

## Chapter 4

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# **The Perceptions of Trade Unions by their Members: A Survey Report on Trade Unions in Malta<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

During the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, trade union membership in many countries has registered a decline. This downward trend was particularly severe in France, the United Kingdom, Italy and the Netherlands (Crouch, 1992, p. 177). The 1997 ILO Report has commented on the decline of trade union power and membership relative to the workforce. Between 1975 and 1995, the overall mean percentage of union density in Europe declined from 50.1% to 43.1% (Blaschke, 2000, p. 221). If one were to exclude a number of Northern European countries - Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Belgium - where, maybe due to the presence of a union managed employment scheme the union density has increased - the mean density of the rest of Europe in 1995 would have been a paltry 32% (*ibid.*).

This decrease in trade union membership can be explained partly in terms of the ongoing economic restructuring which entailed large-scale privatisation policies and mergers. Other contributing

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factors include the political shift towards market pragmatism and the neo-liberal anti-union policies pursued by a number of governments. These posed direct challenges to the bargaining power of trade unions whose legitimacy could no longer be taken for granted in the midst of such threats to their survival and sustenance.

Malta is one exception where this membership crisis has not (yet) hit the trade union movement. Indeed, as Table 1 below indicates, Malta has experienced a high and increasing level of unionisation, registering a consistent increase in membership even during the years when there was a reduction in the labour supply:

*Table 1: Density of Maltese Trade Union Membership*

Year	Gainfully Occupied Persons <sup>1</sup>	Trade Union Membership <sup>2</sup>	Union Density %
1995	139,483	78,126	56.1
1996	140,227	79,217	56.3
1997	138,753	80,972	58.3
1998	137,476	81,983	59.6
1999	138,514	84,033	60.6
2000	137,284	86,047	62.6
2001	138,204	87,158	63.1

*Sources: 1- Economic Division (2000). 2- Registrar of Trade Union Reports. Note that, out of the total number of union members, in 2001, 7,073 are pensioners registered with the GWU (5,672) or with the UHM (1,401).*

In order to explain this consistent increase in local trade union membership, one has to refer to both political and economic scenarios. The political scene in Malta is dominated by two political parties: the Nationalist Party (NP) and the Malta Labour Party (MLP). Since 1971, the struggle for power has practically been a straight contest between these two parties with one of them winning power by polling a few thousand votes more than the

other. Each of these two parties, whether in government or opposition, has actively influenced workers in their choice of union affiliation (Baldacchino, 1990, p. 67). In their strategy to reinforce their hold over the electorate, and especially in the early 1980s, each of these political parties has urged workers, directly or otherwise, to join the trade union that is more sympathetic to its ideology and more amenable to its policy. This party mobilisation in a highly polarised political climate has contributed to swell the ranks of trade unions.

The shape and development of the Maltese economy has also been conducive to the growth of trade unions. The large size of the public sector, by itself responsible for over a third of employment, is another important factor contributing to trade union membership (COS, 1999, p. 7). This is the sector where trade unions are traditionally strong (Grixti, 1994).

It must also be noted that throughout the nineties the Maltese economy was shielded from the repercussions of the depression hitting most advanced industrial countries. The rate of unemployment up to the late nineties was just 5.5% and the economy registered sustained economic growth. By and large, the Maltese trade unions were able to reinforce their ranks as they juggled to reach compromises with both the Government and private employers and, in the process, effectively raising the purchasing power of the workers' pay packet.

The weekly cost of living adjustment (COLA) based on the retail price index given during the period 1990-1998 amounted to Lm15.75c. This is equivalent to a 52.7% increase in the minimum wage over a decade (from Lm29.88 per week in 1989 to Lm47.38c in 1998). To unionised workers, this COLA was supplemented by wage increases stipulated in collective agreements signed between management and trade unions at the enterprise level. These agreements are generally reviewed every three years. An evaluation of 11 collective agreements signed in the 1990's reveals that the weekly pay packet of unionised workers over a period of three years

registered an overall increase of between 14.8% and 42.7%. The biggest increase was registered in an enterprise in the metal sector that tends to generate high export revenue.

