

GWU leaders re-elected after heated campaign

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At a congress held in October 2005, the General Workers' Union, the largest trade union in Malta, for the first time elected the five members of its administrative council by a secret ballot of delegates. All four incumbents who stood for re-election - including the secretary general - were successful in the election, which attracted considerable interest from the media.

The General Workers' Union (GWU (<http://www.gwu.org.mt/>)) is the largest trade union in Malta in terms of the number of workers it represents (over 50% of all union members) and also the variety of categories of workers within its fold (MT0404102F ([//www.eurofound.europa.eu/ef/observatories/eurwork/articles/the-development-and-current-situation-of-trade-unions-1](http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ef/observatories/eurwork/articles/the-development-and-current-situation-of-trade-unions-1))). It is divided into nine sections each of which is headed by a secretary, who is elected every four years from among its delegates. The administrative structure of GWU consists of a council composed of a president, vice-president, secretary general and two deputy secretaries general.

The autonomy of GWU's nine sections and the heterogeneity of its membership often tend to give rise to divisions among the union's rank and file. These divisions came into the open prior to the union's annual congress in October 2005, which had to confirm or elect the five members of the administrative council, who had been in office for the past four years. In the past, the appointment or confirmation of the administrative council members had always been achieved by consensus and there had never been a contest. In 2005, the situation was different as there was more than one nomination for each of the five posts, so a formal election had to take place, by secret ballot among delegates.

Heated contest

The lobbying done by each of the contenders for the GWU administrative council posts and the statements they made were naturally scrutinised by the media and given various interpretations. The political parties, either implicitly or explicitly, also tried to make their influence felt, according to commentators.

The net result was that the contenders, on the basis of the quarters from which they drew support, were widely classified under two labels, namely 'militants' or 'moderates'. The former were four of the incumbent administrative council members who were seeking re-election, while the latter were those contenders who sympathised with one of the incumbent deputy secretaries general, who was standing for the post of secretary general. None of them were content with these labels, as they argued that trade unionists very often have to strike a balance between militancy and moderation.

This labelling heightened the political overtones of the contest as, according to observers, the so-called militants seemed to be getting the support of the opposition Malta Labour Party, which has deep affinities with GWU, whereas the so-called moderates seemed to be more aligned to those who were advising a more accommodating approach. The latter group, according to commentators, seemed to be receiving more of the tacit support of the Nationalist Party, the party which is in government. The Nationalist Party was accused by the 'militants' of meddling in the internal affairs of the union and orchestrating a smear campaign against it.

The main focus was on the contest for the position of secretary general, the highest post in the GWU hierarchy, which was being contested by the incumbent, Tony Zarb, and one of his deputies, Emmanuel Micallef. Both contenders, by virtue of their high position in the union's organisational structure, seemed to commentators to have deep roots within the rank and file of union members, and both are regular contributors in GWU's newspapers. A close contest was anticipated.

However, the results of the election among union delegates confirmed by an overwhelming majority the incumbents on the administrative council. The sitting secretary general, Mr Zarb, polled 80% of the votes cast by the delegates. The other three incumbent members of the council who were standing for re-election were also successful, while the post vacated by the deputy secretary general who contested the secretary general post was filled by a candidate who was aligned with the so-called militants. The efforts of the challengers to change the administration of the union thus failed. All the candidates who were challenging the incumbents fared badly in terms of the number of votes they obtained.

Commentary

Despite some complaints about perceived unethical lobbying and calls for block voting, the GWU administrative council election, held in the presence of John Monks, the general secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation, was a democratic contest. The four union leaders standing for re-election seem to have won a vote of confidence in a very convincing manner. The election has therefore confirmed the democratic credentials of the union. These democratic credentials will be further enhanced if the elected members take greater heed of the minority group that voted against them. In a democracy, the voice of a minority, even if it is a small one, has to be respected. The campaign and canvassing conducted by the candidates may have brought the leaders closer to their constituents.

In the annals of the GWU, the 2005 congress was a historic event, since it was the first time that the union's delegates were asked by means of a ballot vote to choose the administrators of the union. The profound changes that the economic and political scenario has undergone have posed new dilemmas and challenges to trade union leaders. In such a changing scenario that gives rise to new challenges, the quest for an ideal tends to come more to the fore. The differences that this quest can very often give rise to may lead to rifts and regrouping within an organisation. In an organisation such as GWU, with a hierarchical structure and heterogeneous membership, this was bound to happen.

The intrepidity of the union leaders in such a scenario led to the formation of two alliances, each of which tried to steer the policy of GWU towards channels close to its agenda. The task of the leaders who have been confirmed in their office is to try to heal the wounds caused by the hostilities between these alliances so as not to let them fester and lead to a fracture. (Saviour Rizzo, Manwel Debono and Charles Tabone, Malta Workers' Participation Development Centre)