

Trade unions for all working people

A TWO-DAY residential seminar on women's participatory role in trade unionism was held at the Selmun Palace Hotel, on November 29-30. The seminar, attended by representatives of the Confederation of Malta Trade Unions and the General Workers Union, was organised by the Workers' Participation Development Centre of the University of Malta and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. The guest speaker/mentor of the seminar was Dr Esther Quinn, Education Officer with the Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) in Glasgow, Scotland.

In her opening address, Dr Quinn stressed the importance of women's active participation in an otherwise traditionally male-dominated trade union movement. It is essential, she suggests, to establish a women's structure with at least one women-only committee, within each respective trade union, thus ensuring the election of female representatives on trade union national councils.

Dr Quinn added that women in such key positions would serve as role models to other women who would otherwise be reluctant to come forward and participate in actively negotiating on women's behalf.

Issues directly pertaining to the male workforce may be dissimilar to women's concerns. While 'overtime' is an important bargaining issue for male workers, it is often a non-issue for many women in the labour market who are constrained by familial obligations. Alternatively, how often are issues directly associated with the female workforce such as child-care, maternity and parental leave and improved working conditions for part-time workers, included on the bargaining agenda and negotiated by our trade unions?

by Frances Camilleri

while women's share in the MUBE was almost 50% of union membership, the percentage of women workers affiliated to both the GWU and the UHM was 16% and 25% respectively.

Interestingly, the MUT perseveres as the only major union without a gender breakdown of its official statistical data.

A clear under-representation of women in the senior decision-making posts is evident in Table 2 which reveals the position of women and men in the senior decision-making posts of local trade unions.

Barriers to women's participation

The barriers which hamper women from full participation in trade unionism were identified by the union representatives at the seminar. The union officials see family responsibilities as the main constraint affecting women's active participatory role in trade unions. Union meetings which are normally held in the evenings, after office hours, have often proved problematic to women who would wish to aspire to the top. Moreover, the absence of child care compounds the situation.

While it is assumed that honorary unpaid work, as is active trade unionism, is not attractive to women, it is also believed that male members and officials would, nonetheless, feel uneasy with female domination and perceive women as a threat to their established posts.

However, to date, male leaders appear to instil more confidence in their members who are aware of the trend in women's short-term economic activity pattern. This in turn creates a vicious circle whereby women's intermittent or lack of trade union participation results in the loss of self-assertion and confidence-building, acquired mainly through continued working experience. It is suggested that educational programmes specifically for women workers, feature high on trade unionist agenda.

Why should more women be involved?

With the present trend of an increase in the number of women who join the labour force, it is imperative for trade unions to attract and involve more female members. As one Maltese trade union official rightly remarked during the seminar, collective bargaining is not collective if women's representatives are not present during management/union negotiations. Improving women's working conditions improves conditions for all. Women's involvement makes unionisation healthier and more truly representative.

Moreover, issues which are directly involved with female workers,



MRS HELENA DALLI (second from left) addressing the seminar on trade unions with, from left, Dr Esther Quinn, Ms Frances Camilleri and Ms Edith Rizzo

such as maternity leave, parental leave, flexible/reduced working hours, job-sharing, child-care centres, equal pay for work of equal

be open to all union members is in the pipeline for the forthcoming year.

* A women's committee within the Malta Union of Bank Employees was set up in 1985, and included in the union's statute three years ago. The union plans to set up two child-care centres in the near future. The centres will be staffed by voluntary female bank employees availing themselves of their 12-month maternity leave.

Half of this leave could be chosen to provide voluntary service to the banks' child-care centres. In return for such service, the banks will allow 2.5 years of free child-care. Carers need not be MUBE members, but should still sign the union's code of discipline. A quota system of one reserved place within each of the banks' group committee ensures female representation on the central committee of the union.

2. Senior decision-making posts within Maltese trade unions - 1997

GWU	Total	Females	Males
Delegates	602	56	546
Council	56	3	56
Central Administration	5	0	5
Section Sec.	9	0	9
Dep. Sec.	1	1	0
Women's Council	18	18	0
UHM			
General Council	24	1	23
Executive Committees	121	8	113
Full-time Officials	5	0	5
CMTU			
Executive Posts	8	0	8
National Council	36	7	29
Full-time Officials	1	0	1
MUT			
Council	30	14	16

value, sexual harassment and improved working conditions for part-time employees, would certainly come to the fore on the bargaining agenda if more women were to sit at the negotiating table.

Steps taken so far by the respective trade unions to increase women's participation include:

* The General Workers Union has its own women's committee. While it was felt that such a structure was imminent, it was slow in getting started as evening meetings prove problematic to women. It was, however, decided that immediate action will be taken to encourage more women to attend such meetings. Child-care is presently taking top priority on the union's agenda. A child-care centre on the union premises which would

Action plan

GWU:

* Child-care centre to operate in the next year

* Structure of the women-only committee to be reinforced. Push towards an increase in the representation/co-option of women on the executive committee of their respective section

* Less discrimination among trade unionists themselves. A quota system is to be introduced. One female ex-officio member in an administrative post elected from each section will automatically be included on the national council and national conference, with voting power. This move will lead towards a more female-friendly statute by March 1998.

Issues for women trade unionists

- * child-care facilities
- * reduced hours
- * flexible hours
- * job sharing
- * parental leave (private sector)
- * improved conditions for part-time workers
- * sexual harassment
- * forced overtime
- * production/speed and bonus system
- * repetitive strain injury due to production
- * women shop stewards not accepted by management
- * overcrowding and/or isolation
- * freedom of movement on factory floor
- * paid release for union representatives
- * sexual discrimination in human capital investment
- * women's experience at the workplace not fully

- * recognised by management
- * shortage of staff rooms in state primary schools
- * promotions for women which take long to materialise
- * overtime payment for part-time employees. Often, part-time workers are recruited in place of overtime payment to full-time staff to full-time staff
- * seniority after a period of unpaid leave
- * retraining
- * health and safety, especially in pregnancy
- * sick leave when children are sick
- * age discrimination
- * stress abatement
- * distance learning
- * specialised training for women, such as management courses
- * teleworking

1. Union membership - 1993-97

1993/94	Total	Female	%
GWU	43,750	5,756	13
UHM	23,261	6,060	26
MUBE	2,503	1,307	52
MUT	4,040	-	-
1994/95			
GWU	44,647	6,091	13
UHM	23,472	6,049	25
MUBE	2,825	1,403	49
MUT	4,052	-	-
1995/96			
GWU	45,562	7,399	16
UHM	23,626	6,125	25
MUBE	2,915	1,453	49.8
MUT	4,084	-	-

Women and men in trade unions

Table 1 shows the membership of the four largest trade unions in Malta: the General Workers Union (GWU), the Union Haddiema Magħqudin (UHM), the Malta Union of Bank Employees (MUBE) and the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT). The data reveal an overall low in the number of unionised workers. In 1996 just over half (52%) of Malta's total labour supply of 146,472 were members of the four major trade unions. In the years under review,

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