The net outcome of collective bargaining at both the national and enterprise levels has been a significant and tangible increase in living standards over a prolonged period. As a result, trade union membership has come to be regarded as an effective means of improving wages and securing other extrinsic rewards from work.

Additionally, union membership is widely regarded as a form of personal insurance. It protects members against political discrimination in the context of political polarisation, where political considerations tend to intrude and dominate many aspects of everyday life. It also protects members in cases of disciplinary action by employers and ensures fair treatment in the allocation of overtime, promotions and other benefits. As a result, the high level of trade union membership in Malta may be seen as another way of expressing and practising the traditional 'client status' which is characteristic of many aspects of Maltese life (Boissevain, 1974; Zammit, 1984).

It should be noted, however, that bitter confrontations between the Nationalist Government and the General Workers' Union have tended to flare with alarming frequency during recent years. One major issue in the Union's disagreement with Government's policy in seeking EU membership at the next enlargement. Government accuses the GWU of having a political agenda in support of the Labour Party while the Union accuses the Government of seeking to destroy the GWU by taking all possible initiatives to suppress its legitimate actions. Nevertheless, some solutions that would go some way to satisfy both sides have always been worked out in the end. Trade union statistics suggest that trade unions have emerged unscathed from these disputes.

Thus, unlike their counterparts in most European countries, Maltese trade unions have not yet undergone the bitter experience of seeing their membership diminished and their power eroded.

Does this mean however that they are immune from such threats to their bargaining power? Currently, the Maltese economy is sending ominous signals. Indeed the economic shock wave that impinged upon trade union activities in several European countries seems to have belatedly reached Maltese shores. The intensification of global competition is also forcing the Maltese Government to adopt tough monetary measures, reduce public expenditure and privatise utilities and public enterprises. The need for economic restructuring and the pressure being exerted by the EU to align our economy to its standards in anticipation of membership is forcing Government to reduce public deficit through higher tax revenues, raising utility tariffs and dismantling the protective barriers of the Malta's economy.

The steady economic growth of the past decade has been characterised by heavy public spending on infrastructural projects and a consumer driven boom buttressed by a policy of purchasing industrial peace at whatever cost. The austere economic measures currently being undertaken or contemplated to reverse these policies is posing unprecedented challenges to Maltese trade unions that might force them to reset their bearings. To date, the predominant local trade union response to any measures that threaten to lower living standards, raise unemployment or reduce welfare benefits, has been to raise a popular outcry and resist forcefully...while expressing a readiness to negotiate on these matters.

### ***Surveying the Perceptions of Trade Union Members***

In order to avoid stagnation, unions are being constrained to find adequate responses to these challenges. As democratic institutions, their responses must refer to a framework set by their constituents. On the basis of their work and non-work experiences and aspirations, trade union members may develop a set of assumptions that provide a paradigm within which they expect their

organisation to function. A decoding of this paradigm may therefore provide useful information for trade union leaders to help them and policy makers in their efforts to respond effectively to these new challenges.

The Workers' Participation Development Centre (WPDC) of the University of Malta conducted an empirical survey with the specific aim of exploring and evaluating the perceptions held by trade union members of their own trade union. The aim was to present an overview of their varying expectations and responses. The survey was conducted between August and November 1999 and was based on a structured questionnaire that formed the basis of an interview. This was administered on a systematic random sample of 584 Maltese trade union members. Each trade union, irrespective of its size, was represented by a minimum of five members in the sample, as long as it was registered as an official union with the Director of Labour during 1998. Each union was then given an additional member in the sample for every 300 workers on its register. The representation of trade union membership in the sample reflects the size of each organisation. As a result, the two largest Maltese trade unions, the General Workers' Union (GWU) and the Union of United Workers (UHM) had a total of 488 members in this sample, constituting 83.6% of the total: a fair representation of their total membership strength. (See Table 2 below):

*Table 2 – Trade Union Representation in Sample*

Name of Union	Number of Respondents in Sample	Percent (%)
GWU	314	53.8
UHM	174	29.8
MUT	24	4.1
MUBE	18	3.1

