

Chapter 6

Old Labour in Malta

Introduction

This chapter will analyse Malta's Old Labour in a social context while chapters 7 and 8 will analyse Malta's New Labour in a social context. Categories dealing with Overdetermination and Conjuncture, Political Ideology and Strategy, Hegemony and State Power, and Crisis of Hegemony will be analysed by referring to economic, sociological and political literature on the issues in question.

Overdetermination and Conjuncture

The Economy

During the period from 1971 to 1987, Malta's economy was transformed from one depending on military expenditure to a developing economy in which export-oriented manufacturing and tourism were the major earners of foreign currency. Economist Lino Briguglio states that during the 1970s, the major economic problems faced by the Labour Government were the international energy crisis and unprecedented inflationary pressure (Briguglio, L. 1988: 190). Foreign

investment in exporting industries was rendered harder during that period especially due to international competition arising from conjunctures such as the oil crisis.

Briguglio notes that between 1970 and 1974, although Gross Domestic Product grew - albeit at a slower rate than in the preceding and following five-year periods – the labour force did not grow in a significant manner. Besides, much new employment was created by the Government in its labour corps¹ (1988: 192). In this regard Koziara (quoted by E.P Delia) states that in the mid-1970s the Maltese labour market was characterised by a high rate of emigration, high unemployment, low wages, an increase in female participation as well as high geographic mobility (Delia, E.P., 1994: 462).

On the other hand, Briguglio states that between 1975 and 1979, Gross Domestic Product and employment achieved fast growth rates, and unemployment decreased. One major reason for that was the rapid growth in the tourist industry (Briguglio, L., 1988 : 193).

Briguglio argues that during the 1980s, following Malta's freedom from the British military, the Maltese economy was adversely affected. That was due to the international recession as well as certain economic policies of the Labour Government. Delia adds that as the Maltese had no employment opportunities in the British military sector (which had employed as many as 26 per cent of workers in 1957), the Maltese had to find employment either through emigration or within the private or public sectors. Yet "it was the public sector which replaced, to a great extent, the UK defence establishment as the focus of attraction for employment security" (Delia, E.P., 1994: 463).

The sub-period from 1980 to 1984 is considered by Briguglio as the worst economic period under Labour Governments. Economic growth was very low, employment decreased at a faster rate and unemployment reached a relatively high 8.6 per cent rate (1988: 193).

Overall, the major shifts in the Maltese economy during the period in question included the decline of British military expenditure, down from 15 per cent of GDP in the early sixties to 0 per cent during the 1980s (1988: 193); the rise in the manufacturing industry – particularly in the textile, clothing and machinery sectors, from 17 per cent of GDP in the early 1960s to 33 per cent in the late 1970s; and the corresponding increase in employment in this sector during the same period, from 18 per cent during the first half of the sixties to 32 per cent during the 1980s (1988: 193-5).

Delia gives much importance to emigration during the period in question. He states that between 1946 and 1990, about 155,000 Maltese people emigrated, one-fourth of whom later returned to Malta. However, after 1975 the emigration rate slowed down, especially since Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom had become more selective. That helped increase labour supply, “pushing up temporary employment in the labour corps set up for the purpose” (Delia, E.P., 1994: 468). In turn the labour corps were eventually absorbed in the public sector. By 1980 that sector employed 26,838 workers from a total workforce of 120,138 (Nationalist Party Information Office, 1981a: 2).

The following table illustrates changes in Gross Domestic Product and unemployment rates from 1969 to 1986:

¹ By 1977, 7,360 workers formed part of the labour corps (Nationalist Party Information Office, 1981a: 2)

GDP at Factor Cost and Unemployment (official figures)

	1969	1974	1979	1984	1986
GDP (Lm million)	70.8	118.6	293.7	421.4	430.6
Unemployment Rate (%)	3.7	5.8	2.7	8.6	6.9

(Briguglio, L. 1988: 190)

Class Structure

During the Old Labour years in government, various changes took place within Malta's class and occupational structures, which were largely conditioned by the changes in the Maltese economy referred to above.

