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Exploring Trade Union Perceptions Among Members and Non-members in Malta

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Abstract: Trade union density is declining throughout Europe. The situation is no different in Malta. Few recent studies have analysed the perceptions of trade union members and non-members to understand this phenomenon. To achieve this and generate novel findings, a cross-sectional study was conducted whereby both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Trade union members were more likely to be older, have children, work in larger organisations or public organisations, and be covered by a collective agreement. Members described aspects of their unions' approach that they appreciated and the benefits they valued. Members called for better two-way communication and suggested improvements in the way their union is run. Findings indicate that trade unions could attract and retain members via improving internal union democracy, increasing proactivity at the enterprise and national level, promoting two-way communication, reconsidering political connections, and promoting union membership.

Keywords: *Industrial relations; trade unions; members; non-members; perceptions; Malta.*

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1. Introduction

Trade unionism can benefit members in various ways. Amongst them, membership has been found to protect employment[1], benefit earnings and pensions[2], and provide more opportunities for job-related training[3]. Trade unions (TUs) often carry out important health-promoting activities[4] and these, as well as unions' focus on improving working conditions, often result in workplaces with better levels of occupational health and safety[5]. Trade unionism has also been found to support and benefit specific vulnerable populations such as migrant workers and victims of domestic violence[6]. Benefits can also be country-specific. For example, trade union members in the USA are more likely to have health insurance coverage and access to care[7]. In some European countries, trade unions administer voluntary unemployment insurance schemes[8].

Despite the benefits of TU membership, union density has been declining across Europe for many years[9]. This is also the case in Malta (EU), the country where this study was conducted. Given Malta's British colonial

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[1] L. Goerke, and M. Pannenberg, "*Trade union membership and dismissals*", Labour Economics, 2011, vol. 18, n. 6, 810-821.

[2] N. Torm, "*Does union membership pay off? Evidence from Vietnamese SMEs*", in J. Rand and F Tarp (eds), Micro, small, and medium enterprises in Vietnam, Oxford Academic, Oxford, 2018, 230–252. T. Turner, C. Cross, and M. O'Sullivan, "*Does union membership benefit immigrant workers in 'hard times?*'", Journal of Industrial Relations, 2014, vol. 56, n. 5, 611-630.

[3] M. Stuart, D. Valizade, and L. Bessa, "*Skills and training: the union advantage*", CERIC, 2015, vol. 21.

[4] B. Malinowski, M. Minkler, and L. Stock, "*Labor unions: a public health institution*", American Journal of Public Health, 2015, vol. 105, n. 2, 261-271.

[5] JP. Leigh, and B. Chakalov, "*Labor unions and health: A literature review of pathways and outcomes in the workplace*", Preventive Medicine Reports, 2021, vol. 24, 101502.

[6] M. Stuart, D. Valizade, and L. Bessa. *op. cit.* G. Wibberley, T. Bennett, C. Jones, and A. Hollinrake*, "The role of trade unions in supporting victims of domestic violence in the workplace"*, Industrial Relations Journal, 2018, vol. 49, no. 1, 69-85.

[7] L. Petach, and DK. Wyant, *"The union advantage: union membership, access to care, and the Affordable Care Act."*, International Journal of Health Economics and Management, 2023, vol. 23, n. 1, 1-26.

[8] J. Clasen, and E. Viebrock, "*Voluntary unemployment insurance and trade union membership: Investigating the connections in Denmark and Sweden*", Journal of Social Policy, vol. 37, n. 3, 433–451.

[9] J. Visser, "*Why fewer workers join unions in Europe: A social custom explanation of membership trends*", British Journal of Industrial Relations, 2002, vol. 40, n. 3, 403–430. K. Vandaele, "*Bleak prospects: mapping trade union membership in Europe since 2000*", ETUI Printshop, Brussels, 2019.

past, industrial relations in Malta reflect the British system, whereby voluntary bipartite collective bargaining at the enterprise level is the norm. However, following Malta's accession to the EU in 2004, European practices in the area of social dialogue and industrial relations are increasingly being observed.

Between 2000 and 2020, employment in Malta more than doubled, driven by an increase in the female and migrant labour force, and has continued to increase since[10]. TU membership has not kept pace with this rapid increase in employment. Union density was reported at 60% in 2000 and fell to 45% in 2019[11]. Although this level of density is rather positive when compared to several other European countries, national statistics may overestimate trade union membership[12]. Furthermore, whereas TU membership more than doubled between 1980 and 2000, only an 8% increase was registered between 2000 and 2019[13] . As unions seek to tackle the decline in TU density, comprehending individuals' reasons for joining or not joining a TU has become a fundamental research topic[14]. Despite this, there are few studies on views of TUs' work[15] and very few papers that explore this topic qualitatively. Furthermore, whilst work has continued evolving[16], and the profile of workers is ever-changing, recent research on this topic is very limited. This situation is no different in Malta, and thus the current paper aims to investigate members' and non-

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[10] LA. Fiorini, and FME. La Ferla, "*The development of occupational health and safety in Malta*", in M. Debono, and G. Baldacchino (eds), Working Life - The Transformation of the Maltese Workplace: 1960-2020, Malta University Press, Malta, 2021, 217–236. Jobsplus, Employment trends, Malta, 2023. https://jobsplus.gov.mt/

[11] M. Debono, and LA. Fiorini, "*Malta: Trade union resilience in a changing environment",* in J. Waddington, T. Muller, and K. Vandaele (eds), Trade Unions in the European Union, Peter Lang, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2023, 763–798.

[12] M. Debono, *"An analysis of trade union membership in Malta"*, Xjenza, 2018, vol. 6, n.1, 46–58.

[13] M. Debono, and LA. Fiorini, *op. cit.*

[14] L. Frangi, and M. Barisione, "*Are you a union member?' Determinants and trends of subjective union membership in Italian society (1972–2013)"*, Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research, 2015, vol. 21, n. 4, 451–469. J. Holgate, G. Alberti, I. Byford, and I. Greenwood I, *"Trade union community membership: exploring what people who are not in paid employment could contribute to union activism"*, Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research, 2021, vol. 27, n. 4, 469–483.

[15] L. Frangi, and MA. Hennebert, "*Expressing confidence in unions in Quebec and the other Canadian provinces: Similarities and contrasts in findings*", Relations Industrielles, vol. 70, n. 1, 131–156.

[16] LA. Fiorini, *"Remote workers' reasons for changed levels of absenteeism, presenteeism and working outside agreed hours during the COVID-19 Pandemic",* SAGE Open, 2024, vol. 14, n. 1, 21582440241240636.

members' perceptions of TUs in Malta. More specifically, the study will explore how TU members differ from non-members, what TU members like about their union, and what they think their union can do better. The study will also examine why other individuals have chosen not to join a union and what can be done to encourage membership. The study will utilise both quantitative and qualitative data to generate new information that may be of value at both a national and international level.

2. Literature Review

Research on TU density often falls into one of two categories. Studies that focus on the macro level and analyse the structural and institutional determinants of TU membership, and those that focus on the micro level, and examine the differences between members and non-members, as well as individuals' reasons for joining or leaving a TU[17].

It has been argued that macro-level factors, including political and institutional factors, are the primary reason for the decline in TU membership[18]. In many Western countries, the power and mobility of capital, backed by domestic and foreign supporters have posed significant challenges to TUs. Factors such as privatisation, labour deregulation and increased international competition have led to downward pressure on wages and working conditions, making it more difficult for TUs to influence working conditions[19]. Reasons also vary between countries. For example, the erosion of the link between unemployment insurance and TU membership in the Nordic countries (often termed the Ghent System)[20], or the shift of employment from manufacturing to the service sector in many Western countries[21]. In addition, many TUs are unable to make inroads into new workplaces, new sectors and young workers[22] and new forms of work such as platform work, where workers have no fixed

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[17] J. Toubøl, and CS. Jensen, *"Why do people join trade unions? The impact of workplace union density on union recruitment"*, Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research, 2014, vol. 20, n. 1, 135–154.

