

## Chapter 20

# Malta: Trade union resilience in a changing environment

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Malta's trade union movement appears healthier than the movements in several other member states of the European Union (EU). Total union membership has more than doubled since 1980, although the rate of increase has slowed considerably over the past twenty years (see Table 20.1). Despite shrinking unionization rates and collective bargaining coverage, trade unions still officially represent around 45 per cent of workers, while collective bargaining coverage is around 50 per cent. It is noteworthy that collective agreements in the private sector are signed only at company level and there are no 'erga omnes' extension provisions. Conversely, the public service has two tiers of collective bargaining: a general agreement covering all employees is complemented by a number of agreements at the industry level.

Union membership is becoming more varied. The female share of union membership has increased substantially since 1980, and the proportion of foreign members appears to have grown, too. This increasing heterogeneity is not sufficiently reflected in union leadership, however, which is still largely composed of Maltese men. Furthermore, union structures do not necessarily give sufficient attention to the interests of the new types of members. The Covid-19 pandemic has accentuated the plight of several adversely hit groups of workers, including foreigners, which has prompted unions to take public stands to protect the rights of these workers.

There are three peak trade union organizations in Malta, namely the General Workers Union (GWU), which is by far the largest; the Confederation of Malta Trade Unions (CMTU), which includes the

second largest union in Malta, the Union of United Workers (now *Unjion Haddiema Magħqudin* – Voice of the Workers, UHM); and the more recently set up umbrella organization *Forum Unjions Maltin* (For.U.M.).

Adopting Hyman's (2001) model of trade unions' strategic orientation, Maltese unions are particularly oriented towards the market and society. Because of Malta's colonial past, unions have their roots in the confrontational British industrial relations tradition and invest most of their energies in representing their members' interests in relation to employers, often through collective bargaining. Over the years, there has been a marked change in their strategies, however, moving away from industrial action and rather emphasizing dialogue and cooperation. Concurrently, the trade union movement, in particular peak union organizations, is strongly involved in promoting social integration and social conditions more generally. Successive governments have facilitated unions' participation in tripartite institutions and generally pay adequate attention to social dialogue. EU membership has strengthened union involvement at the level of national policy. Trade unions have been involved in a number of important social agreements, one of which resulted in the setting up of the Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) mechanism, which has contributed to maintaining industrial calm over the past thirty years.

The rather traditional set up and structures of most unions may make their efforts to reinvent themselves less evident. This chapter indicates that, despite some adversity, the trade union movement has managed to retain its influence and status as a key stakeholder in Maltese society.<sup>1</sup>

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**Table 20.1** Principal characteristics of trade unionism in Malta

	1980	2000	2019
Total trade union membership	39,238	86,047	101,801
Women as a proportion of total membership	n.a.	24 %	41 %
Gross union density	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Net union density*****	53 %*	60 %	45 %****
Number of confederations*****	2	2	3
Number of affiliated unions (federations)*****	7**	11***	25
Number of independent unions	7**	22***	7
Collective bargaining coverage	n.a.	57 %***	50 %****
Principal level of collective bargaining	Company		
Days not worked due to industrial action per 1,000 workers	n.a.	38	0*****

Note: \*1983; \*\*1985; \*\*\*2002; \*\*\*\*2018; \*\*\*\*\*2016; \*\*\*\*\*2017; \*\*\*\*\*Official statistics reported in this table may overestimate real membership data (see the section on ‘Unionization’); \*\*\*\*\*Includes the three peak trade union organizations, namely the GWU, the CMTU and For.U.M in 1980 and 2000 and Includes unions affiliated with CMTU, For.U.M., GWU and UHM in 2019.

Source: Appendix A1; Baldacchino (1990); Baldacchino et al. (2003).

## Historical background and principal features of the industrial relations system

The industrial relations system in Malta was formed on the British model. The first trade unions were set up in the nineteenth century, when the country was a colony of the British Empire. Unionism remained ineffective for several decades, however, because of ‘the inexistence of any institutional machinery for negotiation’ (Baldacchino 1988: 68). The industrial relations scenario changed momentarily in 1943, when the GWU was set up to protect the rights of the employees working at HM Dockyard Malta (later, Malta Drydocks Corporation and Malta Shipyards Limited) on British war ships, who were faced with mass redundancies because of the imminent end of the Second World War (Baldacchino 1988). The GWU quickly became the largest union in the country and within two years, it represented a quarter of all the workers in Malta (Baldacchino 2021). By aligning itself with the centre-left Malta Labour

Party (now *Partit Laburista*, PL), one of Malta's two major political parties, the union contributed towards the enactment of employment legislation, including the first rudimentary industrial relations framework. The CMTU was established in 1959 with the intention of 'coordinating and rationalizing ... trade union activities' (Zammit et al. 2015: 188), but the GWU refused to join it.<sup>2</sup> The CMTU became the second major union block in the country, spearheaded by the UHM. As will be discussed in the next section, the growth of the CMTU was in part a reaction to the GWU's close relationship with the PL. While the adversarial relations between the two blocks have often been criticized as unhelpful to the cause of the workers, it has also led to innovative ideas that have facilitated the unions' adaptation to a changing society.

The For.U.M. was set up in 2004 to protect the interests of a number of unions that were not affiliated to GWU or CMTU and that felt the need for representation at a national level. This umbrella organization constitutes the third union block and represents the last major addition to the current union structure in Malta.

The current industrial relations system is difficult to categorize (Debono 2018), as it is composed of a mosaic of elements reflecting both the British industrial relations traditions, as well as continental models. Over the years, unions have been very active at company level, negotiating collective agreements and protecting their members' rights. Shop stewards are the main union representatives at workplaces. Traditionally, employment legislation only provided for the basic conditions of employment, and working conditions were often improved through collective agreements. The legacy of British colonial rule gradually lost some of its strength, however. Over time, especially since Malta embarked on the process of joining the EU (which it did in 2004), through government facilitation, unions increased their voice at policy level and became closely involved in tripartite concertation. At the same time, industrial relations at company level started shifting away from confrontation, as evidenced by a decrease in industrial conflict.

## Structure of trade unions and union democracy

The Registrar of Trade Unions (RTU) listed thirty-two trade unions in 2019 (DIER n.d.b). 'The dominant rationale for union organization

<sup>2</sup> Despite its name, CMTU's affiliates are trade unions, not federations.

in Malta, and in true British tradition, remains the trade or employment class or profession' (Debono and Baldacchino 2019: 426). Indeed, apart from the two general unions, which represent workers from all industries and companies, the GWU and UHM (which forms part of CMTU), most unions may be categorized as professional unions, often covering a specific profession or class of workers within a particular organization. Out of the current unions, only about half existed in 1993. Smaller unions often have a shorter lifetime than larger ones. While some of the newer unions splintered off from larger ones, there does not appear to be a general trend towards fragmentation in unions.