Up to the 1980s not much data was available on occupational-class structure, distribution of wealth and social mobility in occupational terms². No national census was held during the 1970s, and the last census before that was held in 1967. This lack of information is noted by Mario Vassallo (Vassallo, M., 1979: 227).

However, one can say that by the mid-1980s, Malta's class structure included a relatively large working class. This is mentioned in the "Census '85" (1985), which states that a trend was first noted in 1967, within which a shift was taking place from own-account workers to wage/salary earners. While, in 1967, 20.4 per cent of gainfully occupied males and 22.9 per cent of gainfully occupied females were own-account workers, by 1985 those figures had decreased to 12 per cent and 4.2 per cent respectively by 1985. On the other hand, while in 1967, 77.5 per cent of males

and 76.7 per cent of females were wage/salary earners, these figures had increased to 85.3 per cent and 95.1 per cent by 1985 (Central Office of Statistics, 1086: 87). Indeed, the 1985 national census gives the following figures:

1985 Census: Malta's Labour Force (N: 105,293)

%	Number of Persons	Occupational Status
2.2	2,315	Employers
10.2	10,695	Own-account workers
87.6	92,283	Wage/salary earners

(Central Office of Statistics, 1986: 87-88)

(Sultana, 1994: 45)

1985 Census: Breakdown of Wage/Salary Earners' Occupation (N: 92,283)

%	Number of Persons	Occupational Status
7.7	8,106	Professionals, technical and other related workers
5.2	5,506	Administrative, managerial, and other related workers
19.2	20,229	Executive, clerical and other related workers
35	36,923	Skilled and semi-skilled workers
20.4	21,519	Unskilled workers

(Central Office of Statistics, 1986: 35-36, 87)

(Sultana, 1994: 45-46)

² One important study in this regard is that of David M. Boswell (1979). He carried out a survey on occupational and residential prestige, wherein he concluded that a high degree of consciousness existed, in Malta, regarding social

Another change in the occupational structure during Old Labour rule was the increase in female employment as a percentage of total gainful employment, from 18 per cent first during the first half of the sixties to, 26 per cent during the second half of the 1970s. Once again the largest growth rate was within the manufacturing sector (Briguglio, L. 1988: 195).

Ideology

The ideological³ framework of the Maltese social formation during the Old Labour years was such that by the 1980s, the Maltese prioritised traditional and materialist values within a polarised political setting. Post-materialist values were present, too, although at a lesser extent than materialist ones.

Jeremy Boissevain observes that the polarisation between the Malta Labour Party and the Church, which dominated Maltese political life during the sixties, was replaced by polarisation between Labour and the Nationalists. Writing in 1993 about the post-sixties, he asserts that “Politics has become a corrosive zero-sum contest characterised by factional loyalty that reaches a veritable frenzy just before elections” (Boissevain, 1993: 150).

Boissevain also notes the importance of patronage, which according to him was still present in Malta. He also notes that with the centralisation of power – which was the order of the day under Old Labour - Government ministers became “the new super ‘saints’” (1993: 154), taking the place of old patrons such as members of the clergy and of the traditional professions.

prestige of residential areas. He relates this to socio-economic characteristics (Boswell, D.M., 1994)

According to sociologist Anthony M. Abela, in the 1980s the Maltese had a very strict morality which cherished marriage, the family, the Church and religion (Abela, 1994: 257-8). Intolerance in political matters was commonplace, as was the lack of trust in others (1994: 261). He states that the most important priorities for the Maltese were the materialist values regarding the upkeep of social order and the control of prices, followed by the post-materialist values of freedom of speech and giving people more say in important government decisions (1994: 265). A high percentage of Maltese citizens were very proud of their nationality, and a little less than half of the population expressed trust in the European Community (1994: 267).

By the general elections of 1987, the Maltese people had witnessed higher living standards, better standards of education and greater chances of social mobility than in previous generations.