[18] J. Visser, *op. cit., 2002.*

[19] J. Kelly, *"Trade union membership and power in comparative perspective"*, The Economic and Labour Relations Review, 2015, vol. 26, n. 4, 526–544.

[20] A. Bryson, B. Ebbinghaus, and J. Visser, *"Introduction: Causes, consequences and cures of union decline"*, European Journal of Industrial Relations, 2011, vol. 17, n. 2, 97–105.

[21] J. Toubøl, and CS. Jensen, *op. cit.*

[22] S. Machin, *"Trade union decline, new workplaces and new workers"*, in H. Gospel, and S. Wood (eds), Representing Workers: Trade Union Recognition and Membership in Britain, Routledge, London, 2003, 15–28.

employers or workplaces, exacerbate the situation. This is also the case in Malta, where blue-collar work has become less prevalent and TUs struggle to gain a foothold in many service industries and new forms of work. TUs have lobbied for the introduction of mandatory TU membership. The proposal has received Government support but has been fiercely resisted by employer associations[23].

At the micro-level, the factors and motivations that influence trade union membership have also been studied. Studies in several EU countries have demonstrated that the factors that drive TU membership can vary between countries[24]. Furthermore, most cross-national studies do not include Malta, emphasising the value of studying such issues in the country. Individuals join unions for a variety of reasons, which include both the benefits they might derive from membership and broader social justice reasons[25]. Some of the more common micro-level findings are discussed below.

Waddington[26] found that one of the leading reasons for retaining TU membership was to have workplace support, which is also a primary reason in Malta[27]. Most members, however, were dissatisfied with their representation[28], and past research also indicates that this is common in Malta[29]. This is notable as individuals renounce their membership for reasons including poor support and communication[30].

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[23] M. Debono, and LA. Fiorini, *op. cit*.

[24] B. Ebbinghaus, C. Göbel, and S. Koos, *"Social capital, 'Ghent' and workplace contexts matter: Comparing union membership in Europe"*. European Journal of Industrial Relations, 2011, vol. 17, n. 2, 107–124. C. Schnabel, and J. Wagner, *"Union density and determinants of union membership in 18 EU countries: Evidence from micro data, 2002/03"*, Industrial Relations Journal, 2007, vol. 38, n. 1, 5–32.

[25] J. Fiorito, I. Padavic, and ZA. Russell, *"Pro-Social and Self-Interest Motivations for Unionism and Implications for Unions as Institutions"*, in D. Lewin, and PJ. Gollan (eds*),* Advances in Industrial and Labor Relations, 2017: Shifts in Workplace Voice, Justice, Negotiation and Conflict Resolution in Contemporary Workplaces, Emerald Publishing Limited, Vol. 24, Leeds, 185–211.

[26] J. Waddington, "Trade union membership retention in Europe: the challenge of difficult times", *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 2014, vol. 21, n. 3, 205-221.

[27] M. Debono, *"A national survey on trade unions in Malta",* National Forum of Trade Unions, Malta, 2015.

[28] J. Waddington, *op. cit., 2014*

[29] M. Debono, *"Attitudes towards trade unions in Malta,"* Economic and Industrial Democracy, 2019, vol. 40, n. 4, 997–1017.

[30] J. Waddington, *"Why do members leave? The importance of retention to trade union growth"*, Labor Studies Journal, 2006, vol. 31, n. 3, 15–38.

Workers often join a TU to obtain working conditions that they would not otherwise get on their own[31], and indeed, Waddington[32] determined that improving one's pay and working conditions was another main reason for remaining a TU member, as were the additional benefits one gets from being a member. This also appears to be the case in Malta where individuals covered by collective agreements are more satisfied with the work of unions[33]. Indeed, dissatisfaction with TUs' efforts to improve pay and working conditions has been linked with individuals renouncing their membership[34].

Social norms can be a powerful reason for joining a trade union. Previous studies have revealed that a major reason for membership was that others in the same workplace were members[35]. As union density decreases, this pull factor is increasingly blunted. A statistical analysis[36] found that workplace union density was the most important predictor of union membership when controlling for various other variables. In a related finding, the presence of a union in the workplace was found to be an important variable[37] but its importance depends on the situation in the workplace. For example, its impact on membership is diminished where the workforce benefits from extension mechanisms[38]. In Malta, workers who are not members are also covered by collective agreement provisions in organised enterprises. Debono[39] found that apart from disinterest in trade unionism, the lack of a TU in Maltese workplaces was the greatest barrier to TU membership.

Attitudes and dispositional factors have also been linked to TU membership. TU members are more likely to hold a left-wing ideology than a right-wing ideology[40]. However, this only appears to influence membership in a few EU countries[41]. Waddington[42] also revealed that

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[31] J. Visser, *op. cit., 2002.*

[32] J. Waddington, *op. cit., 2014.*

[33] M. Debono, *op. cit, 2019.*

[34] J. Waddington *op. cit, 2016.*

[35] J. Visser, *op. cit., 2002.*

[36] J. Toubøl, and CS. Jensen, *op. cit.*

[37] B. Ebbinghaus, C. Göbel, and S. Koos, *op. cit.* Schnabel, and J. Wagner, *op. cit.*

[38] Z. Fazekas, *"Institutional effects on the presence of trade unions at the workplace: Moderation in a multilevel setting"*, European Journal of Industrial Relations, 2011, vol. 17, n. 2, 153–169.

[39] M. Debono, *op. cit, 2015.*

[40] Z. Fazekas, *op. cit.* J. Toubøl, and CS. Jensen, *op. cit.* C. Kollmeyer, *"Who joins trade unions? Testing new sociological explanations"*, Comparative Sociology, 2013, vol. 12, n. 4, 548–574.

[41] Schnabel, and J. Wagner, *op. cit.*

[42] J. Waddington, *op. cit., 2014.*

holding positive ideological beliefs about TUs was a reason why individuals remained TU members. Factors such as neuroticism and external locus of control[43] as well as higher self-transcendence and conservation scores have also been associated with TU membership[44].

In some EU countries, individuals are more likely to join a TU if they are dissatisfied with the situation at work[45]. Strike action has been significantly associated with higher membership rates. This is likely related to feelings of union effectiveness and perceived injustice about the situation[46]. The trend In Malta[47], as well as other EU countries[48], is that industrial action has become less frequent, which may have harmed membership. In fact, in many EU countries, individuals are more likely to join a union they consider powerful[49]. However, whilst economic strikes have decreased across Europe, general strikes (e.g., related to social justice) have increased[50] and thus TUs have not lost their power in mobilising individuals when needed. Lobbying government was cited by some TU members as a reason for retaining their membership[51]. Individuals in Malta also value this TU role[52]. Conversely, political links between TUs and political parties are often a reason for dissatisfaction with TUs, a situation that is not unique to Malta[53].

Demographic and work-related variables have also been associated with TU membership. In some countries, males are more likely to be TU members, however, this is not the case in the Nordic countries[54]. It has been argued that gender differences in TU membership are due to females' greater likelihood of working part-time and holding atypical

[43] KR. Parkes, and TD. Razavi, *"Personality and attitudinal variables as predictors of voluntary union membership"*, Personality and Individual Differences, 2004, vol. 37, n. 2, 333–347.

[44] H. Kirmanoğlu, and C. Başlevent, *"Using basic personal values to test theories of union membership"*, Socio-Economic Review, vol. 10, n. 4, 683–703.

[45] Z. Fazekas, *op. cit.,* Schnabel, and J. Wagner, *op. cit.*

[46] A. Hodder, M. Williams, J. Kelly, and N. McCarthy. *"Does strike action stimulate trade union membership growth?"*, British Journal of Industrial Relations, 2017, vol. 55, n. 1, 165–186.

[47] M. Debono, and LA. Fiorini, *op. cit.*, E. Zammit, M. Debono, and M. Brincat, *"Malta"*, in R. Blanpain, and M. Colucci (eds), International Encyclopaedia for Labour Law and Industrial Relations, Kluwer Law International, The Hague, 2015.

[48] ETUI, *"Strikes map of Europe",* Brussels, 2023, https://www.etui.org/strikes-map.