There are three union blocks in Malta, namely the GWU, the CMTU and the For.U.M., together with a small number of independent unions. The GWU is by far the largest union and accounts for around half (51 per cent) of all union membership on the island (DIER n.d.b). While it is essentially a union, the GWU also functions as a federation or confederation. It has other unions and associations affiliated with it, namely the Police Officers Union, the Open Market Sellers, the Community Workers' Union, the Malta Football Players Association and a taxi association. A union representing the armed forces, which was previously affiliated to the GWU, was eventually incorporated in the GWU. Affiliate members benefit from the GWU's strength, as well as being able to make use of its resources. Because of its size and importance, the GWU has been granted the privileges and status of a peak trade union organization, both nationally, and at EU and international levels. The GWU covers all types of workers and industries. Having its roots in the dockyard, however, the GWU has traditionally been strongest among blue-collar workers and has throughout its history been linked to the PL. The union comprises twelve sections, eight of which represent different industries and are headed by section secretaries. There are also a youth section, a pensioners association, an international section, and a CGIL-GWU trade union contact point. Section secretaries can carry out collective bargaining in their own industries autonomously, within the aims and values of the organization, but involve the Union's National Council when bargaining decisions may have wider implications (GWU 2020). This indicates a strong level of autonomy for individual sections during bargaining, though they form part of the same trade union and ultimately have to follow union policies.

The CMTU currently has seven autonomous affiliate unions that together represent around 31 per cent of all unionized workers (DIER

n.d.b). Like the GWU, the CMTU covers all industries and occupations. It has traditionally been strongest among white-collar workers, however. While it has never had any formal political affiliation, the confederation arguably leans towards the centre-right Nationalist Party (Partit Nazzjonalista – PN).<sup>3</sup> Representing around 83 per cent of the members of CMTU or 25 per cent of all unionized persons, the UHM is by far the largest and most powerful union within CMTU. The union traces its roots to the Malta Government Clerical Union, set up in 1966. Over the years, the union has transformed itself. It widened its scope, increased its membership, and eventually adopted its current statute and name in 2015. A change in the method of appointment of high officials as part of this revitalization process, increased the number of women and highly qualified union managers. The union has four pillars: the first is the traditional union, which has seven sections representing different parts of the economy, as well as sections representing young people and pensioners. The other pillars consist of affiliated unions; affiliated associations (e.g. Malta Environmental Health Officers Association); and affiliated cooperatives (e.g. Ports Foremen Cooperative Limited). The concept of four pillars emerged from the different needs of entities that did not fit under the traditional union sections. Affiliated groups benefit from the UHM's knowhow, as well as access to its resources.

For.U.M. is the smallest and newest trade union block. It was established in 2004 in response to the fact that a number of unions that were not part of an existing peak trade union organization were being excluded from national-level discussions. For.U.M.'s request to participate in national-level debate was met with substantial resistance from nearly all members of the Malta Council for Economic and Social Development (MCESD)<sup>4</sup> (The Malta Independent 2011). The reasons for such resistance varied and appear to have included fear on the part of employers' associations of overrepresentation of trade unions and inter-union rivalries (Rizzo 2010). It was not until 2012 that it was allowed to form part of the MCESD, by which time it had already been admitted to the ETUC in 2011 (Debono 2012). Unions within For.U.M remain autonomous.

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<sup>3</sup> While extreme-right wing parties are not represented in parliament, the country has also experienced the international wave of populist nationalism, which is reflected in politics, and which translates into negative sentiments towards foreigners. Trade unions in Malta generally oppose such sentiments and are becoming more vociferous against the exploitation of foreign workers.

<sup>4</sup> MCESD is Malta's highest organ for tripartite concertation.

The purpose of this umbrella organization is to provide unions with access to national and international bodies they may not otherwise have access to, while also providing unions with the possibility to aid each other (e.g. during collective bargaining, if necessary), as well as a forum to discuss and possibly reach common positions on national-level concerns. For.U.M. has grown from eight to fourteen union affiliates, representing around 15 per cent of all union membership. The affiliates of For.U.M. are mainly unions of professional workers, hailing from a wide spectrum of industries, allowing For.U.M. to take an informed position on various national-level concerns. The Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) is its largest affiliate, representing around 64 per cent of all the unionized members of For.U.M. (DIER n.d.b).

After the setting up of For.U.M., the most prominent change in the main union blocks took place when the MUT withdrew its membership from the CMTU in 2008 following disagreements about the government's decision to increase water and electricity rates (Baldacchino 2009; Times of Malta 2008). This resulted in a significant drop in CMTU membership. When MUT joined For.U.M. in 2009, it not only strengthened the latter in terms of members, but also moved it away from the CMTU and closer to the GWU. Indeed, in 2012, For.U.M. and GWU pledged to strengthen cooperation between them (Times of Malta 2012).

The friction between the two largest union blocks – namely, the GWU and the CMTU – has been a constant feature of the industrial relations landscape. Despite this, there have been a few instances in which they have joined forces. In a rare show of force, in November 2008, twenty trade unions participated in a historic demonstration against the government's proposals to increase utility tariffs (Debono 2009). More recently, a package of measures to assist the economy during the 2020 pandemic was approved by all social partners represented on the MCESD, including both the GWU and CMTU (The Malta Independent 2020). The deep division and strained relationship between the GWU and CMTU is evident in the fact that, despite interventions by the British Trade Union Congress and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the blocks did not agree 'to establish a consensual code of practice and dispute resolution mechanism' (Rizzo 2006: para. 9). It is evident that the level of trust required for such cooperation does not exist. In 2014, a National Forum of Trade Unions was set up by the President of Malta and the Centre for Labour Studies, within the University of Malta, with the aim of strengthening the unity of trade unions. While several activities were

carried out by the Forum towards this aim, the trust gap between union blocks hardly appears to have been affected.

Competition among unions is apparent not only at the level of peak organizations, but also between individual unions. The reasons for such competition vary and include: clash of leaders' personalities, differing political allegiances, demonstrations of power, and perhaps most importantly, competition for members and for the right to carry out collective bargaining. Over the years, several conflicts between unions developed over the right to carry out collective bargaining in specific places of work. For example, the disagreement between the MUT and the University of Malta Academic Staff Association over the right of sole representation of academic staff at the University of Malta took three years to be settled (Baldacchino 2007). Over the years, high inter-union conflict became a concern to the Malta Employers Association (MEA 2015), a major employers' association, as it was harming companies by disrupting collective bargaining. Eventually, the Recognition of Trade Unions Regulations (2016) was enacted to prevent disputes over union recognition.