Name of Union	Number of Respondents in Sample	Percent (%)
MUMN	10	1.7
Unjon Haddiema Bank Ċentrali	5	0.9
Union Periti Awtorita Ippjanar	5	0.9
Drydocks Senior Staff (DSESU)	5	0.9
Union of Licensed Tourist Guides	5	0.9
Casino Employees Union	4	0.7
MAM – The Medical Union	4	0.7
Union of Cabin Crew	4	0.7
Airline Pilots Association	4	0.7
Unjon Haddiema Università	3	0.5
Lotto Receivers Union	2	0.3
EneMalta Professional Officers Union	1	0.2
Nor Specified	2	0.3
Total	584	100%

### The Questionnaire

Most questionnaires were filled by respondents on their own at the place of work and were collected by an official of the WPDC who was always present at the place of work when the questionnaires were being filled. On some occasions the help of this official was summoned to assist in filling this questionnaire. On many occasions, the assistance of the shop steward or the union staff representative was availed of in order to distribute the questionnaires to the members selected in the sample. However, it was made amply clear in advance that any union representative was not to have any say whatsoever in the selection of respondents or in the determination of their replies. The questions dealt with various issues relating to the *raison d'être* of trade unions and their organisation; their operations at the workplace and beyond. The

presentation of the findings of this survey is sub-divided into three parts namely:

- *The Aims of Trade Unions,*
- *Trade Unions and Labour Issues at the Workplace*  
and
- *The Search for a Broader Agenda.*

The first part deals with how the members perceive the rationale upon which their trade union is operating. The second part evaluates the members' perceptions of their trade union's behaviour in dealing with issues directly related to the 'workplace'. The third part examines the members' views about the broader agenda of trade unions and the need to update this agenda to be able to meet the challenges of modern times.

### ***The Rationale of Trade Unions***

There seems to be widespread recognition of the rational base of trade unions in the literature on Industrial Relations throughout the twentieth century. All definitions of trade unions concur that their main purpose is to improve and promote the living standards of their members (Allen, 1996, p. 49). Indeed, trade unions are seen primarily as agents constantly striving to improve the conditions of work of their members through bargaining and negotiation. If or when constrained to pursue political action, they do so as "an adjunct to extend the scope or coverage of bargaining or to protect the right to organise and bargain" (Kelly, 1998, p. 52). This role of trade unionism is reinforced by the notion that affluence is not a divinely ordained privilege granted to a small elite but something that can be attained by a larger segment of the population through social engineering of the market value of work. There is a cultural assumption that affluence is not a dream but a goal that can be achieved by means of productive work. This has bred an instrumental attitude towards work that has been



transferred to trade unionism in the sense that workers expect their trade unions to use their bargaining powers to fulfil their aspirations (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1968).

These views contrast sharply with the ideological Marxist belief that the immediate issues of wages and working conditions ought to be transcended by a larger purpose. Trade unions should serve the interest of the working class as a whole rather than the interest of those workers who comprise their membership. The original role ascribed by Marx and Lenin to trade unions was to use the bargaining power to emancipate the working class (Lozovsky, 1935, p. 18). According to this view, trade unions, as focal points for the organisation of the working class, are expected to rally round all the workers outside their ranks and transcend the narrow confines of particular workplace demands by harnessing their energies towards the emancipation of the downtrodden (Lenin, 1960, I-iv, p. 317).

These Marxist views find their echo even in the modern literature on Industrial Relations. Flanders argues that trade unions should operate with the dual role of 'sword of justice' and 'vested interest' (Flanders, 1970, p. 15). However concerned they may be about sectional interest of their members, they have to be aware of being a part of a larger society (*ibid.*, p. 40) Their activities are aimed both at defending the worker community and at ensuring that change is induced by a sense of social justice and equity. Hyman (1999) contends that, at present, the role of 'sword of justice' does not feature prominently in the perceptions of trade union members and officials.

The findings of the Malta survey tend to confirm Hyman's views: the majority of Maltese trade union members define a trade union as an organisation that should be primarily concerned with 'vested interest' rather than with being a 'sword of justice'. The great majority of respondents (69.7%) believe that a trade union should look after the interests of its members to obtain the best possible conditions of work rather than strive to ensure that social justice

is meted to all workers, including those who are not unionised (25.9%). The higher grade professionals express the highest instrumental attitude (81.5%), whereas the routine non-manual workers express the lowest (62.7%).