[49] Schnabel, and J. Wagner, *op. cit.*

[50] J. Kelly, *op. cit.*

[51] J. Waddington, *op. cit.,* 2014.

[52] M. Debono, op. cit., 2019.

[53] M. Debono, op. cit., 2019, J. Kelly, *op. cit.*

[54] Schnabel, and J. Wagner, *op. cit.*

contracts, which have also been associated with lower membership[55]. A study by Waddington[56] found little difference in the reasons for TU membership between men and women. Age has also been studied, with TU membership often linked with older age[57]. One study found that membership increased until the age of 54 and then decreased again, possibly because older individuals have greater job security and income[58]. The same study also found that the relationship between education and TU membership does not appear to be linear; membership increases with higher levels of education up to 15 years of full-time education (i.e., attainment of university-level education) and then decreases. TU members are also more likely to be employed in blue-collar occupations[59], although several professional unions appear to be thriving[60]. While contrary results have been presented, the size of the organisation seems to play an important role in TU density in countries where TUs are not involved in organising unemployment insurance[61], as is the case in Malta. This places Maltese unions at a particular disadvantage given the high proportion of micro and small organisations in the country.

Demographic and work-related variables have previously been studied in Malta. Debono[62] concluded that TU members tend to be older and have full-time and indefinite contracts. In contrast to some European findings, TU members generally had higher levels of education and higher-level occupations. A link with gender was not identified. In terms of satisfaction with TUs, limited associations have been identified with demographic factors: education and age were not correlated, while women were more satisfied with the work of TUs when they worked in smaller organisations, whereas men were more satisfied when they worked in larger organisations[63].

It can be concluded that the views of members and non-members are likely to be shaped by various factors. TU members are likely to value the positive working conditions and support offered by TUs, whilst political beliefs and social norms may also foster favourable attitudes towards TUs.

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[55] B. Ebbinghaus, C. Göbel, and S. Koos, *op. cit.*

[56] J. Waddington, *op. cit.,* 2014.

[57] Z. Fazekas, *op. cit.*

[58] B. Ebbinghaus, C. Göbel, and S. Koos, *op. cit.*

[59] B. Ebbinghaus, C. Göbel, and S. Koos, *op. cit.* Z. Fazekas, *op. cit.,*

[60] J. Kelly, *op. cit.*

[61] Z. Fazekas, *op. cit.* B. Ebbinghaus, C. Göbel, and S. Koos, *op. cit.* Schnabel, and J. Wagner, *op. cit.*

[62] M. Debono, *op. cit.*, 2018.

[63] M. Debono, *op. cit.*, 2019.

Perceived shortcomings in these factors may be associated with TU dissatisfaction, as may additional factors such as TUs' political links and perceived lack of power.

3. Methods

A cross-sectional study was conducted, with data collection carried out in two phases. TUs in Malta were invited to share the questionnaire with their members. Seven TUs accepted this request. The questionnaire was also shared via social media, with adverts being set up on Facebook and LinkedIn which targeted individuals living in Malta of working age, those living outside of Malta were excluded. This two-pronged approach allowed for a larger sample to be obtained, and for responses to be collected from members and non-members. In all cases, an online questionnaire hosted on Google Forms was used.

Data collection took place via an anonymous questionnaire which contained open and closed-ended questions. Given the study's objectives, questions were prepared for union members and non-union members.

All participants were asked to provide demographic and employment information which included: TU membership status, gender, age, level of education, if they have children, job status (full-time or part-time), employment contract (permanent or temporary), employer (public or private), size of organisation, country of origin and the sector they worked in.

TU members were also asked two further open-ended questions. One question asked respondents to describe what they liked about their trade union. The second asked them to explain how they felt their union could improve. Non-members were asked to consider four statements regarding whether they believed TUs played an important role in these factors in Malta, and were scored on a three-point scale of yes/no/unsure: protecting rights of workers at the workplace; offering individual services to their members; seeking unity among workers; contributing to national debates. Non-members were also asked if they were satisfied with the work of TUs in Malta; this was scored on the same three-point scale. Through open-ended questions, non-members were also asked to explain why they were not TU members, and what TUs could do to encourage membership. Those who chose 'no' or 'unsure' when asked if they were satisfied with TUs' work were asked to explain why.

Closed-ended questions were analysed quantitatively via SPSS version 29. Statistical analysis was conducted to determine associations between being a trade union member and the other studied demographic and

employment factors. Chi-Square was used to identify significant differences whilst Phi was used to determine the effect size[64]. Missing data was tackled by using pairwise analysis. In the case of the open-ended questions, these were analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis[65].

The study received ethical approval from Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) at the Faculty of Economics, Management and Accounting (FEMA), University of Malta. Participants were provided with an informative letter and indicated their consent before participating. The questionnaire was anonymous and no personal data that could identify the individuals was collected.

4. Results

Data from 346 participants were analysed, 204 (59%) were TU members whereas 142 (41%) were not. As shown in Table 1, most of the participants were male, aged between 40 and 55 years, had completed tertiary education, had children, were employed full-time, worked in the public sector, worked in a large organisation, were of Maltese origin and were covered by a collective agreement.

Bivariate analysis (Table 1) indicated that TU members were significantly older, had children, worked in larger organisations, were of Maltese origin, were covered by a collective agreement, and worked in the public administration sector and human health and social work sector. Those working within the arts and the professional, scientific and technical sectors were less likely to be TU members.

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[64] GA. Morgan, KC. Barrett, NL. Leech, and GW. Gloeckner, *"IBM SPSS for introductory statistics: use and interpretation"* (5th ed), Routledge, New York, 2013.
[65] V. Braun, and V. Clarke, *"Using thematic analysis in psychology"*, Qualitative Research in Psychology, 2016, vol. 3, n. 2, 77–101.

Table 1. Associations between trade union membership and measured factors

Variable		N (%)	X^2	Phi
Gender	Male	188 (54.3)	.08	.02
	Female	155 (44.8)		
Education	Secondary or post-secondary	78 (22.5)	.07	.01
	Tertiary	269 (77.5)		
Children	No	134 (39.7)	4.73*	.12*
	Yes	210 (60.7)		
Job	Full-time	302 (87.3)	.96	.06
	Part-time	16 (4.6)		
Contract	Not permanent	48 (13.9)	.01	-.01
	Permanent	266 (76.9)		
Employer	Public	202 (58.4)	40.77***	-.36***
	Private	115 (33.2)		
Country of origin	Not Malta	24 (6.9)	4.91*	.12*
	Malta	322 (93.1)		
Sector[1]	Manufacturing	21 (6.1)	1.07	-.06
	Electricity	14 (4.0)	1.54	.07
	IT and Finance	37 (10.7)	3.68	-.11
	Professional, scientific or technical	29 (8.4)	8.58**	-.17**
	Administrative and support services	23 (6.6)	.44	-.04
	Public administration and defence	38 (11.0)	6.49*	.15*
	Education	50 (14.5)	1.29	.07
	Human Health and social work	49 (14.2)	15.47***	.23***
	Arts and recreation	11 (3.2)	6.22*	-.14*
Collective agreement	No	73 (21.1)	63.72***	.46***
	Yes	233 (67.3)		
Age	39 or under	105 (30.3)	7.14*	.14*
	40-55	194 (56.1)		
	56 or older	47 (13.6)		
Size of organisation	49 or less	57 (16.5)	12.93**	.21**
	50-249	50 (14.5)		
	250 or more	200 (57.8)		

[1] Only sectors with > 10 individuals presented. *< .05, **< .01, ***<.001. Source: Own Elaboration (2024).

4.1. Reasons for not Being a TU Member

Participants were asked to explain why they were not TU members. 137 participants responded to this question. Three key themes emerged, namely reasons related to participants' employment, perceptions of TUs' principles and impact, and outcomes of TU membership. The number of participants who provided an answer related to a sub-theme is provided in brackets.

4.1.1. Employment

Participants (30) provided reasons linked to their sector or organisation, often noting that it was not unionised, and thus they did not have the option to join a TU. Others worked in small organisations and did not see the need, or were unsure that they would benefit from membership. Some participants were previously TU members but having left a unionised organisation or sector, did not see a reason to remain a member.