Political Ideology and Strategy

Economic Policy

The Old Labour administrations emphasised the state's role within the economy, thus carrying out various nationalisations and setting up a number of state-owned enterprises. That policy was given importance in the Development Plan 1973-80 (Office of the Prime Minister, 1974). Yet the same plan also spoke about the need to attract foreign, industrial, export-oriented investment, which would benefit from a disciplined workforce and "very competitive local wage levels" (1974: 13). One major foreign company to invest in Malta under Old Labour was SGS-Thompson. The Development Plan which followed, that of 1981-85 (Office of the Prime

³ The Althusserian concept of ideology is being referred to, defined as "the system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group" (Althusser, 1984: 32). Therefore, it has much to do with what

Minister, 1981), acknowledged the fact that local export-oriented investment was lacking, and similarly to the successive 1986-88 plan (Ministry for Trade and Economic Planning, 1986), it acknowledged that the state had to intervene in sectors where there was no capitalist class.

Import substitution, bulk-buying and wage/price freezes were resorted to, so as to ensure cheap prices as well as economic viability of local industry. One of the major economic objectives in this regard was the attainment of full employment. The Malta Development Plan 1973-80 states that that was needed not only in order to provide gainful occupation to workers, but also “to ensure that available human resources are used in the most productive manner” (Office of the Prime Minister, 1974: 94).

Hence Old Labour Governments sought to modernise Malta by means of increased productivity in an industrial economy, to such an extent that, according to sociologist Edward L. Zammit, Dom Mintoff constantly emphasised the supremacy of work over all other activities as well as the values of *ghaqal*⁴ and *bzulija*⁵. As Mintoff would put it, “[he or she] who works the hardest receives most in return. The lazy ones get nothing” (Zammit, 1984: 60).

When the wage freeze was introduced in 1983, it was justified as a necessity to attract investment. Mintoff’s successor Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici constantly defended the policy by affirming the Labour Government’s prioritisation of work. He did so for example during the Malta Labour Party General Conference on the 1st November 1985. Mifsud Bonnici also added that before attaining full employment, the Government should not succumb to any pressure to improve the conditions of those who were gainfully occupied with a decent pay. In his words,

many sociologists refer to as values.

⁴ Tr. from Maltese: ‘prudence’

“today we have to give priority to those who are without a job, those who need most help, if we want to be called socialists” (Malta Labour Party Department of Information, 1987: 97-99).

Mifsud Bonnici also opposed an increase in salaries, on the grounds that it scared investment, particularly in export-oriented industry and tourism. (Malta Labour Party Department of Information, 1987: 166).

A few weeks before the 1987 general elections, during his tenure as President of the Malta Labour Party, Alfred Sant, wrote that Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici’s main aim was to fight unemployment. In his own words, “[Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici] surely measured all initiatives taken under his leadership in terms of their effectiveness in the struggle against unemployment” (Malta Labour Party Department of Information, 1987: 5).

Therefore, the economic policies of Old Labour prioritised industrial development in order to create of new jobs. Local industry was helped by means of such policies as import substitution, and at the same time foreign investment was welcome. The policy in favour of low wages and lack of rights to categories of workers such as those within the labour corps was countered by social policies such as free health care, free schooling, children’s allowance, very cheap housing, an increase in pensions, and the introduction of the minimum wage.

Foreign Policy

Foreign policy played a very important role under Old Labour Governments. Non-alignment with the Western and Eastern blocs was emphasised within a policy which emphasised Malta’s

⁵ Tr. from Maltese: ‘diligence’

Mediterranean – rather than European – dimension (Malta Labour Party Department of Information, 1987: 105). Mintoff's Government also took a third-worldist approach by joining the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of '77. However, most importantly, the Old Labour administrations were pragmatic in reaching vital strategic and economic agreements with diverse countries such as Italy on one side and Libya on the other.

On the other hand, the Old Labour rhetoric regarding its relationship with Western Europe definitely did not bring about a cosy relationship between the two. In this respect Henry Frendo states that

“the Government's bargaining stance rather soiled – although never spoilt altogether – relations with Western Europe, which Mintoff had the gall to refer to in a Strasbourg meeting as the ‘Europe of Cain’ in relation to the Eastern half!” (Frendo, H., 1991: 215).