### **Role of Trade Unions**

The perceived aim of trade unions and the actual role expected by their members provide some contrasting views. In response to a question about the role of trade unions, more than half (57%) believe that the main role of trade unions should be to safeguard workers' rights, whereas 26.4 % state that the trade unions should strive to achieve workers' solidarity. However, solidarity may be simply perceived as simply a means of safeguarding workers' rights. If so, the survey data shows that the spirit of collectivism features prominently in the consciousness of workers ( $57 + 26.4 = 83.4\%$ ). The roles the members expect their trade unions to play, and the perceived aims of trade unions, could be seen as complementary. This is shown in Table 3 below:

*Table 3: Perceived Trade Union Role (all figures in %)*

	Offer individual service	Seek unity among workers	Safeguard workers' rights at place of work	Non-Response	Total
High grade professionals	11.1	18.5	66.7	3.7	4.6
Low grade professionals	14.7	27.5	56.9	0.9	18.7
Routine non-manual	20.0	18.7	60.0	1.3	12.9
Technicians and supervisors	14.8	36.1	45.9	3.2	10.5

	Offer individual service	Seek unity among workers	Safeguard workers' rights at place of work	Non-Response	Total
Skilled manual	11.6	28.9	57.0	2.5	20.8
Semiskilled and unskilled	14.3	24.2	58.4	3.1	27.6
Total	N=67	N=154	N=333	N=30	N=584

Moreover, an instrumental orientation does not exclude a concern with humanitarian ideals. Indeed, 55.7 % of respondents believe that their trade union is very much concerned with the rights of people with special needs while keeping a watchful eye to ensure that these rights are safeguarded. There is also a significant minority (41.3%) who think that Maltese trade unions are not really much concerned with this issue.

### **Trade Unions and Social Policy**

One social policy issue which is currently discussed in Malta is that of an unsustainable public deficit and an increasing welfare gap. The majority of respondents maintain that trade unions should play an active role in the reform of the social security system as currently being advocated by Government. Only 6.2% are of the opinion that this is exclusively a matter for politicians, in which trade unions should not get involved. By and large, respondents tend to be equally divided between those who advocate a policy of resistance and one of negotiation. The former (45.8% of the sample) believe that trade unions should conduct strong campaigns against any measure aimed at reducing social services benefits. There is however an almost equal number (46%) who think that the trade unions should negotiate with Government in order to find an acceptable solution to this issue.

The workers who would like their trade unions to take a militant

stand on this issue and conduct a campaign to counter any attempts to reduce social security benefits, tend to be the following: the older age group, male workers, workers with primary or secondary education and the semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers. Conversely there tends to be a stronger support for collaboration among female workers (57.1%), employees with post secondary and tertiary education (59.0%), and routine non-manual workers (66.7%).

Although the responses on the issue of welfare reform diverge between a policy of resistance and one of collaboration, there seems to be consensus among respondents that the trade union should play an active role in this matter.

### ***Trade Unions and Labour Issues at the Workplace***

One of the trade unions' main achievements at the workplace has been to reduce the employees' dependence on the arbitrary will of their employers. They have effectively constructed a social order embodied in a code of industrial rights. In other words, while the prerogatives of management have been retained, the workers have achieved greater control on their working lives (Ross, 1989, p. 42).

### ***Efforts to Neutralise Unions***

Since the inroad into managerial prerogatives through trade union action has become established, some employers are making serious attempts to defuse the 'us and them' dichotomy by setting up systems aimed at propagating a feeling of good will and reciprocity. The development of human resource management forms part of this managerial strategy. Rather than engaging in a direct attack on the trade union mechanism, the employers try to bypass it and address the workers directly at the shop floor level (Geary, 1995, p. 377). The techniques of human resource management are seen by some as a means of communication that could mute the unions

(Terry, 1995, p. 221). As this management system has grown in extent and sophistication, ambivalent feelings towards it have developed among trade unionists, workplace representatives as well as rank-and-file employees. Human resource management and its concomitant practices of team work, quality circles and total quality management, have enabled managers to change their image of being “mere fire-fighters engaged in handling disputes and collective bargaining; developing a wider language within management as to how to regulate labour; and saying to workers that something new is going on” (Edwards, 1995, p. 607). HRM does not necessarily exclude trade union activity and several studies show that coexistence between the two is possible (TUC, 1994).