## **Political relations**

The continuous dominance of the GWU in the sphere of industrial relations since it was set up in 1943 makes it an obvious starting point for an examination of relations between unionism and the polity. The GWU emerged at the dockyard as a reaction to the precarious conditions workers experienced as a result of British colonial policies. Ever since its early days, the history of the GWU has been intertwined with that of the PL. Such links, which 'fluctuated in both intensity and form over time' (Baldacchino 2009: 7), were facilitated by the fact that both organizations relied on the support of workers hailing from the same social background. Indeed, dockyard workers not only constituted the most militant section of the GWU, but also formed the backbone of the PL (Zammit 2003). While the formal ties between the GWU and the PL were already apparent in the social pact that the two organizations agreed in 1946, their relationship reached its full strength between 1978 and 1992, when the organizations were united by statute. This 'marriage' resulted in the GWU being represented in the cabinet of the Labour government. Whether one focuses on the vigorous support that the GWU provided to Labour government policies (e.g. Zammit 2003) or the need of subsequent governments to accommodate the GWU's



demands in order to avoid serious damage (Baldacchino 2021), there is no doubt that the GWU was a major contributor to the development of industrial policy and legislation. The GWU's sustained close relationship with the PL inevitably led to strong conflicts with governments formed by the centre-right PN, Malta's other major political party. When the GWU ordered a strike by the dock mooring men, it not only led to what has been described as probably the most economically damaging dispute since the country's independence, but also contributed to the downfall of the Nationalist government in 1971 (Baldacchino 2021). More recently, the GWU's campaign against precarious employment led to several legal and policy changes meant to reduce such problems, and also contributed to bringing down the Nationalist government in 2013 (Debono and Marmara 2017). The strained relations between the GWU and the Nationalist government culminated in 1999, when 'the police intervened in the course of an industrial dispute at Malta's international airport. The union's officials were arrested, subsequently arraigned in court and charged with "criminal offences" for damaging state property (Zammit 2003: 83). Subsequently, in 2006, the GWU lost a significant source of revenue when a Nationalist government did not renew the union's subsidiary's (Cargo Handling Co. Ltd.) contract to handle cargo in Maltese ports (Debono and Farrugia 2006). This company had acted as the sole operator of cargo handling at the ports for decades. Besides, while the dockyard's closure in 2008 by the Nationalist government was caused by its long-term financial losses, it has also been viewed as the party's 'sweet revenge' on the union (Baldacchino 2021). Since the PL returned to government in 2013, the union's sources of revenue appear to have broadened (e.g. Briguglio 2018; Camilleri 2016).

Relations between the Labour government and the affiliates of the CMTU 'progressively deteriorated' in the 1970s and 1980s (Zammit 2003: 77), and this increased the rivalry between the GWU and the smaller unions. During this period, the PN, in opposition, encouraged workers to leave the GWU and join the so-called free trade unions (who were not formally affiliated to any political party) (Zammit 2003). Such conflict and politicization of union membership increased the class consciousness of white-collar workers, which fuelled the growth of the second largest union, the UHM, emerging from a number of mergers of smaller unions (Zammit 2003). While 'the CMTU and its affiliated trade unions profess no formal political allegiance ... their official policies often converge with those of the Nationalist Party, thus reflecting the social background of most of their members' (Zammit 2003: 84–85).

Because of its size, the UHM holds a dominant position within the CMTU. Besides, unlike the other unions within the CMTU, the UHM sought and obtained direct representation on the MCESD. The union has contributed substantially to social dialogue and government policy over the years. For instance, in 2012 the UHM proposed an employment policy ‘meant to improve the flexibility and productivity of the Maltese labour market; this was endorsed by the major social partners and political parties before the 2013 general election, and later adopted by the new Labour government’ (Debono 2016: 176). It is interesting to note that, like its rival the GWU, the UHM also won contracts relating to active labour market policies under the new Labour government formed in 2013 (Dalli 2016).

Over the past three decades, there has been something of a departure from the British model of industrial relations to a more continental one: the ‘traditionally polarised relationship between employers and trade unions’ has given way to ‘a pattern of corporate, tripartite, bargaining at the national level based on social partnership’ (Zammit 2003: 68). This was partly brought about by a growing realization that industrial action might scare away private business and thus harm employees. But it was also facilitated by successive government policies. In line with its electoral manifesto, the Nationalist government set up the Malta Council for Economic Development in 1990 (later renamed the MCESD) as a forum for tripartite consultation. According to Zammit (2003: 114–115), setting up this structure ‘entailed a departure from the state centralized and divide-and-rule policies of the previous era; as well as from the informal and ad hoc dealings that often characterize social relations among actors in a small state society’. During this period, the GWU was involved in a harsh confrontation with the Nationalist government over the latter’s income’s policy, which inadvertently led to the closure of the Hotel Phoenicia (a historic luxury hotel) and the dismissal of all its employees (Rizzo 2003). Such a disastrous outcome of industrial action led to a negotiated agreement in 1990 within the MCESD on a national incomes policy, consisting of a mandatory annual allowance (COLA) based on an official cost of living index. This agreement was a watershed moment that greatly boosted the standing of social dialogue in Malta. An era of more conciliatory industrial relations commenced. Since the 1990s, ‘manifest unilateralism has tended to be used infrequently, as a last resort in cases of lack of consensus among social partners’ (Debono 2016: 6). Over the years, it has become customary for the government to carry out annual

pre-budget consultations within the MCESD, which shape government policy and strategy, and increase industrial peace. The country's EU accession process and eventual EU membership in 2004, also helped to strengthen the culture of social dialogue in Malta, especially by enabling government and social partners to learn from their participation in social dialogue at EU level. Apart from the MCESD, the main social partners are also represented on other tripartite fora, including the Employment Relations Board, a tripartite body consulted by government on labour legislation. Besides, union officials are appointed to the boards of influential public sector organizations, authorities and other entities, such as the Occupational Health and Safety Authority, and Jobsplus, Malta's public employment service organization.

## **Unionization**

The Employment and Industrial Relations Act (EIRA 2002) requires unions to keep an up-to-date record of their members and annually submit their membership numbers to the RTU. The RTU has the power to inspect such records and to cancel a union's registration if it is not in conformity with EIRA (2002). This system provides for an official public count of union membership, although – as will be explained below – its reliability has been questioned.

According to these official figures, the raw number of union members increased considerably from 44,760 in 1980 to 101,801 in 2019 (DIER n.d.b.). While there is a clear upward trajectory in membership figures, its magnitude has declined considerably over the past twenty years. Whereas membership more than doubled between 1980 and 2000, it only increased by 8 per cent between 2000 and 2019. These membership figures include the pensioners' sections of the GWU and the UHM, which total 11,548, or 11 per cent of all union membership in Malta. The smaller unions do not provide a count of their pensioner members. It should also be noted that in 1999 (the first time both the GWU and the UHM reported on their pensioners' sections), there were 6,033 registered pensioners, representing 6 per cent of all union members. Thus, the number of pensioners has increased both in absolute terms and as a proportion of total membership over the past twenty years. This reflects the ageing population, but also the relatively low growth of younger members, a phenomenon that will be further discussed below. The declining growth of union membership has coincided with strong

growth of around 75 per cent of total employment over the past twenty years (Eurostat 2020).