Old Labour's foreign policy was such that only those countries which were ready to embark on economic relations with Malta were considered friends. On the other hand, those countries which Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici defined as “nit-pick[ing] on Malta's democracy, human rights and pluralist system” were not (Malta Labour Party Department of Information, 1987:105).

In line with its protectionist economic policies, Old Labour embarked on a policy by means of which Malta would not buy products from other countries unless those countries brought Maltese products. During a Mass Meeting at San Gwann on June 15th, 1984, Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici declared that his Government had already stopped buying Japanese products, and would stop buying products from France, Italy and England if they refused to purchase Maltese products. In his own words, “Malta has to be ready to buy a Czech fridge instead of a French car or fridge if

the Czechs are ready and willing to buy Maltese products!” (Malta Labour Party Department of Information, 1985: 45). The justification used by both Mintoff and Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici in their foreign policies was the nationalistic *‘Malta l-ewwel u qabel kollox’*⁶.

Commenting on Old Labour’s foreign policy, Dominic Fenech states that during that period the Malta Labour Party “had seen itself as Mediterranean rather than European, seeking a role as bridge between Europe to the north and the Arab countries to the south, thus complementing its policy of equidistance from East and West” (Fenech, D. 1988: 136).

Class Interests

From its early days, the Malta Labour Party had declared itself to be the party that represented the interests of the working class. That self-proclaimed mission – especially in the Party’s relationship with the General Workers’ Union - was emphasised under Old Labour Governments.

In his days as Prime Minister, Dom Mintoff defined the Malta Labour Movement as existing to serve the interests of workers.

“We are a Union and a Party who are there for those who work. A union of all workers: some with their hands, others with their minds, with the pen, some play musical instruments, while others sing – all work” (Zammit, E., 1984: 60).

⁶ Tr. from Maltese: ‘Malta first and foremost’

Nevertheless, there were various critics of the relationship between Old Labour and the General Workers' Union. Michael Schiavone states that the high number of strikes carried out by the Union prior to the 1971 general elections had a strong partisan bias. Indeed, although Old Labour was involved in much industrial conflict with a myriad of trade unions during its administration, it was the opposite case with the General Workers' Union. Schiavone also mentions the fact that at the time of the GWU strikes prior to the 1971 elections, at least three Labour members of Parliament held high positions within the Union: Lorry Sant, Wistin Abela and Rokku Abdilla. Sant and Abela would later on become Labour ministers (Schiavone, 1990: 50).

Writing about the merger between the Malta Labour Party and the General Workers' Union, Lino Briguglio⁷ stated that for Mintoff, effective control over the General Workers' Union would be advantageous for the carrying out of the Labour Government's policies. Briguglio highlighted Labour's industrial policy that was based on the need for wages to be kept as low as possible and on the need to control industrial conflict. "In order to control the Union, changes had to take place within the statutes of both organisations" (*L-Invell*, October 1978).

The merge between the Malta Labour Party and the General Workers' Union was considered by both sides to be in the interests of Malta's working class. Indeed, the joint electoral programme for the 1981 general elections states that by means of the merger, "the workers have managed to elevate the Maltese people to a nation free from all foreign interference" (Malta Labour Party/General Workers Union, 1981: introduction).

⁷During the mid-1970s Lino Briguglio served as member of Labour's National Executive but was expelled from the Party in 1978 due to his disagreement on the merger with the General Workers' Union and the Government's policies on the University of Malta.

On the other hand, as shown in the previous chapter, Old Labour was involved in various industrial conflicts with other trade unions. Besides, those who disagreed with the merger between the Party and the General Workers' Union were discarded. Apart from Lino Briguglio who was expelled from the Party, another high profile figure who clashed with the Malta Labour Party was Joe Attard Kingswell, who was publicly attacked by Dom Mintoff and lost his place as General Secretary of the Union (*L-Invell*, October 1978).

Old Labour did not enjoy very good relations with other social classes. Mario Vella argues that the development of modern industrial capitalism brings about various crises of pre- and proto-capitalist social classes within a social formation. Thus, the changes that materialised especially during the 1970s resulted in “socio-economic tremors throughout the country’s traditional rural and urban social structures” (Vella, M., 1989a: 171-172) especially through those who were losing their economic and social privileges. They included those who belonged to traditional middle classes and categories, such as merchants who imported foreign products, doctors, and teachers, all of whom were greatly affected by Labour policies.

