

## Efforts to increase inter-union cooperation

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The difficult socio-economic situation has recently prompted Maltese trade unions to cooperate more with one another. In June 2004, the general secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) was asked to intervene to decrease the inter-union rivalry that has characterised the Maltese trade union movement for several decades.

In recent years it has become evident to many of those concerned that Maltese trade unions need to adapt to new circumstances - notably increasing levels of flux in the world of work and employment insecurity threatening many occupations - by enhancing inter-union solidarity and improving their services.

### Divisions between trade union blocks

Maltese trade unionism has two main blocks (MT0404102F (<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ef/observatories/eurwork/articles/the-development-and-current-situation-of-trade-unions-1>)) - the General Workers' Union (GWU (<http://www.gwu.org.mt/>)), which is Malta's largest union, and the Union of United Workers (Union Haddiema Maghqudin, UHM (<http://www.uhm.org.mt/>)). In 1978, GWU made a socio-political pact with the left-wing Malta Labour Party. This fusion, opposed by many people with right-leaning sympathies, led to many small trade unions merging into what became UHM in 1978. Apart from these two main unions, several others exist, many of which tend informally to sympathise with the right-wing Nationalist Party. Nine of these unions, together with UHM, are represented in the Confederation of Malta Trade Unions (CMTU). GWU did not accept an invitation to join CMTU. In 2003, GWU represented 54.9% of all Maltese union members, UHM 30.1%, and the other 31 unions the remaining 15% between them.

Malta's fervently bipolar political system has strengthened but also deeply divided trade unionism. The two major arms of the trade union movement have adopted divergent policies with regard to major recent political decisions. For example, in the 2003 referendum regarding EU accession, GWU campaigned against Malta's bid for membership. All the other unions, spearheaded by UHM, publicly supported the 'Yes' camp. Over the years, the rift between the unions has been increased by public accusations by their leaders and other officials. There has been intense competition for members and issues of representation at company level have sometimes culminated in industrial action. Newspapers, television and other media have also tended to accentuate and sustain this rift.

In recent years, the Workers' Participation Development Centre (WPDC) with the help of the British Trades Union Congress (TUC (<http://www.tuc.org.uk/>)) and other institutions have attempted to increase collaboration among Maltese unions. The unions have also showed positive signs of collaboration through the joint signature of collective agreements, representation on EU bodies and representation on the Malta Council for Economic and Social Development (MCESD (<http://www.mcesd.org.mt/>)), the country's highest forum for tripartite concertation.

### Meeting organised by GWU

Recently, GWU embarked on a new initiative, which led to the organisation of a round-table conference on 18 May 2004 entitled 'Working together'. The conference was meant to create the proper climate for inter-union cooperation. As well as GWU, the event was attended by the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT (<http://www.mut.org.mt/>)), the Malta Union of Bank Employees (MUBE (<http://www.mube.org/>)), the Malta Union of Midwives and Nurses (MUMN (<http://www.mumn.org/>)), the Union of Central Bank Employees (Union

Haddiema Bank Centrali, UBC), the Cabin Crew Union (CCU), the Association of Airline Engineers (AAE) and the Airline Pilots Association (ALPA). UHM and CMTU were notably absent from this conference.

At the event, Professor Edward Zammit, chair of the WPDC, argued that unions' power can be measured in several ways, including their membership numbers, the services they provide, their recognition at workplace level, their past achievements, their vision and their members' attitudes. Maltese unions currently represent 86,000 employees, or 63% of all employed people in Malta. This is very encouraging when compared with other EU countries, even though there has been a reduction in membership in the past three years which reflects the existing problems in the labour market. During the conference, several participants expressed their will to increase inter-union cooperation through other future activities.

## Visit by ETUC general secretary

Following the conference organised by GWU, John Monks, the general secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC (<http://www.etuc.org/>))), held meetings with Maltese trade unions on 29 and 30 June 2004. Both GWU and CMTU are affiliated to ETUC. The aim of the talks was to see how Maltese trade unions could increase their collaboration in areas such as participation in EU fora, sharing information and common issues such as occupational health and safety.

Mr Monks told the Maltese unions that he believed that they could set an example for other European trade unions by showing what could be achieved through more collaboration. Mr Monks argued that trade unions in Malta are in good shape. They are the strongest in the new EU Member States and stronger than unions in several EU 15 countries. Maltese unions need to enhance the collaboration among themselves for the benefit of members, their families and the country. Such collaboration is even more important in the current economic circumstances that Malta is passing through.

## Joint statement drafted

Based on the feedback from the participating unions, the general secretary of ETUC drafted a joint statement on how the Maltese unions could join forces to face their common future. The statement proposes two lines of action. First, there should be regular meetings held at least every three months, in which unions should consider issues including:

- inter-union relations, including at sectoral level, and a code of practice on these relations;
- employment and economic matters;
- EU developments and international affiliations;
- welfare and social matters; and
- recognition and collective bargaining

At the same time, a representative working group should be formed to explore the formation of a Malta Trade Union Confederation. This group would receive help from ETUC and draw up options for rules and procedures.

ETUC, with the help of the WPDC and signatory unions, would review these two exercises a year after their launch and propose a way forward.

## Commentary

Maltese trade unions have started to feel the need to increase cooperation and unity among themselves. While trade unionism was founded on the principle of solidarity, Maltese unions have arguably often tended to be short-sighted and to prefer their individual short-term advantage over the collective long-term good. To decrease inter-union rivalry that ultimately damages the interests of employees, there needs to be a change in the prevailing culture of distrust among unions. The joint statement, which still has to be signed by the unions, can be a useful tool to enhance the unions' influence on important future decisions in Malta. (Manwel Debono, Malta Workers' Participation Development Centre)