Nevertheless, some valid questions may be raised about the workers’ perceptions of this managerial strategy. Is this technique enabling employers to define ‘acceptable’ work behaviour unilaterally? Are trade unions, as a result, becoming redundant at the workplace? Do Maltese workers perceive a hidden managerial agenda? Do they endorse the implied message in this approach or do they simply see these managerial techniques as a development in the evolutionary process towards a more humanised workplace?

The belief that there is a managerial strategy at the workplace to neutralise trade unions does not seem to be widespread among Maltese trade union members. Only one out of three (33.4%) respondents believe that employers are devising a system that would render trade unions redundant. Conversely, 65.9% were confident that there is no evidence of such integrationist attempts from the employers’ side.

The belief that employers are contriving to by-pass the unions seems to be more prevalent among skilled and unskilled manual workers. The differences in the opinions held by this group of workers (traditionally the backbone of trade unionism) and other categories of workers about attempts to erode trade unions and their power is quite significant. These trends are shown in Table 4:

**Table 4: Are employers devising strategies to bypass trade unions? (All figures in %)**

	Yes	No	Non-response
Higher grade professionals and administrators	18.5	81.5	—
Lower grade professionals and higher grade technicians	32.1	66.1	1.8
Routine non-manual workers	21.3	78.7	—
Lower grade technicians and supervisors	27.9	72.1	—
Skilled manual workers	42.1	57.0	0.9
Semi/Un- skilled manual workers	39.8	59.6	0.6
TOTAL	N=195	N=385	N=4

Other variables – age, gender and education - do not explain any significant differences of opinion about this matter.

### **Consensual Arrangements**

In this heightened competitive market, the statement that the cooperation of management and labour is crucial for the viability of the firm is no longer treated as a platitude by trade union officials or worker representatives. The imperatives of the globalised economy have affected their attitudes. This central role of trade union representation at the workplace seems to be more evident in Britain where shop stewards tend to take “an ever increasing lead of employee representation through grievance and disciplinary procedures” (Terry, 1995, p. 207). Due to their proximity to the workforce, they command greater loyalty than trade union full time officials (*ibid.*, p. 203). The remoulding of corporatist ideology, based on cooperative relationships and on a pragmatic appreciation of the benefits that accrue from support rather than confrontation with management, must have affected the role of shop stewards.

How is the ‘new’ role of these representatives perceived by Maltese trade union members? Do these retain their roles as effective

intermediaries between union, workers and management? Or are they incorporated into the management system? Quite a high percentage (58.8%) still see the union representatives at the workplace as an effective link between workers and unions; whereas only one in five (19.4%) think that they have been assimilated into the management system. This is shown in Table 5 below:

*Table 5: Perceptions of the Union Representative at the Workplace (figures in %)*

Good link between union and workers	58.8
Good link between workers and management	17.9
Part of management/ Tool of management to manipulate workers	19.4
Non-Response	3.9

Total No= 584 (100%)

Occupational class has also proved to be a significant variable in the respondents' perception of their shop stewards. Once again the skilled manual workers among all occupational categories stand out as the group with the most negative perceptions of their union representatives at the workplace. One in three of these workers (33.1%) think that their shop stewards have become 'part of management' or 'a tool in management hands to manipulate the workers'. All the other occupational categories score less than 20% on this count. The nearest that come to the manual workers in percentage terms are the unskilled and semi-skilled with 17.4%.

### **Disputes at the Workplace**

The current corporatist arrangements might also affect the trade union policy in dealing with workplace disputes. The majority of respondents do not see a confrontational approach as a predominant feature between trade union and management at the workplace level. The most prevalent perception is that the trade union seeks to reach a compromise whenever there is a dispute at the workplace. To do this, 70.8% of respondents think that the trade union

strives to strike the best deal on their behalf with least amount of trouble. Only one in ten (9.9%) believe that their trade union adopts a rigid, confrontational approach. In contrast, 18.4% see their union as being very weak in its dealings with management. This belief is more prevalent among males (20.8%) than females (11.8%). The occupational categories who perceive their trade union as weak in its handling of workplace disputes are the higher-grade professionals (29.6%) and the skilled manual workers (27.3%).