> I work in a small company and no one is a member. I don't know how much help   being in a union would be for me

A further 16 participants were not TU members due to their role in their organisation. Reasons included being part of management, working within Human Resources, or because, "*my current role does not allow me to join a union*". Several other individuals (22) gave reasons related to their employment status, including not being employed (11) as they were either a student or retired, self-employed (9) or being employed part-time (2).

> I am self-employed so I never felt the need to join a union

4.1.2. Trade Union Principles and Impact

Several participants (16) avoided union membership due to perceptions that TUs were subservient to political parties, the government, and to a lesser degree, to employers. Some participants made specific reference to Malta's two largest unions, the General Workers Union (GWU) and UHM Voice of the Workers (UHM). Participants felt that TUs that did this had lost their values and became ineffective.

> In Malta, unions are too politically inclined and their agenda is set accordingly

Several participants (19) questioned the impact of TUs, using words and terms such as, "not radical enough", "useless", "helpless", "inefficient", and "powerless". Examples provided included organisation-specific ones, such as collective agreements that had expired a long time ago and have not been renegotiated, as well as more general statements, sometimes linked to the union's political links including:

> At the moment they are like Sleeping Beauty - it is like
> they do not exist anymore because they are just another
> branch of the political party in Government

> The silence of today's trade unions is deafening

A further 11 participants highlighted that they did not trust TUs. Participants often questioned if TUs had employees' best interests at heart. Wider national-level values were also questioned by some:

> Slave labour, cheap labour, human trafficking, forced sex
> work, social dumping, corruption and selling workers to
> any bidder are all legitimised and institutionalised

4.1.3. Outcomes

Several participants (26) saw little benefit in becoming a TU member or were uninterested. Reasons were sometimes linked to other themes, such as their perceived lack of impact. Others worked in a sector or job with clear and good working conditions and saw no benefit. A couple of participants believed in negotiating their conditions:

> I do not believe in the need to be represented by a third
> party to properly negotiate my work needs/aspirations

Some individuals (10) reflected upon negative experiences in the past explaining that their union had not assisted them when needed.

> I did not get the service I wanted when I was a member,
> so I resigned

A few others (3) worried that if they interacted with a TU it would tarnish their reputation at work, or their employer would be vindictive against them.

> My current employer does not respect trade unions and if
> I had to use them he would turn against me and make my
> life hell

4.2. Non-Members' Perceptions of Tus' Role in Malta

The majority of non-members felt that TUs played an important role in protecting workers' rights within the workplace, in contributing to

national debates and in offering their services to their members. However, most non-members did not believe that TUs played an important role in seeking unity among workers, and few non-members were satisfied with the work done by TUs in Malta (Table 2).

Table 2. Non-members perceptions of TUs

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Unsure (%)
Protect the rights of workers in the workplace	78 (55.3)	48 (34.0)	15 (10..6)
Offering individual services to their members	70 (49.6)	46 (32.6)	25 (17.7)
Seeking unity among workers	52 (36.9)	68 (48.2)	21 (14.9)
Contributing to the national debate	72 (51.4)	47 (33.6)	21 (15.0)
Satisfied with TU work in Malta	33 (23.2)	90 (63.4)	19 (13.4)

Source: Own Elaboration (2024).

4.3. Non-union Members: Reason not Satisfied with TUs

Non-union members who were dissatisfied or unsure if they were satisfied with TUs work (*n* = 109) were asked to elaborate on their reasons why. 94 individuals responded. Their responses fell within one of two themes, either they dealt with dissatisfaction with the outcomes of TUs' work, or with the philosophy and values of TUs.

4.3.1. Outcomes

Several participants (28) described their dissatisfaction with TUs' contribution at both an organisational and a national level. At the organisational level, participants questioned the contribution that unions had brought to workplaces:

> I haven't heard of anything the trade union I could potentially form part of have done for workers recently

It was stated that TUs had become weaker and were not militant enough at both the organisational and national levels. Some participants linked this with unions' desire not to create conflict with political parties. In other cases, participants struggled to name TU contributions or described national topics where they believed TUs should take more of a stand:

> There are so many themes and issues which they could be working on (e.g., living wage, gig work, remote work, health and safety) but they are not, or if they take them on, their attempts feel half-hearted

A few participants (7) were disappointed with past interactions with a TU. Participants highlighted that had been let down by their union when they needed them, or felt that they showed preferential treatment to other members.

4.3.2. Trade union philosophy and values

The most common reason for dissatisfaction (33) with TUs was their perceived links with political parties and the government of the day. Some participants believed this prevented TUs from representing members appropriately, particularly when dealing with the government as the employer.

> The largest unions are merely extensions of the two main political parties and act in the interests of the parties rather than their members

A few participants specifically highlighted the links between the GWU and the Labour Party, others argued that some TUs were more "interested in strengthening its financial portfolio than confronting the government on major issues", and thus held back from discussing important national matters.

Indeed, a few individuals (4) expressed their dismay at unions' focus on money. Participants stated how unions focused on collecting their fees from members or on their wealth.

A related subtheme was the belief that TUs were not focused on the protection and amelioration of workers' conditions (22). This too was sometimes attributed to links with political parties or employers.

> Their interests do not necessarily centre around the wellbeing and protection of the employee

A few other individuals (6) were specifically critical of TUs' proximity to organisational leaders and their focus on pleasing employers or aiding management-level workers to improve their conditions rather than regular employees.

Several individuals (20) criticised TUs' philosophy and principles, but the aspects varied substantially. Whilst most criticised TUs for becoming pro-market, for protecting capitalist behaviours, and abandoning the working class, others felt that trade unions were too socialist, protected lazier workers and highlighted that striking punished normal citizens.

> They seem to have a basic lack of understanding of the importance of bringing together the working class, irrespective of race, origin, language, etc, leaving an open space for capitalist interests to take over and alienate workers

A few participants (3) also criticised TUs lack of unity, highlighting the constant squabbling between TUs.

4.4. Non-union members: what can unions do to encourage membership?

All non-union members were invited to provide their opinions regarding what TUs could do to encourage them to become members, 125 responded to this question. Most responses fell under the theme, 'change philosophy and approach'. Other themes included promotion and outcomes, and unsure and uninterested.

4.4.1. Change philosophy and approach

Participants (29) called for TUs to focus their attention on workers, by "defending, protecting and promoting the workers' rights", to "return to their roots", and to do more for the weakest employees. Participants called for more frequent member consultation, to be more visible outside of the period when a new collective agreement was being negotiated, and to ensure that collective agreements benefitted the entire workforce, not only those in higher positions. When issues arose, participants argued that TUs should take the side of the employee and not the employer.

> When it comes to collective bargaining, the bargaining power of unions is substantial and so it must be utilised wisely and not only in the interests of the few

Participants (28) also argued the TUs must dissociate themselves from political parties. They argued that TUs should not be "puppets of both political parties" or "cheerleaders to the government of the day", and that they "focused on members, not politicians".

Another common theme was participants' (24) call for TUs to be "bolder" and "more militant". It was argued that TUs should be more "courageous", "unrelenting", "ready to fight", "to work hard", 'to be determined', 'to speak out'. In most cases, this was about fighting for employee rights and conditions. However, national-level changes were also discussed.

> Must become bolder and assume the militant attitude of
> Malta Employers Association (MEA). MEA always takes
> the side of the employers. Suffice to say that MEA leaders
> even went on record arguing against parental leave, even if
> this was "politically incorrect" etc. Why can't trade union
> leaders assume similar audacious stands?

Participants (24) called for TUs to be more professional in their approach,
calling for them to be run more democratically and transparently. Others
called for unions to be impartial and to support workers equally.
However, some stated that TUs must *"stop defending workers who are unworthy
of their defence"*.

It was also argued (13) that TUs should focus more on certain categories
of employees. Suggestions were varied and included doing more for part-
time workers, targeting sectors that are not unionised (iGaming and
accountancy were highlighted), supporting foreign workers, those working
in small organisations, those employed in certain government employment
grades, and those living in Gozo (Malta's sister island). A couple of
participants also suggested that mandatory union membership could be a
possible solution.