Official union membership data might be inflated (see Debono 2006) and thus also union density. Besides, the reliability of union density figures is also affected by such things as: the inclusion or otherwise of pensioners when counting union members; the inclusion or otherwise of self-employed persons, and persons who are (or were) legally prohibited from joining unions; and perhaps more significantly, which data source (Labour Force Survey or employment records kept by the Public Employment Service [PES]) is used to represent the workforce. Having said that, there was a clear increase in union density between the 1980s and the early 2000s. At its peak, density reached over 60 per cent (Baldacchino and Debono 2009). The trend has been reversed over recent years. Membership levels have not kept pace with the growth of the labour force, fuelled by a growing number of female and foreign workers. Thus, in June 2019, union density was about 40 per cent. This figure is based on the official records of union members, excluding pensioners, as a ratio of all employees as listed in PES records. One should note that data gathered in 2014 from a representative survey of workers revealed that just over a third of all employees (33.8 per cent) are union members (Debono 2018). These lower figures reflect methodological differences in data capture, but also point towards the possible inflation of official membership figures mentioned earlier.

Public sector employees are significantly more likely to be unionized than their peers in the private sector (55 and 22 per cent, respectively) (Debono 2018). Within the private sector, unionization tends to be strong in the secondary, and weak in the primary and tertiary sectors. Indeed, 'there are no collective agreements in the primary sector, which is characterized by self-employed persons and family-owned micro enterprises. For the same reason, hardly any wholesale and retail employees are covered by collective agreements' (Debono and Baldacchino 2019: 429). The programme of economic liberalization that started around thirty years ago and the economic expansion that has gathered momentum over the past decade resulted in the expansion of industries, such as financial services, insurance, IT, teaching English as a foreign language, electronic gaming and others, which the unions have found difficult to infiltrate and organize (Baldacchino 2021).

Workers on typical working contracts are more likely to be unionized than those in atypical jobs. Thus, while 38 per cent of all full-time

employees are unionized, the figure drops to 9.5 per cent among part-timers (Debono 2018). Besides, while 35.8 per cent of employees on indefinite contracts are unionized, the figure drops to 24.4 per cent among those on definite contracts (Debono 2018). Some atypical workers, in particular, part-timers, 'might view trade union membership less favourably as they might be more likely to perceive their job as a transient income-generating activity rather than a "career" which requires long-term protection' (Debono 2018: 55). Platform workers are a recent development in the country and have become conspicuous in industries such as taxis and food delivery. The GWU has been proactive in attempting to unionize such workers, while increasing social awareness about their challenges. In 2020, the GWU had around 800 members with such work arrangements in the taxi industry who do not have adequate legal protection.

Official data started separating union membership figures by gender in the early 1990s. The proportion of women rose from 18 per cent of all membership in 1994 to 41 per cent in 2019. This trend is markedly stronger than the growth of women in the labour market. Indeed, while in 1997, around 30 per cent of all workers were women, this figure expanded to around 41 per cent in 2019, thanks to cultural change, and government educational and employment policies (DIER n.d.b). The rise of women in the labour market has been characterized by younger and more highly qualified women, often entering white-collar occupations. This in turn has been reflected in the rise of professional unions, which have grown at a faster rate than the general unions. Thus, while in 1980, the GWU and the UHM represented 85 per cent of all union members, in 2019 they represented 76 per cent, 9 percentage points fewer (DIER n.d.b). The growth of professional unions has benefitted For.U.M. which, while still being the smallest peak organization, has gained ground with regard to its membership ratio in comparison with the GWU and the CMTU. The largest non-general unions, namely the MUT, the Malta Union of Midwives and Nurses, the Malta Union of Bank Employees, and the Union of Professional Educators, have all substantially more female than male members, contrary to the general unions, and unions representing manual or other lower qualified workers. Women who have invested more in their education are more likely to be unionized than those who have invested less (Debono 2018). It should be noted that despite the increasing membership density of women, they are still largely under-represented in high union positions (Debono 2018).

Age is positively related to union membership. The least unionized employees are in the 15–24 age bracket, while the most unionized are in the 45–64 bracket (23.5 and 38.6 per cent, respectively) (Debono 2018). ‘When compared to their older peers, younger employees may be less willing, or aware of the possibility of defending their rights through unions’ (Debono 2018: 55). Notably, younger persons are more likely than older ones to join non-unionized companies operating in the services industry.

Migration has increased substantially over the past decade. The GWU has been proactive in trying to increase its membership among migrants and estimates that more than 4,000 of its members are third-country nationals. Interpreters were necessary for the first time at a recent GWU congress because of the increase in foreign shop stewards. Furthermore, in view of the GWU’s relationship with the *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (CGIL, see the section on ‘Trade union policies towards the European Union’), all public communication is now published in Maltese, English and Italian.

## **Union resources and expenditure**

Trade union financial data is not publicly available, and so the information reported in this section is incomplete. Besides, it is worth noting that there are no strike funds or strike benefits in Malta.

The GWU affirms that its income has increased over the past two decades. The GWU’s major source of funding is membership fees. Such income has increased because of rising membership and membership fee levels. In 2009 the GWU raised its annual membership fee for the first time for twenty years, from €30 to €40 (ToM 2009). In 2021 the annual fee stood at €54. The GWU justifies this fee on the basis of the services it offers members at no added cost, such as access to legal services. Furthermore, the GWU has consciously moved away from a model under which it provides members solely with services related to industrial relations. The union has invested in turning its website into an interactive portal and has developed a mobile application. These allow members to read the union’s news publications, book appointments with section secretaries and access other services, while also providing them with access to a range of discounts in partner outlets, which are meant to improve the members’ quality of life, such as supermarkets and providers of health and education-related services. Over the years, the GWU has

also diversified its business and currently derives revenue from the renting of buildings, the organization of courses, and from public and private tenders. The GWU also has several subsidiaries, among them an English language school and a training and recruitment firm.

The CMTU's revenue derives from the affiliation fees of its affiliate unions; the amount contributed by each union thus depends on its membership. Financial data is not made public. The CMTU limits its expenditure by making use of its affiliate members' resources. Like the GWU, the UHM's primary source of income is membership fees. The union, which has thirty-five employees, also has two subsidiary companies, one which provides educational services and another one which is more commercial and whose activities include selling household products. In terms of services, apart from collective bargaining, the UHM offers its members complementary legal services, the opportunity to make individual claims, and the ability to obtain fuel at reduced prices from select fuel stations.

