

*Up to a few years ago, trade unions in Malta appeared to be immune to the crises which were afflicting many of their colleagues in other countries. Their influence and social standing remained strong and their actions effective whereas other unions were constantly losing ground. Union membership levels in Malta continued to increase whereas elsewhere they underwent a dramatic decrease.*

## The Current State of Malta's Trade Unions

In many countries, following Britain's lead, laws were enacted and policies were adopted which restricted trade union action. The ultimate aim was both to restrain the militant sections within the unions and to reassert the managerial prerogatives within industry and the economy at large. To date, no 'anti-union legislation' has been enacted in Malta, despite the fact that in some political quarters no secret is made of a desire to do so. And although some local union leaders are prone to raise the alarm, both locally and abroad, at any perceived restrictive policy, recent governments have been generally keen to defuse any emerging industrial conflict.

Nevertheless, some cracks in the edifices of Malta's unions are becoming clearly visible. The recent spate of resignations and dismissals from the leadership of the General Workers' Union and the negative media publicity which surrounded the event has shaken the foundations of Malta's largest union. There are also problems within the other main trade union organization in Malta. It seems that, in contrast with their predecessors, the present generation of union leaders affiliated within the Confederation of Malta's Trade Unions are so absorbed with their sectional issues that they have little time left for harmonising their activities and on the pursuit of collective goals. The setting up of independent, sectional and house unions and particularly, the doubts about the published membership figures, all seem to confirm that view.

There are also indications that the social standing of trade unions among the people in general is quite low. Their failure, two years ago, to reach an

agreement with the other social partners on a *national social pact* aimed at economic recovery is still fresh in the people's memories. Not that by itself this would have had any significant impact on Malta's economy. The symbolic value of such a wide-ranging agreement, however, would have been to synergise other efforts and create a general atmosphere of cooperation in the pursuit of common goals. Malta remains one of a small number of European countries where such an agreement is elusive.

The impact of re-structuring, privatization, downsizing and the shift from manufacturing to the services industry is being reflected in a decline of union membership. The emerging areas of economic growth, notably in information technology and the services sectors, are traditionally hostile to unionism. The table below shows that whereas trade union membership had been constantly increasing up to the year 2002, there has been a gradual but steady decrease in the last few years.

**Table 1: Malta's Trade Union Membership 1996-2005**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Labour Force</b>	<b>Employment (%)</b>	<b>Unemployment (%)</b>	<b>Membership</b>	<b>Density (%)</b>
1996	133,195	95.0	5.0	79,136	59.4
1999	134,302	94.2	5.8	84,033	62.6
2002	136,863	94.8	5.2	86,225	63.0
2005	138,041	94.8	5.2	85,679	62.4

(Source: Annual Reports of the Registrar of Trade Unions - December 2005)

It is probably true that the actual membership figures are lower than those officially reported. Furthermore, the above figures include the number of the pensioners' sections which amounts to 3.9% of the GWU and 2% CMTU membership. Consequently if one excludes the pensioners' sections which were established in the larger unions during the last few years, the decline would be even more evident. There is also an unknown rate of dual membership. However, one can easily draw the wrong conclusion about the significance of these figures. The real power of a union does not merely lie in its 'paid-up' membership figure. Nobody doubts, for instance, the strength and influence of the French trade union movement – despite the known fact that the total union membership only amounts to seven or eight percent of the total workforce. Yet, when the French unions occasionally flex their muscles, the whole country may be brought to a standstill. And the same, no doubt, applies to Malta. With a density of more than 62%

of all the gainfully occupied, the membership level of Malta's unions is among the highest in Europe. Realistically, the level of trade union density should exclude the self employed, members of the police and the armed forces, employers and other categories who cannot, for various reasons, become members.

Still there is certainly no room for complacency. There can be no doubt that the Maltese unions, like their colleagues elsewhere, are facing an uncertain future. No matter how vital they might have been in the past, their survival in the emerging post-industrial society cannot be guaranteed. It all depends on their ability to identify the social and economic changes taking place in the world around them, to adapt themselves to the new situations, and to confront the new challenges without betraying their basic mission.

Union leaders are always eager to know what their members expect from them and to meet their demands. Clearly, no union can afford to detach itself from its own grass roots. But the members' expectations may be unrealistic and may even jeopardize their own employment. Union leaders know that the members' interests are best served when their jobs are secure. They are well aware of the realities of today's global economy where the supply of labour far exceeds the demand. And they also know that their members' interests may be better served through social dialogue rather than conflict. What course do they steer amid these seemingly irreconcilable differences?

In this situation trade union leaders often adopt an ambivalent attitude. On the one hand they express strong, aggressive language especially when addressing members in a rally or through their own papers, but appear very reasonable and moderate on television, when confronting a wider, national audience. And despite their militant rhetoric, they only resort to limited industrial actions and usually end up settling for a sensible, compromise solution. In fact, when the total incidence of strikes in Malta, including those in the public sector, are compared with those of other EU states, Malta's figures, over the years, are consistently below the European average. The ambivalent roles displayed by union leaders may be attributed to the fact that, like politicians in a democracy, they have to maintain a difficult balance between their 'leadership' and 'representative' roles.

Among all the various challenges faced by trade unions and workers today, arguably the most urgent one is that of workers' education and vocational training. It is only through a constant development of their competences that workers can become assured of *employability* throughout their careers in a world where lifelong job tenure is becoming an increasingly elusive

goal. Education enables workers to become more actively involved in discussions affecting their workplace. Education enlightens workers about the real state of their country's economy and the competitiveness of their enterprises so that they may avoid pressurizing their union leaders to pursue unrealistic and unattainable goals. Above all, education helps the workers to appreciate the real values of life so they may resist exploitation through the glitter of today's individualistic, consumer society often resulting in personal, social and environmental degradation.

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