One possible controversial issue at the work place may be related to management's attempts at rendering the workforce more flexible and adaptable to the exigencies of the market. To a trade union whose mission is that of uniting rather than dividing the workforce, any form of flexibility introduced by management is likely to raise a dilemma. The following Table 6 indicates that divided opinions exist on flexibility among the workforce. Although they are generally inclined to cooperate in the introduction of various 'flexibility' measures that may benefit their firms, they would always like their union to negotiate in securing the best deal.

*Table 6. What should a trade union do if or when 'flexibility' is introduced at the Workplace? (all figures in %)*

Forms of 'Flexibility'	Should not approve	Should approve but negotiate adequate compensation	Non-Response
(a) Change in work schedule to reduce overtime	40.8	40.0	19.2
(b) Job Rotation	28.5	53.7	17.8
(c) Increased responsibilities and work load	30.9	51.3	17.8



The above differences of opinion among respondents emerge more clearly when analysed by gender, age, education and occupational levels. These are discussed in turn below.

### (a) Changes in Work Schedule

The division among respondents emerges clearly on the introduction of changes in working time which may result in a reduction of overtime and hence also of earnings. The members are equally divided between those who would approve of such changes and those who resist such a change whatever the circumstances. However, those who approve expect their union to negotiate adequate compensation. Further analysis shows that:

- Males (52.4%) tend to resist such a change more than females (46.6%).
- The younger age group (16 –25 years) expresses the strongest resistance (62.5%) whereas the 37 - 47 age group expresses the least level of resistance (26.6%).
- Among the occupational categories, the skilled manual workers (77.4%) express the strongest resistance while the higher grade professionals (26.9%) express the least.
- Workers with a lower level of education express more resistance (56%) than those with a higher level (41.6%).

### (b) Job Rotation

- The 16-25 age group expresses the highest level of resistance (49.3%) whereas the 37-47 group expresses the lowest (28.7%).
- Females (40.3%) tend to oppose such changes in work organisations more than males (32.3%).
- The skilled manual workers (47.3%) are the most resistant whereas the lower grade professionals are the least (25.8%).

- Workers with a low level of education are more resistant (37%) than those with a higher level of education (30.4%).

### **(c) Increased Workload and Responsibilities**

- Once again, the 16-25 age group expresses the highest opposition (57.7%) while the 26-36 group expresses the least (33.3%).
- Females (48.8%) are more opposed to such changes than males (33.2%).
- Workers with a low level of education (43.6%) would oppose more than workers with a higher level of education (29.1%).
- The semiskilled (47.3%) express the highest level of resistance while the higher grade professionals express the lowest (26.9%).

Cross tabulations consistently indicate that the highest resistance to all forms of flexibility is found among the younger generation, workers with low level of education, manual workers and females.

However what emerges most clearly from the data is that most respondents are quite prepared to consider the introduction of changes that may be beneficial to their enterprises – so long as the trade unions get involved in negotiations to secure their interests. This also suggests that the unions still enjoy a wide measure of legitimacy in their members' views.

### ***Trade Union Strategy***

In order to confront current economic challenges, trade unions in many countries are looking for a new strategy. Governments everywhere are reducing public expenditure and privatising utilities while employers are clamouring for the widest latitude of flexibility

and rationality at plant level. This very often entails lean production practices and downsizing. For trade unions and workers these may sound like euphemistic terms for redundancies or simply as 'doing more with less'.

Trade unions are compelled to take new initiatives aimed at increasing their effectiveness. Their new agenda may include: (a) a re-evaluation and enhancement of its image; (b) the designation of policies to cope with the new economic environment; (c) strategies to encourage industrial democracy; and (d) a re-assessment of its relations with the state (Kester & Pinaud, 1996). The views of respondents on each of these items are discussed in turn.