Similar to the CMTU, For.U.M. derives its income from the affiliation fees of its affiliate unions. Each union is required to pay the same basic amount, as well as a fee calculated on the basis of membership. Affiliate unions in turn derive their income from membership. Consequently, while financial data is not published publicly, For.U.M.'s income has increased over time and has kept up with increased expenditure. This is because of both the increase in the number of affiliate unions that have joined For.U.M. over time, as well as the growing number of members joining many of its affiliates. For.U.M. attributes strong membership growth among its affiliate unions to the expansion of the white-collar professions it represents. For.U.M. expenditure is kept in check by using the resources of the larger affiliate unions; for example, meetings are held at the MUMN and MUT headquarters. For.U.M.'s administrative staff is limited to five individuals, who also hold positions in their original parent unions.

A couple of local schemes also assist in the funding of trade unions. Individual unions and confederations can apply for a Civil Society Fund capped at an annual €6,000 per organization, which aims to facilitate organizations' affiliation and participation in European bodies, as well as in training related to EU policies and programmes. A separate Civil Society Fund also provides funds to three union organizations, the GWU, the UHM and For.U.M., as well as three employer associations. It was reported that each organization received €58,000 per year in 2018 and 2019, meant to cover 80 per cent of the costs of participating in local and

European fora (Borg 2020; The Malta Independent 2019). Furthermore, each confederation is provided with a full-time worker paid by the government to aid with administrative work.

Finally, unions also benefit from EU funds, obtained following applications to carry out specific projects and are often financed through the European Social Fund. Examples include a UHM project to increase workers' knowledge of and participation in social dialogue (€323,830), a CMTU project to improve social partners', civil society's and the general public's awareness of policy issues (€67,207), and a GWU project to provide training to shop stewards (€4,761) (European Union Funds Malta, 2017).

## **Collective bargaining and unions at the workplace**

Collective bargaining has been instrumental in improving working conditions. While EIRA (2002) and related regulations guarantee basic conditions, which have been aligned with EU directives, collective bargaining is the main tool that brings added benefits to workers. 'The terms of a collective agreement normally follow a standard pattern and cover both procedural aspects, relating to union recognition and dispute resolution and substantive issues, relating to wages and other the conditions of employment' (Zammit et al. 2015: 245).

Collective bargaining within the private sector is carried out at enterprise level. Normally this consists of one union negotiating with one employer. To register a trade union, a minimum number of seven members is required. In order to be granted recognition to carry out collective bargaining in an enterprise, however, a trade union's membership must account for more than 50 per cent of employees. Employers' associations are not directly involved in collective bargaining, although they may be consulted by their members throughout the process. Collective agreements in the private sector generally last three years, but they remain active until the next agreement is signed. Industrial or multi-employer bargaining does not exist. Enterprise-level collective bargaining is preferred by both unions and employers to higher level bargaining as it gives them the opportunity to adapt the agreement to the specific circumstances of the workplace and its employees.

The process of collective bargaining in the public sector is more complex than in the private sector and takes place at two different levels.



Public service employees are covered by a general collective agreement signed by the government and seven unions. This is complemented by a number of lower-level industrial agreements. Other organizations within the public sector sign enterprise-level agreements. All agreements in the public sector are coordinated by the Industrial Relations Unit, which aims to ensure sustainable outcomes based on harmonious industrial relations across the public sector. Collective agreements in the public sector tend to last longer than three years, with the 2017 agreement for public service employees spanning a record eight years (Office of the Prime Minister 2017). The scope of agreements in the public service is narrower than in the private sector, as many employment conditions are regulated by the Public Service Management Code.

Based on the British tradition, shop stewards act as union representatives within enterprises, and play a vital role in collective bargaining. They recruit members, mobilize them, understand and relay the members' needs to the union, and take part in collective bargaining negotiations. Shop stewards also provide the recruitment pool from which higher union officials are normally elected (MEA 2015). Research carried out in Malta shows the importance of shop stewards to increasing union membership (Debono 2015). Indeed, it is reasonable to argue that the decline of trade union density is at least partly because of unions' inability to establish shop stewards in particular employment sectors and firms. Little, if any research exists on shop stewards in Malta. Their performance has been subject to criticism by employers, however, who assert that increasing numbers of shop stewards are taking up the role 'because of personal grudges against the company' or do not have the necessary training to perform such a role properly (MEA 2015: 10). Aware of these issues, some unions do carry out training to improve their shop stewards' knowledge and skills.

An average of forty-five agreements were registered at the Department of Industrial and Employment Relations (DIER n.d.a) annually between 2001 and 2018. These consist of new collective agreements, renewals or extensions, side agreements, addenda and amendments. It is estimated that about 56 per cent of all employees were covered by collective agreements in 2014 (Debono 2015). While nearly all workers in the public sector are covered by collective agreements, the figure drops to over a third of those working in the private sector. Workers are also more likely to be covered by a collective agreement if they have a higher level of education, work full-time, or in a large organization. Collective bargaining coverage

appears to be decreasing, in line with falling membership density. Several of the industries that have grown in strength in recent years, such as financial services, ICT and iGaming, tend to be non-unionized, while the number of medium and large companies in highly unionized industries has shrunk. For example, the number of companies with more than fifty workers in manufacturing decreased from eighty-five to seventy-four between 2001 and 2019 (National Statistics Office 2010, 2020).

While the content of collective agreements has not changed dramatically over the past decade, some new topics have emerged. For example, to curb sick leave absenteeism, some collective agreements now feature an allowance for attendance, which is gradually lost when workers' absenteeism exceeds predefined annual benchmarks.<sup>5</sup> Another more recent clause included in the majority of agreements concerns the accumulation of sick leave, whereby workers can utilize the unused sick leave of previous years in case of some major medical event. As the number of working women has increased, clauses on flexibility and work–life balance have become more common in collective agreements. Furthermore, with the growth of health and safety issues, clauses related to this topic have become more prevalent. The UHM also notes that topics related to skills development and the development of specialist positions have become increasingly common. Some collective agreements have also started to include clauses on setting up third-pillar pension schemes, which are still relatively rare.

Workers receive mandatory wage increases based on an annual average inflation rate as determined by the Retail Price Index. This mechanism, which was agreed by the government and the social partners in 1990, establishes the mandatory COLA, which is granted as a flat rate to all employees, irrespective of how much they earn (Debono and Farrugia 2013; Vella 2014). Employer associations and the European Commission have over the years pressured the Maltese government to review the COLA mechanism to better reflect labour productivity and competitiveness (Council of the European Union 2011; Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry 2014; MEA 2014). While unions have often defended COLA, the UHM recently stated that it is time to discuss whether COLA should continue to be used, or perhaps should be replaced by a living wage (Galea 2019). To date, however, the

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<sup>5</sup> Administrative methods aimed at reducing absenteeism may result in counterproductive behaviour, such as workers attending work while ill (Fiorini et al. 2018).

government has resisted such calls, arguing that the COLA system has helped to reduce industrial action (Ministry for Finance of Malta 2013).

