



The value of Trade Unionism

by Saviour Rizzo

The findings of a survey about trade unions in Malta have recently been published. The aim of this national sample survey of perceptions and opinions of trade unions was to investigate the attitudes of the general population on trade unionism in Malta.

The data emerging from this survey by and large confirm the widely held view that trade unions are primarily seen as agents that strive to improve the conditions of work of their members. The data reveal that the great majority of the Maltese workers expect their union to look after their vested interest. Indeed about one out of three respondents (31%) regard trade union membership as a means to improve working conditions while 40% of respondents regard it as a form of personal insurance from discrimination. The rationality of the latter perception has to be contextualised in the polarisation prevailing in the Maltese scenario where political considerations tend to intrude and dominate many aspects of social life. Discrimination at the workplace can take place in the allocation of overtime, promotion and other benefits.

To the great majority of Maltese workers (71%) trade union membership tends to be seen as a means to an end. This instrumental or utilitarian value dominates over the solidaristic principles which have often been acclaimed to be the core values of the trade union movement. The statement that they became members of a trade union to be in line with their companions (“to be similar to other employees”) was endorsed by 18% of the respondents who are employees. Even if it is argued that this statement may show an element of solidarity the data still suggest that this perception is not widely diffused among Maltese employees. The message being transmitted by this survey is that though the trade union may assume the role of a social movement aiming at ensuring that social justice is meted out to all workers it is still perceived by its members as an institution that has to be primarily concerned with their vested interest.

This instrumental view of trade union membership 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 large segment of the population through social engineering of the market value of work. The instrumental attitude towards work which has been bred by this notion of affluence has been transferred to trade unionism in the sense that workers expect their trade unions to use their bargaining powers to fulfil these rising aspirations. There may however be a sizeable number of workers who might not need the bargaining power of the trade union to promote their vested interest. This hint is given by the response of those who opted not to join a trade union.

Generally these non-unionised workers employed in an enterprise where a trade union is given recognition by management to engage in collective bargaining are defined by their counterparts as free riders since they are benefiting from union representation and services without giving their share in the form of a membership fee. In the reasons given by these respondents why they are not trade union members the answer that tops the list (58.4%) is “Not Interested/do not need a trade union/ can care for own self”. This relative large group of non-unionised workers, labelled free

riders, may show signs of higher levels of individualism among the workforce. What this implies is that among the non-unionised workers in the labour market there is a substantial number of workers who do not need the services of a trade union either because they are not interested or because they think they have enough bargaining power to make management accede to their request. Naturally it is difficult for the trade unions to recruit these categories of workers as members.

The dilemma of the trade union leaders is how to retain their core group of loyal members while attracting new ones and adapting the union to today's economic and social circumstances. However concerned the trade unions may be about the sectional interest of their members they have also to bear in mind that they are part of the larger society. What should boost the morale of the trade unions is that overall the Maltese population approve their role and work in society. Indeed 45.4% of all respondents seem to be satisfied with the work done by trade unions in Malta while only 17.7% stated that they are not satisfied. The other 36.8% stated they do not know. At least the Maltese trade union movement does not seem to be suffering from lack of legitimacy.

The survey was published by the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and the Centre for Labour Studies (CLS) at the University of Malta. The data gathering process of the research, held on a national basis, was carried out by the Malta National Office of Statistics while the processing and analysis of data were conducted by CLS.

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