#### *(a) Trade Union Image*

In contemporary society, new social movements often compete on the protest stage with the old established movements like trade unions (Hall, 1992). In their drive to promote and legitimate their particular claims, these new movements often provide a range of identities that may cut across and fragment the older movements. Many action groups or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are active on the protest stage. Trade unions can take the role of seasoned NGOs and act as a bridge between the new protest groups and society at large (Thomas, 1999, p. 14). Rather than becoming fragmented, a trade union can reinforce and strengthen its image by taking such a leading role aimed at bringing about a fusion of identities (Kelly, 1998, p. 121). Such amalgamation or cooperation with other movements must not therefore be seen as a sign of weakness but as part of the trade union renewal. What do trade union members think about this issue?

On the issue of alignment with other movements, the respondents are almost equally divided between those who do not see much value in such alliances (52.5%) against 46% who think that the unions should follow such a course. The lower the occupational scale one goes, the more vocal the support tends to be. On the

other hand, the majority of the professional and routine non-manual workers do not believe in such alliances (Table 7).

*Table 7. Should trade unions join forces with other voluntary organisations? (all figures in %)*

Occupational Groups	Yes	No	Non-Response
High grade professionals & administrators	29.6	66.7	3.7
Lower grade professionals	44.0	55.0	1.0
Routine non-manual	38.7	60.0	1.3
Lower grade technicians & supervisors	54.1	42.6	3.3
Skilled manual	44.6	54.5	0.9
Semiskilled\Unskilled	52.2	46.6	1.2

The other variables - namely age, gender and education - do not reveal any significant differences.

The image of a trade union, irrespective of its alignment with other movements, remains an issue to be addressed by its leadership. Image building may depend very much on the effectiveness of its public relations and its mobilisation drive. Of course this depends on how the messages are transmitted and on the tactics of mobilisation adopted by its leaders (Touraine *et al.*, 1989, pp. 186-290). Respondents tend to be divided in their opinions about the effectiveness of the trade unions' public relations exercise: 51 % contend that trade unions are not making good use of the media against the 48% who think otherwise. The younger age group and female workers tend to express more satisfaction with the trade union's use of the media than the semi-skilled and the unskilled.

### *(b) Coping with the New Economic Environment*

The threat of unemployment haunts the minds of many Maltese workers. To them, this threat brings back memories of past depressions occurring periodically during colonial rule which subjected many Maltese workers to unemployment, sometimes

for long periods, during their working life (Zammit, 1994, p. 485). The majority of respondents think that trade unions should actively involve themselves in this issue and should take measures to create employment (75.1%). Another 13.4% agree with this involvement though they do not expect the trade union to devote too much energy on it. Only 9.9% are of the opinion that unemployment is not a trade union issue and should be dealt with solely by politicians.

Significantly, the younger age group (16 to 25) is keenest to uphold the idea that unions should actively promote cooperative schemes (83.1 %).

One logical response by trade unions to counteract the current threat of globalised production is to strengthen their existing international links and forge new ones wherever possible. How do trade union members view such initiatives?

Kelly (1988, p. 54) has questioned whether the trade union involvement in international solidarity is a legitimate expression of the 'social movement' face of trade unionism or a political inspired distortion of the unions' aims. The vast majority of Maltese respondents tend to believe more in the former assumption: 27.3% see such trade union involvement as a good means of strengthening the unions' position and another 20.9% think that it enhances worker solidarity. Some also view these links as a good means to provide the trade union with the information about events happening abroad (43.4%). Only 3.1% see these links as a useless effort and a waste of time.

It must however be pointed out that 'solidarity', one of the options included among the salutary effects of international links, scored the lowest choice (20.9%). The lower the occupational categories, the higher tends to be the belief in the positive effects of international links on workers' solidarity. Skilled manual workers score the highest among the occupational categories (27.3%) whereas the routine non-manual workers the lowest (13.3 %).