Malta also has a national minimum wage, complemented by a series of wage regulation orders setting minimum terms, including wages in specific industries. The national minimum wage was introduced in 1974 (Vella 2014) and is revised annually through COLA. One criticism is that it is not sufficient to guarantee a decent standard of living (Caritas 2019). While the government has been reluctant to change the existing mechanism, in 2017 it reached a rare agreement with both trade unions and employers' associations to increase the wages of workers on minimum wage who work with the same employer for more than a year, with gradual increases after the first and second years of work.

In recent years, the general trade unions have complained about the unfairness of non-unionized workers benefiting from the gains made through collective bargaining. The GWU pushed forward the idea of mandatory union membership for all workers, with the possibility of non-enrolment by paying an amount of money into a union fund.<sup>6</sup> According to the union, their proposal 'would boost the fight against precarious employment and exploitation in sectors where unionization is very low or non-exist[ent], such as in construction and tourism' (Micallef 2019). On its part, the UHM believes that compulsory membership for all workers may not be feasible with the unions' current resources, which might be insufficient to provide adequate services after a sudden substantial increase in members. Thus, the UHM proposes that the system be introduced gradually, with membership first being made compulsory for more vulnerable workers. Presumably, the two unions believe that compulsory union membership would significantly strengthen their membership numbers and enable them to influence a wider range of companies and sectors. The idea of compulsory membership has come up against strong resistance from employers, however, who have labelled it 'unconstitutional'.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the Labour government has agreed in principle with the idea and claims to be studying it (Pace 2019).

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<sup>6</sup> No further information about such a fund is available.

<sup>7</sup> Compulsory union membership may also infringe the ILO convention on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention (No. 87) 1948, and Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

## Industrial conflict

Trade unions have traditionally shown their strength through industrial action. While, as already noted, general strikes and public demonstrations have been used over the years, they are uncommon. As will be discussed in this section, industrial action is nowadays being resorted to less frequently, especially in the private sector.

Industrial action is regulated by EIRA (2002), which provides immunity to trade unions and employers' associations in relation to industrial action, protects sympathy strikers from liability, and allows peaceful picketing. The law also prohibits certain categories of workers from carrying out industrial action, such as members of the disciplined forces, and other employees carrying out essential services. Strike legislation has been described as 'fairly lax' (Debono and Baldacchino 2019: 430) and the legality or otherwise of strikes has often been unclear, leading to contestation (Zammit et al. 2015). The lack of legal precision has over the years resulted in several disputes over the legality or otherwise of industrial action. Law courts have helped to clarify some aspects relating to strikes. The following are two examples of this.

The first example concerns what constitutes a 'trade dispute'. The UHM vigorously opposed the increases in utility prices announced as part of the 1998 government budget and carried out industrial action across the public sector. The Freeport Terminal Company, then owned by the government, sued the UHM for damages, contending that 'since no trade dispute existed with the UHM and that the collective agreement had been honoured, the industrial actions taken by the union at the Freeport were illegal and abusive' (Zammit et al. 2015: 274). In 2001, however, 'the Court of Appeal ruled that unions had a right to strike on budget measures, given that these affected the conditions of employment ... [This] demarcated an area of industrial relations that was previously untested' (Zammit et al. 2015: 275).

The second example concerns whether union action may be carried out lawfully in relation to issues of recognition. Disagreement between the UHM and the GWU in the late 1990s concerning who had the right to represent the workers at Malta International Airport (MIA) led the GWU to order industrial action at the company. MIA tried to stop such industrial action by stating that it was illegal because there was no 'trade dispute' at the company according to law. The dispute was eventually resolved in 2000, with the two unions agreeing to jointly

negotiate the collective agreement. Subsequently, the International Labour Organization (ILO) ruled that the GWU's actions were not subject to immunity as they were not covered under existing laws. The ILO also 'recommended the government to amend industrial and labour legislation to clearly define trade union recognition as legitimate subject for trade dispute, something that the government acted upon following the enactment of EIRA in 2002' (Zammit et al. 2015: 277).

'The ability to carry out industrial action ... has traditionally been a major source of union strength' (Debono and Baldacchino 2019: 430). Over the years, industrial action has been instrumental in bringing about political and social change. For many years until its closure in 2010, the dockyard remained a central hub of both industrial and political activism. Industrial conflict peaked in 1970–1971, when a seven-month long strike ordered by the GWU crippled the dockyard, and was probably the most economically damaging industrial action since independence (Baldacchino 2021). Strikes remained frequent in both the 1970s and 1980s, however. The longest industrial action ever registered started in 1977 when a strike ordered by the Medical Association of Malta (a member of CMTU) resulted in a government-imposed lock-out. The dispute was only resolved after ten years, when the PN came to power in 1987 (Baldacchino 2021).

Over the years, industrial disputes and strikes have trended downwards and 'Malta has enjoyed an atmosphere of relative industrial peace and stability' (Zammit et al. 2015: 262). Indeed, trade unions became increasingly reluctant to resort to industrial action, especially full-blown strikes in the private sector, for fear of scaring away foreign companies. DIER stopped collecting strike data in 2018, which might also indicate their reduced role.<sup>8</sup> A few high-profile cases of industrial action resulting in the closure of private companies highlighted the dangers and increased social partners' propensity to work together to find amicable solutions. The global financial crisis of 2008, and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic, reinforced the importance of solving industrial disputes without resorting to industrial action. During the pandemic, the law courts also intervened to stop industrial action in the health care sector on the basis

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<sup>8</sup> Official strike statistics exclude partial industrial action such as work-to-rule (Zammit et al. 2015).

that it would endanger public health, which points to the increased difficulty of trade unions availing themselves of such rights.

Despite this, some industrial action has continued to be registered in recent years, especially in the public sector, where unions have more leverage to realize their demands. It is interesting to note that industrial action in the public sector often concerns professional workers rather than the blue-collar workers historically associated with industrial action (Baldacchino 2021).

The Director of the DIER often investigates ‘trade disputes’ before they are officially registered (Debono and Baldacchino 2019). Between 2000 and 2019, the Director was involved in about fifty-seven annual mediation/conciliation interventions (DIER n.d.a). There has been a decreasing trend of interventions, which could reflect the overall reduction in industrial conflicts. Around 80 per cent of interventions resulted in agreement between the parties. When agreement cannot be reached, the case might be referred to the industrial tribunal. An average of seven cases were decided by the industrial tribunal annually between 2000 and 2019.