4.4.2. Promotion and Outcomes

Some participants (12) felt that TUs should do more to promote unionism
and its benefits, as they were unaware of TU work or the benefits of
membership. Some participants encouraged greater TU presence at
outreach activities such as sector-specific conferences. Others felt that
TUs should be more accessible.

> Show the individual the benefits of being in a union. As a
> whole everyone knows it's beneficial, but on an individual
> basis it is vague

Some participants (5) stated that they would consider membership if they
thought it would benefit them. Better working conditions and protection
against discrimination were mentioned. A couple of participants stated
that TU membership should include additional benefits, such as the
provision of medical insurance.

4.4.3. Unsure or Uninterested

Several respondents (20) were either unsure what TUs could do to persuade them to join or stated that there was nothing TUs could do to persuade them. Reasons for this attitude included the opinion that union action has a negative impact, that they see no value in joining given their working conditions, and that they prefer to negotiate their own terms and conditions.

4.5. Union Members: What I like about my Union

Responses ($n = 167$) fell into one of three themes, namely those who liked the approach taken by their TU, those who enjoyed the benefits associated with membership, and those who liked little about their union.

4.5.1. Approach

The leading theme that emerged was that TUs supported and worked for their members (40). TUs were described as *"continually fighting for better conditions at our place of work"*, or working hard to improve worker rights. Others described how their TU demonstrated care, interest in their wellbeing, or assisted them, including providing advice and support when needed.

> When I was in need, even when I was alone, they came through and helped me

Many participants (34) described their TU as accessible and offered two-way communication. Members described their TUs as approachable, easy to reach and open to members' opinions. Some emphasised the accessibility of shop stewards and those in senior positions. Others were positive about the information they received from their TU and highlighted its importance during collective agreement negotiations.

> Regular communication from the union representatives at our place of work

Some respondents commented favourably on the level of professionalism and reputation of their TUs (11), describing their approach and knowledge of relevant issues and how well-established they were. Participants also described that their TU was a house/professional union

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(10) and felt that it better understood their issues and focussed on their professional needs.

> Being a house union, most of the representatives have
> hands-on experience when a complaint is raised

Some respondents spoke positively about facets of their TU's leadership (10). A few described leaders as hard-working or respectful. Others appreciated that their TU leadership had no political or government links, and spoke positively about the TUs' openness to improvement.

> He works like a dog. He lives and breathes UPE (Union
> of Professional Educators) and is very dedicated to the
> members

4.5.2. Benefits

Several participants (20) described how forming part of a union provided them with power in numbers, and with a voice that would otherwise not be heard. Some participants noted that their union was powerful in their sector, or that they had resources at their disposal.

> The voice of the members is heard by management
> through our union

Some participants (16) cited collective agreements as the most important benefit of TU membership. Individuals described satisfaction in not having to fight for better conditions themselves or alone, that the collective agreement was renegotiated promptly, or that the agreement led to better working conditions. The collective agreement conveyed a sense of fairness, as working conditions were standardised for the same grades.

> Collective power, removing the pressure from having to
> negotiate a better work package myself

TU membership also provided participants (6) with a sense of security. This was related both to the union's ability to stick up for workers when needed as well as via the presence of a collective agreement.
Some participants (9) described additional benefits they derived from their membership. Almost all members focused on continuous professional development (CPD) or related benefits such as TU-organised seminars and profession-specific news. A couple of participants described the

information about job vacancies and discounts at other companies that they received through their union membership.

> Nowadays, our union … has evolved to provide frequent continuous professional development courses and seminars to ameliorate our professionalism towards our clients and colleagues

4.5.3. Better than Nothing or Negative Comments

Five participants simply viewed their TU as *"better than having no representation at all"*. A further 20 respondents stated that there was little or nothing to like about their union. Some felt betrayed or abandoned by their union or that they were *"spineless"*.

> They haven't done much, especially when we needed them

4.6. Union Members: What my Union can Improve

Trade union members' suggestions (*n* = 153) fell into one of two overall themes. These either dealt with improving TU communication or how their TU was run.

4.6.1. Communication

Many participants (45) highlighted the need for better and more frequent two-way communication between the union and members. Some argued that this needed to be more transparent, should have occurred before important decisions were made, and that responses needed to be quicker. Others suggested greater use of digital communication and social media.

> Be more present and available to our queries and needs, reply to emails and return calls within a reasonable time

Several participants (19) specifically called for more meetings to take place between the union and members. Some specified that an annual general meeting was not sufficient.

> Organise a general meeting for all the members at least every six months. It would help in identifying problems at an early stage and most of all hearing ideas and perhaps even solutions directly from the members themselves

A few participants (3) also encouraged improvements in how the union communicated with the general public, stating that this sometimes came across as aggressive, and did not help public relations.

4.6.2. Union Focus and Management

Several members (22) called for TUs to be more proactive, for timely discussions on collective agreements and for more action, militancy and, if necessary, legal action.

> Negotiating the collective agreement should start a lot earlier. It's always concluded one to two years after the previous collective agreement expires

However, a few participants (3) were uncomfortable with the aggressive or militant attitude of their TU and called for greater consideration before calling industrial directives in specific sectors, such as health.

> People get very angry with directives involving patients. For example, leave patients in bed. Why should a dementia patient who doesn't even know what is going on get punished to improve nurses' conditions? It shouldn't be so

A key suggestion by several participants (15) was that their TU needed to focus more on members' needs. Participants commented that some types or grades of workers had been forgotten. Others felt that their TU needed to re-focus on worker needs in contrast to their unions' business interests, acquiring new grades of workers, or the needs of union officials.

> Acknowledge that its main purpose is to safeguard and promote its members' interests rather than the interests of its officials and those close to them

In a related sub-theme, individuals (12) argued that TU ideology should be more member-centred. Participants felt that their union should focus less on politics and instead focus on workers' rights and issues such as wellbeing. Several nurses also expressed dismay that their union had started to represent other professions and called for this to be reversed:

> Remove allied health professionals from being members as they have zero interest in helping our profession move

> forward. By protecting their interests many nurses end up
> suffering the consequences

Some participants (10) argued that their TU required a change in leadership and that the process by which leaders were elected needed to be more democratic, or that there should be better worker representation within the union.

> Opening up to new blood, where new people can actually be elected in the union.

Aspects related to conflicts of interest and fairness were also discussed (20). Several argued that union officials are there for their personal interests and growth and that this should be eradicated.

> Our union council members are on the committee to gain personal exposure, often leading to personal promotion at work

Others highlighted that conflicts of interest arose because their TU represented different grades of workers and those with management responsibilities acted as union representatives. This could lead to TUs not taking the side of workers in disputes, agreeing to collective agreements that favoured certain individuals, grades or those in senior positions, or leaving certain workers voiceless:

> How can I complain about management to the union, if the union representatives and the management are the exact same people?

Participants thus suggested that management-level workers should not be represented, that collective agreements should benefit all grades of workers, and that union officials involved in bargaining should not work for the involved enterprise.

Some participants (14) called for their union to have more human resources, particularly more worker representatives within the workplace. Calls for full-time secretaries and the employment of more officials were also made, with some suggesting that these should be paid for by the state or employer.

> We need more shop stewards who are ready to sacrifice their time for us

Some participants also called for greater union professionalism (10).
Suggestions were varied and included providing union representatives
with training, fostering more ethical behaviour and better skills, and access
to professionals when needed. Some participants also described the need
for their TU to have more power (5). Participants made several
suggestions including government support, legislative changes that
favoured unionism and additional resources for unions. A few participants
(4) also called for TUs to provide more services and training for members
as part of their membership.

