CLS Director, signing the FNTU Charter



Photo: DOI - Jeremy Wonnacott

Trade Union Officials with H.E. the President at the launch of the FNTU



CLS students at a FNTU activity