

MALTA'S LABOUR MOVEMENT:  
A COMPARISON WITH LABOUR IN  
DEVELOPING NATIONS

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THE purpose of this article is to compare certain characteristics of the Maltese labour movement with general features of labour movements in developing nations in order to assess the degree of the Maltese labour movement's development.

GENERAL FEATURES

There are certain characteristics of the labour movements in developing nations. Although individual movements differ from the stereotype that follows, Millen suggests a great number of the developing nations have the following features in common.

(1) Quite often the unions are weak financially and have to depend upon government, political parties or other sources for support.

(2) An elite group leads the unions and these leaders are at times divorced from the rank and file. This elite is composed of the educated, foreign language speaking, who spoke the language of colonial officials. These individuals are also conversant with industrial relations concepts.

(3) Instead of engaging in collective bargaining the unions will push for specific demands. Neither labour nor management frequently are sophisticated for collective bargaining covering a wide range of issues, as a result the written agreement is a rarity.

(4) The craft structure is virtually unknown because the craft workers have largely stayed outside the mainstream of industrialisation. The labour force is overwhelmingly unskilled. Generally the earliest type of union was organisation of a plant. In many countries national organisation only includes railway workers because of the nature of their work. General unions also developed which placed workers of various skills and industries into one organisation.

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(5) In Asia and Africa unlike the West, workers solidarity spread first among white collar workers rather than factory workers or agricultural labourers. Millen subscribes the reasons for this: steady employment by colonial employers; also literary and education made the workers more frustrated by the discrimination of European employers.<sup>1</sup>

(6) In many developing nations the labour movement has been suppressed or become a tool of the state. Many leaders of developing nations, even former labour leaders, and economists have argued that unions can retard development by diverting resources from capital formation, disrupting production and interfering with efficiency.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE MALTA LABOUR MOVEMENT

In comparing the general features of labour movements in developing nations and the Malta labour movement's characteristics, it is necessary to specify the Maltese labour movement. Thirty-four different unions of employees with a declared membership of 36,175 were registered in 1974. Because some organisations had not submitted 1974 data, the number of people actually in such organisations is probably understated by about 2,000. Complete 1973 data indicated a total union membership of 38,170. The General Workers' Union contains 25,317 members and is the dominant union force. Two other organisations have over 3,000 members, the Malta Government Employees' Union and the Malta Union of Teachers. The others are relatively small. Sixteen of the 34 unions have less than 100 members. Seven have over 100 but less than 200 members. Seven have over 200 but less than 900 members.<sup>3</sup> These smaller organisations along with the MGEU and MUT are found mainly in the public sector. Overshadowing all of these is

<sup>1</sup> Bruce H. Millen: *The Political Role of Labour in Developing Countries* (Brookings Institute, Washington D.C.) 1963, pp. 20-36.

<sup>2</sup> Asoka Mehta, 'The Mediating Role of the Trade Union in Underdeveloped Countries', *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, October 1957; Karl de Schweinitz, 'Industrialization, Labour Control, and Democracy', *Ibid.*, July 1959; Adolf Sturmthal, 'Unions and Economic Development', *Ibid.*, January, 1960. Adolf Sturmthal, *Comparative Labour Movements Ideological Roots and Institutional Development* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1972) 143-150.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Clifford Koziara, *The Labour Market and Wage Determination in Malta*, (Malta University Press, 1975) 13-17.

the GWU with sections for private, public and United Kingdom employees. Closely allied with the GWU is the socialist oriented Malta Labour Party which has been in power since 1971. The GWU-MLP alliance dominates the Malta labour movement and the other organisations quite often are in conflict with the GWU-MLP partnership.<sup>4</sup> The discussion which follows will primarily equate the Maltese labour movement with the GWU-MLP alliance although it should be remembered that the GWU-MLP are not representative of the entire labour movement.

#### COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS

(1) The pattern in most developing nations is of relatively weak unions. Where tolerated these unions are financially poor and dependent on political parties and government for support. The situation in Malta is somewhat different in that the GWU is relatively strong financially, its assessments are £M5.20 per year; additionally it engages in a number of enterprises including a union press and a tourist operation. To some extent it has been dependent upon the MLP for support and significant gains have been made through government action which supplement collective bargaining accomplishments. At the same time the MLP is dependent upon the cooperation and support of the GWU. Although it is questionable as to the precise nature and the degree of dominance in the relationship, it can be concluded that a symbiotic relationship does exist.

The other organisations in comparison with unions in developing nations are also relatively strong financially. However these organisations, officially, generally assume a politically independent posture. This is largely because these are public employee organisations and political activity is prohibited.

(2) The leadership is also quite different from the elites mentioned earlier. The union organisation, labour legislation, and even industrial relations terminology have been patterned and influenced by the British labour movement. The leadership of a number of union organisations worked for the United Kingdom Defence Establishments. However the large gap between the leadership and the rank and file which continues to plague industrial relations in Great Britain and a number of other countries, does not exist in Malta. Because of the smallness of the country, a homogeneous population, the small size of the labour organisations and enter-

<sup>4</sup> For a statement of the mutual interests of the GWU and MLP see the *Joint Election Manifesto of 1971*.

prise level bargaining, there is an intimacy within the labour movement; fractious and harmonious, which cannot be found elsewhere in Europe.<sup>5</sup>

The rank and file has entré to labour union leaders and labour party leaders. Also enterprise rather than national bargaining contributes to membership involvement because the workers become familiar with leaders and issues. This close contact makes it less likely leaders and led will have contradictory life styles.

