

Trade union density in Malta from 1953 to 2008

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In Malta, trade union density measurements are based on the total number of reported trade union members as a proportion of the labour force. To develop a more accurate measure of trade union density, it is necessary to account for those workers who are members of trade unions and those who could become members of trade unions while excluding those wage earners who, by law or the conditions of military discipline, could not join a trade union.

Measuring trade union density

Trade union density measurements in Malta are based on the total number of reported trade union members – taken from the annual returns of the Registrar of Trade Unions – as a proportion of the total labour force. Such a statistic is based on the principle that trade unions are primarily organisations of workers. And yet, the same annual returns clearly identify many thousands of pensioners as trade union members. Secondly, although technically capable of registering as trade union members, most students, self-employed and unemployed people are not likely to do so. Thirdly, various categories of people in paid employment have been prevented from setting up or joining trade unions.

This EIRO article seeks to address these concerns. By identifying the characteristics of the Maltese labour supply since the end of the Second World War, it proposes to develop a more realistic measure of trade union density in Malta.

Such a net trade union density would also be more valid in comparison to similar data obtained from other countries. For example, in Belgium in 2007, when ‘adjusted for unemployed persons, students [and] retired persons’, trade union density amounted to 50%: this level is much lower than the gross trade union density of 85% (see the [Industrial relations profile of Belgium, 2007](#)).

Net trade union density would also dispel a common misrepresentation of density rates in Malta, since the gross trade union density figures may have been used in the past instead of net trade union density figures. Using gross trade union density figures may suggest that Malta enjoys a very high trade union density, of 56% in 1995 rising to 63% in 2004. As a result, Malta would have shown the fifth highest trade union density in Europe after Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Cyprus. It would also have been the only one of the then 25 EU Member States not to report a

decline in trade union density figures between 1995 and 2004 (see the Eurofound report on [Industrial relations in EU Member States 2000–2004](#)).

Net trade union density represents the total number of trade union members in paid employment – thereby excluding full-time students, unemployed and retired persons – divided by the total number of wage earners in the country. For even more accurate measurements regarding trade union density, wage earners who may be barred from trade union affiliation in the country should be removed from the total number of wage earners.

Working assumptions for calculating net trade union density

In working out net trade union densities since 1953, the complete database of trade union associations and their membership figures in Malta have been used, as submitted by the director responsible for labour to the *Annual abstract of statistics* (1953 to 1998). In addition, net trade union density measurements are based on data in the annual reports submitted to the minister of labour and published in the Malta Government Gazette by the Registrar of Trade Unions. While the data might not be completely reliable, no other sources of official trade union membership data are available in Malta.

From such annual tables, the number of pensioners who are members of the two largest trade unions – the General Workers’ Union ([GWU](#)) and the Union of United Workers (Union Ħaddiema Magħqudin, [UHM](#)) – can be identified since 1987 in the case of GWU and since 1999 in the case of UHM. It is not known whether other trade unions have any pensioner members; if they do, their numbers are not likely to be nationally significant.

Moreover, some Maltese trade unions organise a number of self-employed workers. The Malta Union of Tourist Guides has around 630 members, of whom about half are self-employed tourist guides; UHM includes about 115 street sellers of goods – so-called Valletta Hawkers – who are self-employed. About 180 lotto agents who are economically dependent on Maltco Lotteries, but generally classified as self-employed, have their own trade union (see the [Maltese contribution](#) to the 2009 Eurofound comparative report on [Self-employed workers: Industrial relations and working conditions](#)). Other trade unions also organise some self-employed members – including the Medical Association of Malta ([MAM](#)), the [Malta Chamber of Pharmacists](#), the Maltese Psychological Association ([MPA](#)) and the Malta Union of Professional Psychologists (MUPP) – but there is no data pertaining specifically to any of the self-employed members of such unions. Through an educated guess, one might suppose that about a third of the members of these trade unions are self-employed. This estimation corresponds to about 350 persons in 2008.

The actual number of wage earners between 1953 and 1998 was interpolated from the *Annual abstract of statistics*. This provides separate figures for people in paid employment, and wage and salary earners in the private sector. For 2003 and 2008, data was derived from economic surveys published by the Economic Policy Division within the Ministry of Finance, the Economy and Investment ([MFIN](#)).

Finally, all of those workers need to be identified who, although wage earners and therefore part of the labour force, could not join a trade union since they were restricted from doing so by law

or by the conditions of military discipline that were integral to their engagement. In the period under review, this group consisted of workers within:

- Her Majesty's (H.M.) Forces when Malta was a British colony. In 1958, some 3,660 people worked in the British navy, army and air force; this figure declined to 306 persons in 1978 – the year before the closure of the British naval base in Malta;
- the [Malta Police Force](#), which has been in existence since 1814. It employed 1,070 police officers in 1953 and had 1,883 serving members in 2008. The number of officers increased in line with the increase of the Maltese population;
- the Armed Forces of Malta ([AFM](#)), which was set up in 1970. Membership of AFM rose steadily until 1973, at which point some 1,000 members were split off to set up the Dirġhajn il-Maltin labour corps. In 2008, AFM comprised 1,491 employees;
- Malta's prisons, where about 94 prison officers currently work, for a population of about 387 inmates. The number of prison officers has increased from 54 officers in 1953 to 94 officers to date to reflect the increase of prisoners;
- the Department of Civil Protection, which was set up in 1997. The number of workers within the department appears to have remained steady throughout the years, comprising 113 officers in 2000 and 118 officers in 2008;
- the Detention Services, set up in 2005 to deal with undocumented migrants, which employed 166 officers in 2008;
- various other corps that were engaged under military conditions. In chronological order, these are: Dirġhajn il-Maltin and Malta Pioneer Corps (Pijunieri), which were both set up in 1972–1973 and were replaced by the Dejma Corps; the latter existed from June 1981 to December 1989. Baħħar u Sewwi and Izra u Rabbi were set up in 1976. In 1977, some 8% of the employed population worked 'in military-style labour corps doing various jobs in the agricultural, industrial and public works fields' (King, 1979, p. 263). The Auxiliary Workers Training Scheme (AWTS) was the last labour corps set up in the late 1980s. According to an article in *Malta Today* in 2005, 'following its election in 1987, the Nationalist government established the Auxiliary Workers Training Scheme in order to absorb a number of unemployed workers to work in government services such as refuse disposal'. In 1989, some 4,322 persons worked in the AWTS scheme (NSO, 2001).

These details are significant because, for example, in the late 1970s over 9,000 workers were prevented from becoming members of trade unions in Malta – almost 10% of the population in paid employment.

Net trade union density

Taking all of these details into consideration, net trade union density can be calculated, as accurately as possible, on the basis of currently available data on the number of workers who:

- are members of trade unions;
- could become trade union members.

Dividing the number of trade union members by that of those who could become trade union members and multiplying the resulting figure by 100 provides the net trade union density expressed as a proportion of the total labour force. These statistics are collated in the table below.

The two main categories not accounted for in the calculations are those of students and unemployed people. Maltese trade unions are not prevented from enrolling individuals from these two categories as members. However, no indication exists of how interested these two population groups are in trade union membership. Moreover, they would tend to slip into employment at some point and would therefore be counted among wage and salary earners. If it were possible to account for such members, the net trade union density in Malta would be slightly lower over the years under examination.

Commentary

The computation of net trade union density is a better tool to examine and measure the disposition of workers to join trade unions in Malta. This rough first computation suggests that net trade union density is higher than gross trade union density, reaching a peak of 64.5% in 2003. Moreover, it implies that a major shift in net trade union density occurred in the decade 1978–1988 when workers were strongly mobilised to join a trade union by the two main political parties. During this period, the net trade union density increased significantly from an average of 45.4% between 1963 and 1978 to a staggering 59.8% between 1983 and 2008.

Overview of trade union membership and density rates in Malta, 1953–2008												
Year	1953	1958	1963	1968	1973	1978	1983	1988	1993	1998 ¹	2003	2008
A: Total trade union registration	19,304	21,238	30,067	30,205	38,198	38,890	48,609	63,413	73,523	81,703	86,061	84,172
B: Pensioner members of GWU and UHM (post 1978)	415 ¹	460 ¹	650 ¹	650 ¹	820 ¹	835 ¹	1,045 (GWU) ¹ 350 (UHM) ²	2,082 (GWU) 585 (UHM) ²	3,775 (GWU) 670 (UHM) ²	5,084 (GWU) 690 (UHM) ²	8,207	9,421
C: Self-employed persons registered as trade union members³	220	240	340	340	430	440	550	720	830	920	970	950
D: Employees who are trade union members	18,669	20,538	29,077	29,215	36,948	37,615	46,664	60,026	68,248	75,009	76,884	73,801
E: Wage and salary earners	59,580	67,250	63,690	74,790	83,127	95,945	93,627	109,421	115,979	122,152	122,712 (June)	128,250 (June)
F: Workers not allowed to join trade unions	4,724	4,941	4,239	3,952	6,607	8,522	3,609	7,745	3,397	3,707	3,569	3,873

G: Total wage and salary earners who can join trade unions (E less F)	54,856	62,309	59,451	70,838	76,520	87,423	90,018	101,676	112,582	118,445	119,143	124,377
Net trade union density (%)	34.0	33.0	48.9	41.2	48.3	43.0	51.8	59.0	60.6	63.3	64.5	59.3
Gross trade union density (%)	22.9	23.9	34.8	31.5	37.1	33.5	43.9	50.7	55.6	59.5	62.1	57.9

Notes: ¹ Estimate based on the ratio of GWU pensioners in 1987, the first year in which such data were collected, adjusted according to the annual total trade union members (as GWU membership was not always available).

² Estimate based on the ratio of UHM pensioners in 1999, the first year in which such data were collected, adjusted according to the annual number of UHM members.

³ Estimate based on trade union members in 2008, adjusted according to the annual number of trade union members.

References

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