## **Societal power**

Despite losing ground in terms of unionization rate and collective bargaining coverage, and irrespective of the decline of industrial conflict over the years, trade unions maintain strong societal power. They do not appear to be suffering from a crisis of legitimacy (Debono 2019; Zammit and Rizzo 2003), and are viewed as an important societal institution, countering the power of employers and serving as a powerful lobby group to government.

The public campaigns organized by the large unions over the years yielded significant social changes. The campaign against precarious employment spearheaded by the GWU in the wake of the 2008 international economic recession is an interesting case. Despite the employers’ attempts at minimizing the problem, unions managed to give prominence to the issue, and to turn the then unknown idea of precariousness into a popular term commonly referred to in Maltese mass media, among other things (Debono and Marmara 2017). During the Malta Presidency of the EU in 2017, the GWU lobbied the government, the EU Commission and the ETUC to update the regulations on posted

workers, so that the latter would be provided with the same employment rights and health and safety rights as other workers.

Related to this topic, unions have also campaigned for equal pay for equal work. Through a combination of industrial and legal action, various unions have been successful in ensuring that sub-contracted workers at government entities received the same remuneration as other employees carrying out the same work. Similar successes have also been achieved at public-private institutions where employees employed by the private entity were initially paid less than their publicly employed counterparts (Cordina 2020). Unions are currently working with stakeholders to close loopholes in the law which allow for individuals to be paid differently when working for different employers within the same workplace.

Unions have proactively worked with other organizations to tackle a wide variety of issues. For example, the UHM aided the development of cooperatives by providing them with guidance on contracts, assisting them in dealing with regulators, and acting as a pressure group on government. The GWU in collaboration with the UN's Refugee Agency developed a series of videos on working rights and integration, targeting third-country nationals (with subtitles in various languages). The production of these videos, coupled with talks held with third-country national communities, which aimed at informing unions about migrants' plight, as well as explaining Maltese employment laws and the benefits of trade union membership, may have aided the GWU in unionizing some migrant workers (see the section on 'Unionization').

In recent years, For.U.M. has lobbied for the 'right to disconnect', which refers to employees' right to refrain from engaging in work tasks and being contacted on work matters outside their working hours. This is of particular importance to union members who are professionals. This resulted in a meeting organized within the Malta-EU Steering and Action Committee (MEUSAC). Subsequently, unions took up the topic at EU level with a Maltese Member of the European Parliament who has pushed for EU regulation on the matter. National discussion on this topic is ongoing, with the MEA arguing that legislation should not be introduced prior to the adoption of a related EU directive (Meilak 2021). For.U.M. also collaborates with the MEA by organizing an annual seminar on themes of common interest.

Union press releases and conferences, industrial threats and actions, and collective agreements are often reported prominently on national media. The opinions of union leaders are often sought when industrial or sectoral issues affecting workers emerge, and their public views are expected in relation to government policies and actions. For example, their opinions on the annual government budget have become an important tradition. The government publishes a pre-budget document and social partners and civil society are expected to give their feedback. Trade unions' feedback is normally given prominence by the media and is taken into consideration by government.

The impact on the media of the general unions, especially the GWU, however, is much greater than that of the smaller unions. The GWU has been influencing public opinion since the 1960s through its two national newspapers, the daily *L-Orizzont* and weekly *It-Torċa*. These newspapers have a large readership, especially among the Labour leaning population. More recently, the GWU has also launched the IT portal iNews. The GWU's voice is given prominence on the PL media platforms, such as One TV, the Party's television station. On the other hand, while the second largest union, the UHM, does not have its own newspaper, it is given ample media space, especially on the PN media, such as the newspaper *In-Nazzjon* and Net News. The advance of digitalization, the growth of social media, especially Facebook, may have started to erode this traditional difference between the large and small unions, however, because it is now easier for smaller unions to publish and propagate their views.

Eurobarometer Surveys between 2005 and 2019 indicate a consistent positive opinion of trade unions among the majority of the public. Besides, while results vary from year to year, there appears to have been an improvement over the surveyed years. As can be seen from Figure 20.1, while public opinion on unions in Malta was nearly always higher than the EU average, the gap between the two has widened in recent years.



**Figure 20.1** Positive public opinion on trade unions, 2005–2019

Note: The question asked was: Could you please tell me for each of the following, whether the term brings to mind something very positive, fairly positive, fairly negative or very negative – Trade union.

Source: European Commission (2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2010, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2019).

Such a trend was replicated in a recent study carried out among a representative sample of Maltese working-age people, which found that respondents have an overall positive opinion of unions (Debono 2019). Over two-thirds of adults (70.9 per cent) think that unions play an important role in protecting workers' rights. Unions are viewed as playing a major role in seeking unity among workers (68.4 per cent). Besides that, people appreciate union contributions to national debates (69 per cent) (Debono 2019). Despite such overall positive views of unions, there appears to have been some erosion of confidence towards unions among their members during the new millennium. While a survey carried out in 1999 found that 89.7 per cent of union members believed that unions were needed by society (Zammit and Rizzo 2003), the levels of confidence expressed by union members about the role of unions never reached 80 per cent among Debono's (2019) respondents and varied according to the type of role being examined. Attitudes towards unions also vary considerably depending on demographic status. Thus, a section of the working population, especially 'women, those who were never unionized, those not covered by a collective agreement, those who have never sought help from trade unions and those employed in small

organizations' (Debono 2019: 1,011) are less likely to have clear opinions about unions.

## **Trade union policies towards the European Union**

The three trade union peak organizations, namely the GWU, the CMTU and For.U.M., are affiliate members of the ETUC. All three organizations benefit from this affiliation by being involved in European issues. Resources preclude Maltese organizations from participating at a European level to the same degree as unions hailing from larger countries and must often be selective with regards to which ETUC meetings they participate in. It is worthwhile noting that not all topics discussed within the ETUC are directly applicable to Maltese industrial relations. The GWU is the only Maltese affiliate member of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Insufficient resources, however, prevent the GWU from participating in the ITUC to the desired degree.

The GWU, the CMTU, the UHM, and For.U.M. are involved in the European Semester, along with other social partners, through the MCESD. While it was reported that the MCESD used to take a reactive approach to the European Semester, whereby reports on EU activity were discussed among the social partners, the approach is now more proactive, with the national agenda formulated around the European Semester. While in general, they feel that they are contributing positively to the European Semester, some union representatives believe that there is still much room for progress because of social partners' limited capacity. Further interaction on EU matters occurs through the Malta–EU Steering and Action Committee (MEUSAC), which aims to facilitate consultation on EU policy and legislation, as well as transposition of EU directives. The Core Group of MEUSAC includes representatives of government, the national parliament, social partners, civil society representatives and EU-related entities. Among its members representing workers are the CMTU, GWU, For.U.M. and the UHM Voice of the Workers. The Core Group meets regularly, and joint meetings are sometimes organized between the MEUSAC Core Group and the MCESD (MEUSAC 2020). The Employment Relations Board, which also includes representatives of employers and employees, also meets regularly to discuss EU developments which may impact upon Malta. For example, discussions were recently held regarding the proposed EU Directive to ensure that workers are protected by adequate minimum wages.