5. Discussion

The study found that union members' demographics differed significantly
from those of non-members. Members were older, worked in larger
organisations and the public sector. These findings are similar to those in
other countries and previous studies from Malta[66], highlighting the
challenge for TUs to attract new members in an ageing workforce[67], with
unions making fewer inroads with younger individuals working in the
private sector. While the structure of the public sector often supports
unionism[68], opposition in the private sector can often stifle unionism[69], as
illustrated by qualitative findings, where a small number of non-members
feared that membership could damage their reputation. That more
members work in larger organisations is unsurprising considering that a
concentration of TU members can foster attraction via social pressure[70].
Qualitative findings also revealed that individuals working in smaller
organisations saw less value in TU membership, while those who moved
from a unionised setting to a non-unionised environment saw no value in
retaining their membership. This is of particular concern for TUs in Malta
where there is a shift in economic sectors towards non-unionised ones,
and where micro and small organisations make up the majority of
enterprises.

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[66] M. Debono, *op. cit.*, 2019. J. Visser, *op. cit.*, 2002. J. Visser, *"Trade unions in the balance"*,
ILO ACTRAV Working Paper, Geneva, ILO, 2019.
[67] B. Ebbinghaus, *"Trade unions' changing role: Membership erosion, organisational reform, and
social partnership in Europe",* Industrial Relations Journal, 2002, vol. 33, n. 5, 465–483.
[68] B. Ebbinghaus, *op. cit.*
[69] J. Visser, *op. cit.*, 2002.
[70] J. Toubøl, and CS. Jensen, *op. cit.*

In line with previous national findings[71], gender was not associated with TU membership. Over the past decades, more women have entered the workforce in many developed countries, including Malta, often within unionised sectors. Conversely, traditionally male-dominated unionised sectors have shrunk, leading to similar numbers of male and female union numbers[72]. However, TU members were more likely to have children. Given the results, this is likely unrelated to gender, but is rather related to members' older age and desires for security and stability. The qualitative findings support this and highlight that TUs should promote the role they play in preventing precarious work and obtaining better working conditions.

TU members were more likely to be of Maltese origin. Immigration of both EU citizens and third-country nationals has increased dramatically in Malta over the past decade[73], with foreign workers now accounting for almost a third of the workforce. Only 7% of the current sample were not Maltese, suggesting that foreign workers were underrepresented. Some TUs in Malta are reportedly making inroads with foreign workers[74], however, some participants called for TUs to do more for this group. Studies from Malta have suggested that foreign workers encounter issues such as poor working conditions, discrimination, and are more likely to be injured in the workplace[75]. As discussed later, some participants suggested that the benefits of unionism should be promoted and this may be particularly relevant for third-country nationals coming from countries where unionism is less entrenched in the work culture[76].

Contrary to previous findings,[77] membership was not statistically associated with full-time or part-time employment. This is likely because part-time workers were under-represented in the sample. However, within

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[71] M. Debono, *op. cit.*, 2015.

[72] J. Visser, *op. cit.*, 2019.

[73] Jobsplus *op. cit.*

[74] M. Debono and LA. Fiorini, *op. cit.*

[75] SC. Buttigieg, K. Agius, A. Pace, and M. Cassar, "*The integration of immigrant nurses at the workplace in Malta: a case study",* International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care, 2018, vol. 14, n. 3, 269–289. M. Debono, and MT. Vassallo*, "An analysis of working conditions of Filipinos in Malta"*, European Scientific Journal, 2019, vol. 15, n. 26, 64–88. LA. Fiorini, L. Camilleri, and M. Gauci, "*Occupational accidents in Malta and the role of the occupational health and safety authority: A twenty-year analysis"*, International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Safety, 2024, vol. 8, n. 2, 12-30.

[76] M. Kranendonk, and P. De Beer, "*What explains the union membership gap between migrants and natives?"*, British Journal of Industrial Relations, 2016, vol. 54, n. 4, 846–869.

[77] Z. Fazekas, *op. cit.* J. Visser, *op. cit.*, 2002.

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qualitative findings, some participants called for TUs to do more for part-time workers. Qualitative data also indicated that non-members were more likely to be unemployed or self-employed. TUs do not traditionally focus on the self-employed[78], but as almost 15% of all employment is self-employment[79], TUs would do well to focus more attention on this group. This is in contrast to the registered unemployed who make up less than 3% of the labour force[80]. As in other countries, the trend towards false self-employment is also being accelerated by digital labour platforms. Some European TUs have a history of successfully organising and representing self-employed workers[81], but current qualitative findings suggest that the self-employed do not see value in TU membership. One Maltese employers' association, the Malta Chamber of SMEs (GRTU) counts self-employed workers amongst its members. Conversely, TUs in Malta have lobbied against bogus self-employment and contributed to the introduction of legislation against this form of employment[82]. Examples of TUs organising platform workers have also been reported[83]. However, much scope for progress remains. This was exemplified recently by platform workers enacting national unofficial strikes for better working conditions, with no clear TU involvement[84]. Consequently, TUs should make themselves available to those who work flexibly and are not linked to specific workplaces[85] whilst also advertising the benefits of membership.

Some participants also avoided membership due to their role, often as they held management positions or worked within human resources. Whilst some studies suggest that the emergence of human resources has not contributed to the erosion of TU power and that workers may benefit

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[78] G. Haake, *"Trade unions, digitalisation and the self-employed–inclusion or exclusion?"*, Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research, 2017, vol. 23, n. 1, 63–66.

[79] National Statistics Office, *"Labour Force Survey 2023/4"*, 2024, https://nso.gov.mt/labour-force-survey-q4-2023

[80] National Statistics Office, *op. cit.*

[81] G. Haake, *op. cit.*

[82] S. Rizzo, and LA. Fiorini, "*Malta: Developments in Working Life 2022"*, Industrial relations and social dialogue, Eurofound, 2023. https://www.eurofound.europa.eu

[83] M. Debono and LA. Fiorini, *op. cit.*

[84] N. Mailak, *"How 500 Bolt couriers went on strike without a union"*, Malta Today, July 31, 2022.
https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/118077/how_500_bolt_couriers_went_on_strike_without_a_union.

[85] A. Bryson, *op. cit.*

from the presence of both in an organisation[86], others have argued that participatory human resources strategies may reduce the perceived need for TUs within the workplace[87]. No participants other than those who work in the role commented on their organisations' human resource function. Human resource practitioners may see themselves as an alternative to trade unionism and appear to view membership as inappropriate or unneeded.

Many TU members were found in the public administration sector and human health sector, which is also dominated by public workers. Whilst this illustrates TUs' strength in the public sector, it is also representative of the strengths and focus of specific unions. General trade unions such as the UHM and GWU have many members in the public sector, and both general unions and professional unions, such as the Malta Union of Midwives and Nurses (MUMN), are popular in the human health sector. Several favourable comments referred to professional or in-house unions. Participants emphasised the importance of their union understanding their professional concerns and offering professional training. Professional unions have the advantage of being able to organise their members more easily and offer tailored services, which would be more difficult for larger general unions to do[88]. Whilst trade union power and membership have generally declined, TUs representing professionals have bucked this trend in many countries, reflecting a strong sense of occupational identity[89]. Disadvantages more likely found within professional and in-house TUs also emerged in the findings. Participants complained that TUs lacked resources or preferred that officials involved in bargaining were not employees of the organisation. Workers in the arts and the professional, scientific and technical sectors were less likely to be union members. This may reflect a need and opportunity for dedicated unions, with several

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[86] S. Machin, and S. Wood, *"Human resource management as a substitute for trade unions in British workplaces"*, ILR Review, 2005, vol. 58, n. 2, 201–218. I. Martínez-Corts, JP. Moreno-Beltrán, S. Renedo, and FJ. Medina, *"Opponent or allied? An European analysis of the union presence and human resource practices"*, Frontiers in Psychology, 2022, vol. 13, 878006.

[87] D. Valizade, *"Why would workers prefer collective forms of representation? Evidence from the 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study"*, in International Labour Process Conference, Kings College, London, 2014. J. Waddington, *"Workplace representation, its impact on trade union members and its capacity to compete with management in the European workplace"*, Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research, 2014, vol. 20, n. 4, 537–558.

[88] B. Keller, *"The rise of professional unions in Germany. Challenge and threat for established industrial relations?"*, Industrial Relations Journal, 2018, vol. 49, n. 3, 278–294.