(3) In many developing nations labour movements push for a specific demand rather than bargain on a wide range of issues; as a result the written collective agreement is a rarity. In Malta's private sector this is not true, sophisticated signed collective agreements covering a wide range of issues have been reached between the GWU and employers. The Malta Employers Association and the GWU have agreed to a contract format. As a result the language of the agreements are quite often identical although the terms vary. In the Malta Government and United Kingdom Defence establishments consultation takes place and the scope of consultations is either limited to a single issue such as a pay claim or fewer issues than what are raised in the private sector.

(4) One feature which the Maltese labour movement does have in common with labour movements in many other developing nations is plant level bargaining. Although plant level or enterprise bargaining takes place in Western Europe it usually acts as a supplement to national or industry-wide agreements. Malta has experimented with industry level bargaining but because of various factors including differences in ability to pay and the failure of employers to maintain a united front, enterprise level bargaining is the norm.

An additional common feature is the general union structure as opposed to the craft or industry structure. However the origin of the General Workers Union and its predecessors comes from both skilled and lesser skilled employees in the British Defence establishments, the drydocks and the port. Many of the craftsmen have remained outside the labour movement, again paralleling the pattern of developing nations, either because they were self-employed or worked in very small establishments.

<sup>5</sup> Even the 'large' General Workers Union is divided into sections which have a great deal of autonomy. There are eight sections currently. The largest has over 5,000 members, the smallest has slightly more than a thousand.

(5) Worker solidarity in Malta spread not from the white collar workers as in Africa and Asia, but from workers at the drydocks and port who came in contact with foreign labour leaders, union members, labour newspapers and ideas. However the oldest continuing labour union is the Malta Union of Teachers which dates from 1919. This organisation was established not as a professional society but as a labour union to attain better wages.

(6) In many developing nations the labour movement has been viewed as an obstacle to economic growth. It has been held in check to prevent work stoppages and increased consumption. In Malta the labour movement preceded independence by half a century. The major development in Malta's labour history was the organisation and growth of the General Workers' Union in World War II. Article 43 of the constitution gives citizens the right to freedom of association and specifically allows them to form or belong to 'trade or other unions or associations for the protection of their interests'. The union-employer relationship, following the British pattern is generally of a voluntary rather than a legislated nature.

The labour movement in Malta has been a 'free' labour movement. However it has also become a highly politicized movement. This means that it operates under constraints imposed by a unified party-union relationship. As a result the GWU is more cooperative with government when the MLP is in power. Critics have charged that the GWU is not able to function as a free trade union. On the other hand the GWU maintains that it is in the best interest of the workers to follow a cooperative policy with government.

There have been suggestions that the GWU should disentangle itself from the union-party alliance. However when Western Europe union-party relations are taken into account, and this is important because the GWU does view itself as a Western European labour organisation, it can be seen that the relations between political parties and labour unions have formed a vital part of the political systems in these countries. Most Western European labour movements pursue their objectives through alliances with political parties, and most parties take into account the objectives of the trade unions. This is because many of the union objectives are at the very core of political controversy. Workers' participation, income distribution, economic growth, unemployment and inflation are just some examples of such issues. One writer has summarized the party-union relationship controversy:

political parties aspiring or clinging to power can no more afford to disregard the vital concerns of major trade union groups than trade unions can afford to abstain from participation in the political process. If there is a choice, it is not over the principle of party-union interaction but over degrees of commitment, links that might become too confining, rights of reciprocal representation, and subtle distinction between what is justifiable and what is excessive influence.<sup>6</sup>

The GWU has engaged in both political and economic action to improve the position of the Maltese worker. Although political affiliation may incur some costs as far as immediate gains are concerned, the GWU perceives a long-run betterment for its membership as worth the price. However it is also necessary for government to deliver to maintain the support of the rank-and-file. Failure to do so in a reasonable period of time could lead to alienation, defections, and defeat.

#### ASSESSMENT

From the comparison and contrasts it can be seen that Malta's labour movement does not fit the model of a developing nation's labour movement. Probably the most important Malta similarity to the model is the presence of enterprise level bargaining and the general structure of the labour movement. The most important contrasts relate to the sophistication of the labour movement and its political and economic strength. Malta rather than fitting the pattern of labour movements in developing nations comes closer to the Western European patterns diverse as they may be, and particularly resembles the British movement in a number of ways. But Malta's small size gives it a tremendous advantage over the labour movements of Western Europe in that the differences between leaders and led are not as great as in a number of European countries and the intra-movement communication process is almost a daily occurrence contributing to union democracy. Probably the most interesting area for further study is the development of more insight to union-party relations and the way these relations evolve over time.

In brief it may be concluded that the Maltese labour movement approaches the sophistication of labour movements found in developed countries and the characteristics attributed to the model of unions in developing nations has limited applicability to Malta.

<sup>6</sup> John P. Windmuller, 'European Labor and Politics', *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, (October, 1974) Volume 28, Number 1, p.3.