The UHM and the GWU also contribute to European Semester discussions via their representation of workers in Malta within the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the European equivalent of the MCESD (EESC n.d.). For.U.M.'s exclusion from this body has created some friction between the federations; For.U.M. representatives believe that while the union representatives within this body represent all unions in Malta, no communications on EESC developments occurs between For.U.M. and those that are party to EESC meetings.

Maltese unions are also active within the European Trade Union Federations (ETUFs) and other European groups they form part of. A case in point is the GWU's affiliation with the European Transport Workers' Federation and the International Transport Workers' Federation. Primarily, the interaction between these entities has concerned maritime workers and their lack of rights when working in international waters. The GWU has been pushing for such workers, who are usually third-country nationals working on Maltese-flagged boats to be granted the same rights as workers in Malta. This is an ongoing issue. The partnership between the GWU and these international bodies has also been active in discussing their concerns with government in the aviation sector, when Ryanair set up a subsidiary in Malta (Malta Air) and planned to transfer workers from around the EU to contracts with this new subsidiary (ETF 2019).

Maltese organizations also contribute to EU policy by means of their representation on boards of EU agencies. For.U.M. and the GWU are represented on the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) Management Board, whereas For.U.M. provides an alternative member to the EU-OSHA Executive Board of the Management Board. For.U.M. is present on the Management Board of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, with the GWU providing an alternative member representing the interests of workers (CEDEFOP 2019).

The GWU has also forged its own cross-border relationships. Of primary interest is its relationship with the CGIL, the largest Italian confederation. Malta has experienced a substantial influx of foreign workers over the past few years, with the largest group coming from Italy. The exponential increase of Italian workers and their growing needs led the GWU to reach an agreement with CGIL to offer the latter's members in Malta a contact point that provides them services, assistance and representation, as needed (CGIL 2019).

## Conclusions

The idiosyncratic development of trade unionism in Malta needs to be understood in relation to the country's colonial past and its socio-economic, geographic and political context. Many of the current challenges faced by unions have been created or intensified by the country's recent strong economic growth, which led to changing employment in industries, an increasingly heterogeneous workforce, growing numbers of people at risk of poverty, and stresses on the quality of life and on environmental sustainability. The complexity of this situation has been further compounded by growing challenges to the rule of law and the pandemic's shock on the economy and social life. While several of these challenges are being tackled by unions, others, including the move towards a carbon-reduced economy, are still not sufficiently high on their agenda.

Maltese unions have been feeling the pressures of the megatrend of diminishing union influence across the Western world, including difficulties penetrating growing industries in private services, ageing union membership, and the shrinking unionization rate and collective bargaining coverage. But the union movement remains strong, as indicated by the raw membership figures, which are still increasing. Besides, the reduction of strikes does not appear to derive from the unions' inability to organize workers but is rather a strategic decision based on a preference for dialogue over confrontation. In order not to jeopardize their strategic social relevance, unions need to be particularly careful about their revenue streams, which in recent years have become more diversified.

It is clear that unions' reach and impact are not consistent across all categories of workers. Indeed, research 'portrays a rather traditionally-oriented trade union movement in Malta, which appears not to be particularly effective in attracting and retaining younger workers, part-time workers, workers on definite contracts and those in the private sector, especially in smaller organizations' (Debono 2018: 56). Despite this and their limited resources, unions constantly strive to assist vulnerable workers, as can be seen from their campaigns against precariousness, including the recent endeavours to protect platform workers, and the fledgling efforts to increase the representation of migrant workers.

While retaining their core function of collective bargaining, the larger and better organized trade unions, on their own or through their umbrella organizations, have increased their influence on the national agenda. They contribute to policy debate that affects not only their

members but also the larger society. Over the years, trade unions have also shaped government policy through a variety of other social actions, such as public demonstrations and campaigns.

As shown in this chapter, the trade union movement in Malta has been resilient in the face of emerging challenges. None of Visser's (2019) four scenarios appear to depict well the likely future trends of the movement. The more successful unions will be those that manage to adapt their strategies to the emerging challenges and needs. Several union leaders are willing to seek creative avenues in terms of helping workers in general and boosting their membership numbers. Efforts are under way to expand membership beyond their traditional base, focusing on previously non-unionized industries and occupational groups. Higher participation of women and more highly educated people is particularly visible, while efforts to increase representation of migrant workers are also on the increase. There is currently even a bold attempt by the GWU and the UHM to increase union membership through government intervention. Cooperation and alliances with other organizations both nationally and internationally are also increasingly common; though, unfortunately, cooperation between the two major union blocks themselves is very rare.

Despite the fact that 'the traditional cadre of union members is set to continue declining in the coming years due to economic, organizational and demographic trends' (Debono 2018: 56), with potential further reductions in membership rates and collective bargaining coverage, the unions' efforts, coupled with a generally favourable public opinion and supportive political class, and even cooperation with employers' associations on aspects of common interest, augur well for the future of the trade union movement. Whether these and other efforts will lead to the movement's revitalization is still difficult to predict.

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All links were checked on 17 May 2021.

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## **Abbreviations**

<b>CEDEFOP</b>	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
<b>CGIL</b>	Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (Italian General Confederation of Labour)
<b>CMTU</b>	Confederation of Malta Trade Unions
<b>COLA</b>	Cost of living allowance
<b>DIER</b>	Department of Industrial and Employment Relations
<b>EESC</b>	European Economic and Social Committee
<b>EIRA</b>	Employment and Industrial Relations Act
<b>ETUC</b>	European Trade Union Confederation
<b>ETUFs</b>	European Trade Union Federations
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EU-OSHA</b>	European Agency for Safety and Health at Work
<b>For.U.M.</b>	Forum Unions Maltin (Forum of Maltese Unions)
<b>GWU</b>	General Workers Union
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>ITUC</b>	International Trade Union Confederation
<b>MCESD</b>	Malta Council for Economic and Social Development

<b>MEA</b>	Malta Employers Association
<b>MEUSAC</b>	Malta–EU Steering and Action Committee
<b>MIA</b>	Malta International Airport
<b>MUT</b>	Malta Union of Teachers
<b>PES</b>	Public Employment Service
<b>PL</b>	Partit Laburista (Labour Party)
<b>PN</b>	Partit Nazzjonalista (Nationalist Party)
<b>RTU</b>	Registrar of Trade Unions
<b>ToM</b>	Times of Malta
<b>UHM</b>	Union Haddiema Magħqudin – Voice of the Workers (Union of United Workers – Voice of the Workers).