[89] J. Kelly, *op. cit.*

participants indicating that they were not members because TUs were not present within their sector or organisation.

The current paper aimed to determine why individuals were not TU members and what could be done to encourage membership. Whilst positive perceptions of TUs may encourage membership[90] less than a quarter of non-members were satisfied with the work of TUs in Malta. Quantitative results provide possible reasons for this. Only about half of non-members felt that TUs play an important role in contributing to the national debate, protecting workers' rights at work, and offering services to members. Even fewer felt that unions play an important role in seeking unity among members. More concerning, the percentage of non-members who believe that TUs play an important role in these factors has dropped substantially since a Maltese study conducted in 2014[91]. The decline is smallest in the provision of services to members (-3%), but greater in the role TUs play in protecting workers' rights (-12%), and contributing to national debates (-19%) and substantial in seeking unity among workers (-29%). This suggests that the decline in union density may be linked to eroding beliefs about the perceived effectiveness of TUs.

TU members were more likely to be covered by a collective agreement. Qualitative findings also showed that being covered by a collective agreement, and the associated benefits, such as favourable working conditions and salary were valued by TU members. Members also appreciated being part of a collective as they felt they had power and access to resources that they would not otherwise have access to. The results echo previous findings that better working conditions and protection were key reasons for TU membership[92]. Non-members did not appear to value or recognise these benefits and indicated that they already enjoyed favourable working conditions or that they preferred to negotiate their terms. Others reflected on past experiences which fostered a belief that protection was not there when needed. Members and non-members alike also desired improvements related to collective agreements, describing slow negotiations and agreements that benefitted some workers more than others as shortcomings. Given their importance to members' satisfaction[93], TUs would do well to avoid such situations. Due to a lack

[90] B. Shulruf, B. Yee, B. Lineham, L. Fawthorpe, R. Johri, and S. Blumenfeld, *"Perceptions, conceptions and misconceptions of organized employment"*, Journal of Industrial Relations, 2010, vol. 52, n. 2, 236-241.

[91] M. Debono, *op. cit.,* 2019.

[92] M. Debono, *op. cit.,* 2015. J. Visser, *op. cit.,* 2002. J. Waddington, *op. cit.,* 2014.

[93] M. Debono, *op. cit.,* 2019.

of official statistics, and unreliable estimates, it is unclear how many workers are covered by a collective agreement in Malta. Several non-members were unsure what might persuade them to become members, but the presence of a collective agreement may be among the most tangible impacts a TU can have. The introduction of the Minimum Wage Directive, which has yet to be transposed into Maltese law, requires countries where collective agreement coverage is below 80% to develop an action plan on how to improve this[94]. This may thus lead to changes in this regard. While the Directive seems to be aimed at promoting sectoral collective agreements, a rarity limited to the public sector in Malta, several TUs in Malta have instead argued in favour of introducing mandatory trade union membership[95]. This is possibly because the former would not tackle the perennial issue of free-riders, but rather exacerbate it. Mandatory membership received little mention as a method of improving membership, with only two non-members highlighting that this should be considered.

A common theme that often influenced participants' satisfaction with TUs was their perceived impact and power. Non-members argued that TUs' lack of influence was a reason for their dissatisfaction, a reason not to be a TU member, and that the situation needed to improve for them to consider membership. Conversely, members cited TUs' efforts to support and fight for workers and unions' ability to exercise collective power as key benefits of TU membership. However, members also wanted their TUs to be more proactive in supporting workers, rather than focusing on expanding their membership. As in many other countries[96], strikes in Malta have decreased over the years[97], with unions favouring dialogue at the enterprise and national level. This may have influenced perceptions of union effectiveness[98]. Given its great importance, unions would do well to demonstrate their impact. At the national level, TUs are involved in debate via tripartite bodies, the Malta Council for Economic and Social Development (MCESD) and the Employment Relations Board (ERB). The integral role of TUs within these forums is visible on occasion, as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic when national support measures

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[94] M. Pape, *"Directive on adequate minimum wages. Briefing EU legislation in progress"*, European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022.

[95] M. Debono and LA. Fiorini, *op. cit.*

[96] ETUI, *"Strikes map of Europe"*, 2023. https://www.etui.org/strikes-map

[97] M. Debono and LA. Fiorini, *op. cit.*

[98] A. Hodder, *op. cit.*

were determined within the MCESD[99]. However, the discussions held in these bodies are often shrouded in secrecy, which has possibly worked to the disadvantage of the TUs. Conversely, if TUs' influence in these bodies is limited, where bargaining and voice are replaced by consultation, workers are increasingly likely to seek organisations other than unions to represent their interests[100]. Indeed, it has been argued that the decline in TU power has contributed to the rise of extremist political parties and that impactful TUs could stem this rise[101]. Whilst TUs can be effective agents of social justice, and seen as such[102], it was notable that non-members were more likely to reflect on TUs' influence at the national level. Members may be better informed of TUs' work in these forums or do not consider it a primary concern. Whilst several members wanted more proactivity at the enterprise level, not all wanted more militancy. A few members were concerned about the impact of strikes on others, as well as the impact of aggressive communication on public opinion.

The partisan political links of TUs were a regular theme. Non-members described this as a key reason for not joining a TU, and would consider membership if a TU was not politically affiliated. It has previously been described that such political connections could prevent TUs from recruiting members[103]. Partisan politics was mentioned less frequently by members, and whilst a few felt that TUs should focus less on politics and more on workers, it appears that links to political parties were neither seen as a strength nor a serious deterrent; possibly because members chose TUs that aligned with their political beliefs, or because they were unconcerned about politics. However, some members emphasised that the lack of political affiliation was a key benefit of forming part of a professional TU. Many respondents did however expect TUs to play an active role in lobbying the Government to improve working conditions at a national level. Others expected TUs to work with the Government to improve their power. Thus, respondents expected TUs to play a role at the political level. After all, it is at this level that the rules and policies that

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[99] LA. Fiorini, *"Protecting employment and businesses in Malta during the first twelve months of Covid-19: a chronology of support measures"*, in LA. Fiorini (ed.), Centre for Labour Studies Biennial Report: 2019-2020, Malta, Centre for Labour Studies, 2021, pp. 24–36.

[100] L. Baccaro, C. Benassi, and G. Meardi, *"Theoretical and empirical links between trade unions and democracy"*, Economic and Industrial Democracy, 2019, vol. 40, n. 1, 3–19.

[101] L. Baccaro, *op. cit.* N. Mosimann, L. Rennwald, and A. Zimmermann, *"The radical right, the labour movement and the competition for the workers' vote"*, Economic and Industrial Democracy, 2019, vol. 40, n. 1, 65–90.

[102] J. Kelly, *op. cit.*

[103] J. Holgate, *op. cit.*

the labour market and TUs themselves must abide by are created, as are broader concerns such as the welfare state[104]. In line with previous findings[105], participants felt that TUs' links to political parties, particularly those in Government, minimised their ability to do so. TUs traditionally use their ties with pro-labour political parties to be influential at the peak level[106]. However, several TUs across Europe that had formal and informal relationships with political parties have ended or reduced these relationships for various reasons, including because political parties have lost popularity or their ideology has changed[107]. This does not seem likely in Malta, where the largest TU, the GWU, with which around half of all union members are registered[108] is traditionally tied to the Partit Laburista (PL, the Malta Labour Party), and appears to have benefitted from the PL's many years in power. Concerns among non-members about TUs' changing ideology, often that they had become too capitalist, may be related to political ties, as the PL has increasingly shifted towards the right. Malta's second largest TU, the UHM, to which a further quarter of all TU members are registered, has informal ties to the party in opposition, the Partit Nazzjonalista (PN, Nationalist Party), which is traditionally pro-business. There thus appears to be an opportunity for non-party affiliated TUs to increase their membership in Malta, particularly if they take meaningful and visible stands against Government policies considered unfavourable to workers.