*(c) Industrial Democracy*

Only about a quarter of the respondents (26.4%) think that Maltese trade unions are doing their utmost to introduce worker participation at the workplace. The rest (71.1%) claim that they are not doing enough or practically doing nothing in this regard. Males tend to be much more critical than females about the behaviour of trade unions on this issue as the following table indicates:

*Table 8: How do you rate the unions' efforts to introduce worker participation at the work place? (all figures in %)*

Gender	Doing enough	Not doing enough	Doing nothing	Non-Response
Males	20.5	62.6	15.6	1.3
Females	44.9	44.2	9.7	1.2

The form of participation which respondents prefer is consultation between management and workers in the decision-making processes (50.6%) rather than works councils (27.6%) or worker directors (15%). Among the occupational groups, it is the skilled manual workers who stand above other categories in their belief that their trade union should show a greater disposition towards the higher forms of worker participation (52.9 %) such as worker directors and works councils rather than mere consultation. No significant differences emerged between the various age groups and levels of education in relation to this issue.

*(d) Relations with the State*

Throughout the 1990's Maltese Governments have tended to pursue a policy of industrial peace at all costs. No efforts have been spared to accommodate and incorporate the unions into the formulation of national policy. This corporatist strategy has naturally called for a new trade union approach in their relations with the state. It may be seen as a ploy by the Government to

obtain the compliance of the unions and mitigate their resistance. Does this mean that trade unions have abandoned all forms of opposition? Does collaboration by trade unions mean accommodation to state policy? On their part the unions may try to legitimate their role with members by striking a balance between opposition and collaboration.

There are only 16.8% of the sample who think that their union is accommodating and 19.9% who still think that it offers stiff resistance. The majority of respondents feel their trade union is managing to strike the right balance between opposition and collaboration in its dealings with the state (59.3%). This view is most pronounced among the older (48+) age group where two out three (67.3%) believe that their union has achieved this kind of balanced relationship. Yet, it should also be noted that a minority of respondents with lower educational (23.7%) and occupational (16.4%) backgrounds regard their union policy as 'accommodating' and should be offering 'stiff resistance' to Government.

## **Conclusion**

The data emanating from this survey suggest that the value of solidarity that traditionally acts as a unifying force among workers may not be highly esteemed by Maltese trade union members. Rather than pursued as an intrinsic value, solidarity tends to be regarded as a means to secure instrumental interests. Given the traditional patron-client relations that prevail in Maltese society, these two types of values may actually reinforce each other. Thus the two pronged aims of trade unionism as propounded by Flanders (1970) namely, 'vested interest' and 'sword of justice', are complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

The prioritisation of one course of action poses a problem to trade unions – one that is compounded by the wide divergence of opinion, evident in the data of this survey. This may be due to the growing heterogeneity of the trade union constituencies. Clearly,

there is a core group of trade union members who would not like to see their union compromise its ideals. This is a strong vocal group who resists the introduction of measures like the reduction of the social security benefits and schemes of functional flexibility that may be proposed by management at the workplace to suit the exigencies of the enterprise. This group is more widely diffused among the manual skilled workers. Significantly among this group there is also a higher number of respondents who are critical of trade union representatives at the workplace. Among this group there also seems to be a more widespread acknowledgement of the positive side-effects accruing from the international linkages of trade unions. In percentage terms they are the group which expresses the highest satisfaction with the public relations campaign of their union. They would also like their trade union to be committed towards a higher form of worker participation.

The data therefore suggests that there is a core group of militant members who uphold a traditional and ideal vision of trade unionism. While acknowledging the need for a union to update itself, these persons firmly believe that the union should adhere to the principles on which it was founded. Hence the dilemma of trade union leaders is how to retain this core group of loyal members while attracting new ones and adapting the union to today's economic and social circumstances.

Finally, it should be noted that, however critical members may be of their union, they are united in their support. Indeed most respondents believe that unions are still very much needed in today's society (89.7%) and will continue to be needed in future (87.5%). Thus, Maltese trade unions are not suffering from a crisis of legitimacy.

Nevertheless, there is no room for complacency. The number of atypical and marginalised workers, who tend to be non-unionised, are increasing while the number of workers in the highly unionised public sector are decreasing. This is a trend that if continued is likely to pose a serious challenge to Maltese trade unions in future



as it has in other countries. The exclusion of workers from union membership, even if it happens by default rather than by design, may result in establishing a new 'labour aristocracy'. To maintain their level of credibility, trade unions may need to show tangible evidence not only of competence but also of fairness and equity.

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