Many of the findings of the current study revolve around TUs' internal democracy. Members and non-members argued that TUs need to focus more on the needs of members. The ability of new blood to emerge within the leadership structures of TUs was also questioned, as was favouritism in TU decisions, including collective bargaining. It has been argued that established TUs increasingly develop autocratic leadership which is detached from workers and their needs and increasingly focused on organisational survival[109]. However, TUs rely on members' buy-in to wield power, which can be difficult to achieve when internal democracy is

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[104] R. Hyman, and R. Gumbrell-McCormick, *"Trade unions, politics and parties: is a new configuration possible?"*, Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research, 2010, vol. 16, n. 3, 315–331.

[105] J. Holgate, *op. cit.* R. Hyman, and R. Gumbrell-McCormick, *op. cit.*

[106] R. Erne, and M. Blaser, *"Direct democracy and trade union action"*, Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research, 2018, vol. 24, n. 2, 217–232.

[107] R. Hyman, and R. Gumbrell-McCormick, *op. cit.* J. Kelly, *op. cit.*

[108] Registrar of Trade Unions, *"Report by the Registrar of Trade Unions 2022-2023"*, 2023. https://dier.gov.mt/en/About-DIER/Archives/.

[109] L. Baccaro, *op. cit.*

weak[110]. Non-members are unwilling to join a union that is perceived as ineffective[111]. Good levels of internal democracy thus appear crucial for TUs to attract and retain members, and this can be difficult to achieve in larger more heterogeneous TUs where leaders are further removed from the rank and file[112]. TUs worldwide regularly struggle with issues of internal democracy[113] and authors have discussed the difficulty of improving this in established TUs[114]. Positively, several members spoke about effective TU leaders, their unions' reputation, and their TU's approachability and communication. However, the current study shows that TUs need to continue to work on improving two-way communication. Members called for more regular meetings and the opportunity to provide their input before decisions are made that affect them. Communication was also seen as a manner to address concerns about ideology, which needs to be more member-centric. Communication can benefit TUs as it not only informs about members' needs and preferences but allows TUs to shape the preferences of members who often do not have all the information or well-formed policy preferences[115]. Members also urged TUs to make better use of social media and other electronic means of communication. Providing information in this manner can enable members to be better informed, promoting participation and democracy[116]. TUs have been criticised for only using social media for one-way communication[117] and would benefit from using the medium to engage with younger individuals who are underrepresented in TUs.

TUs are well-positioned to contribute to adult education initiatives[118]. This was highlighted in the current study, where participants were positive about the training offered to them by their TU. Conversely, members

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[110] R. Gumbrell-McCormick, *"Union Democracy: A European Perspective"*, Labor Studies Journal, 2022, vol. 47, n. 2, 170–179.

[111] PF. Clark, *"Building More Effective Unions"*, New York, ILR Press, 2009.

[112] R. Gumbrell-McCormick, *op. cit.*

[113] R. Gumbrell-McCormick, *op. cit.*

[114] AM. Greene, J. Hogan, and M. Grieco, *"Commentary: E-collectivism and distributed discourse: New opportunities for trade union democracy"*, Industrial Relations Journal, 2003, vol. 34, n. 4, 282–289.

[115] L. Baccaro, *op. cit.*

[116] AM. Greene, *op. cit.*

[117] B. Carneiro, and HA. Costa, *"Digital unionism as a renewal strategy? Social media use by trade union confederations"*, Journal of Industrial Relations, 2022, vol. 64, n. 1, 26–51.

[118] K. Forrester, and J. Payne, *"Trade union modernisation and lifelong learning. Research in Post-Compulsory Education"*, 2000, vol. 5, n. 2, 153–171.

spoke about TU officials' needs for further education and professionalisation. They also called for less favouritism within the union, both in internal promotions and in dealing with members' needs. Clark et al.[119] note that the role that administrative practices can play in revitalising unions has received little attention. They conclude that "the adoption of more formal, systematic, efficient and modern administrative practices, in general, has a positive impact on union revitalization efforts" (p. 386) and had a favourable impact on TU member numbers. Improved policies that reduce favouritism in recruitment and promotion, strengthen TU officials' skillset, attract diverse profiles of TU officials (e.g. women, migrants), and encourage greater use of outsourced services to complement TUs' offerings, may motivate TU staff and reduce turnover[120]. Diverse profiles of union officials may also attract unrepresented groups to become TU members, whilst improved administrative procedures can also save money, which could be invested in acquiring resources. Members pointed out that more human resources are needed, whilst workplace representatives need to be more carefully chosen, and their demands are likely to apply particularly to the smaller unions. Due to the size of the country, Maltese TUs are likely to struggle with resources no matter how efficient their procedures are, and may therefore need to explore alternatives such as enhanced Government financial support, access to EU funds, and sharing of resources between unions via confederations – all of which already exist to varying degrees in the Maltese TU scene.

Non-members suggested that unionism should be promoted in Malta, with some participants unclear about the benefits of membership. Suggestions included that TUs attend sector-related fairs, such as those related to iGaming, a fast-growing sector in Malta that remains largely un-unionised. The promotion of unionism coupled with measures to improve internal union democracy may convince those who abandoned unionism due to negative past experiences, doubts about its value, and those who have lost trust in TUs. Such publicity should delineate the benefits of membership, the work of TUs, and the measures taken to improve internal democracy, thereby addressing common concerns. To boost membership, some TUs have focused on offering additional services and benefits (e.g. discounts at shops). Some authors have suggested such an

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[119] PF. Clark, GJ. Bamber, PV. Whitehead, LS. Gray, S. Cockfield, and K. Gilbert*, "Does modernizing union administrative practices promote or hinder union revitalization? A comparative study of US, UK and Australian unions"*, British Journal of Industrial Relations, 2021, vol. 59, n. 2, 370–397.
[120] PF, Clark et al. *op. cit.*

approach in countries like Malta where collective agreement benefits are extended to non-members[121]. A small number of participants called for more services or expressed concerns about the cost of membership. However, these appear to be concerns shared by a very small group of people and it is unlikely that a continued focus on these issues will bring many benefits to TUs.

5.1. Limitations

As the study was cross-sectional, the direction of associations could not be determined with certainty. The study however made use of both quantitative and qualitative data to allow for findings to be triangulated. The analysed sample size was limited in number and data was not collected randomly, thus findings may not be representative of the Maltese population. Some groups of individuals appear underrepresented in the sample.

6. Conclusion

The study revealed that trade union members were usually older, had children, worked in larger organisations, were covered by a collective agreement and worked within public organisations. Whilst members often hailed from the public sector and the health sector, membership was less likely in sectors related to the arts and professional activities.

Fewer than a quarter of non-members were satisfied with the work of trade unions. Around half of non-members felt that unions played an important role in national debates, providing members with services and protecting workers in the workplace. However, fewer felt that unions were fostering unity within the workplace. Participants provided several reasons for not joining a trade union. These included employment-related issues, such as the absence of a trade union within their workplace or sector, concerns about trade unions' principles and perceived lack of impact, and beliefs that membership would not be beneficial. Several factors that could encourage membership were also uncovered. These included TUs being more militant and focused on workers, TUs dissociating themselves from political parties and promoting the benefits of trade unionism.

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[121] A. Bryson, *op. cit.* Z. Fazekas, *op. cit.*

Members' perceptions were also explored. Members valued that their union provided them with a collective voice, favourable working conditions and salary via collective agreements and conducted member-focused actions. Others described positive leadership behaviours, their union's reputation and the ease with which they accessed and communicated with the union. Union-provided continuous professional education was viewed as a valuable benefit. Trade union members, however, also discussed manners in which their trade union could improve, which frequently focused on strengthening two-way communication and changing how the trade union was run, including focusing more on members' needs, being more proactive, limiting favouritism and allowing new blood into union leadership.

The study demonstrates that despite declining trade union density, measures can be taken to retain members and increase membership; only a fraction of the respondents who were not members stated that nothing could persuade them to become members. Trade unions that are perceived to have a high level of internal democracy, that actively support workers at the enterprise and national level, are not tied to political parties, foster two-way communication and promote their services in sectors and to workers that are underrepresented, particularly those who do not feel that they have good working conditions, should have a bright future.

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