Not that Old Labour gave much importance to these classes. During a mass meeting at Siggiewi a few months before the 1987 general elections, Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici could not have been more direct.

“We want to keep on winning on the strength of our socialist beliefs, and we want to keep on growing due to our honest work. We do not need manipulation, conspiracies, and collisions to gain unfair advantages, neither from the lawyers, nor from the specialists in hospital, University lecturers or magistrates. We do not need these things” (Malta Labour Party Department of Information, 1987: 225).

Therefore, while Old Labour was involved in conflict with various categories and classes, the same party created an alliance with the General Workers' Union and acted as a largely absent industrial capitalist class.

Party Interests

Old Labour was frequently associated with the Mintoffian slogan '*min mhux maghna kontra taghna*'⁸. The fact that various acts of violence as well as cases of political discrimination and corruption took place under Old Labour Governments gave the impression that during those years some people were more equal than others. In this regard Henry Frendo states that within this "increasingly abrasive and intolerant" brand of socialism, "the party card became precious" (Frendo, H., 1991: 215).

Writing in 1981, Michael Frendo, who at the time was a young student activist, uses strong words to describe the political situation during the previous decade.

"Since 1971 tolerance has been replaced by an acute polarisation engendered by autocratic Government and fanned by the State-run media. The major trade union has been incorporated within the ruling party. Progress has officially become synonymous with Government activity and consequently Government's critics have become reactionaries and dangerous seditious elements. As Mintoff continues to address the Nation while sporting his Party's emblem, and as his speeches to the party faithful at the Labour Party conferences are transmitted

direct by the State media, the distinction between Party and State has become uncertain” (Nationalist Party Information Office, 1981a: 1).

Violence was particularly symbolic of the fact that certain persons stood to gain under Labour Governments, to such an extent that in the words of Boissevain “Physical violence gradually became an overt political instrument” (Boissevain, 1993; 153). Lino Briguglio examines the violence under Old Labour in his publication entitled ‘*L-Elementi Kriminali w Vjolenti Fi Hdan il-Partit Laburista*⁹’ (Briguglio, L.: 1986), wherein he also queries whether the violent and criminal actions carried out by elements of the Malta Labour Party formed part of the Party’s strategy. He constructs a typology of the violent and criminal elements within the Malta Labour Party during the 1970s and the 1980s. According to him these included the following categories, that had material or political interests to preserve the status quo.

- Common criminals;
- Militant Labourite Dockyard workers;
- Certain Labourites with unruly tendencies;
- People with close ties to powerful people;
- Certain high-ranking political appointees within the Police and the Armed Forces;
- Powerful people within the Malta Labour Party including some ministers; (1986: 3-6).

Briguglio states that all of these categories of people had been involved one way or another in violent incidents against the rivals of the Malta Labour Party, but they appeared to be acting in a co-ordinated manner during the incidents at Tal-Barrani, Zejtun (1986: 6-7, 23). He mentions the

⁸ Tr. from Maltese: ‘Those not with us are against us’

⁹ Tr. from Maltese: ‘The Criminal and Violent Elements Within the [Malta] Labour Party’

fact that barricades were set up the night before the Nationalist Party meeting, that there were many weapons as well as other instruments in peoples' possession.

However he concludes that these violent and criminal acts did not form part of Mintoff's strategy, but on the other hand Mintoff knew that he could not control these elements. Mintoff did not admit that he had no control over these elements, because he wanted to project the image of a serious leader (1986: 17).

With regard to the criminal and violent acts committed under the Mifsud Bonnici leadership, Briguglio states that Mifsud Bonnici, whose authority was granted and legitimated by Mintoff, inherited the consequences of many years of arrogant leadership which attracted violent and criminal elements within the Malta Labour Party. By the time that Mifsud Bonnici became leader of the Party, these elements were rooted within the Party. Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici – who was much calmer and more polite than Mintoff – had much less power than Mintoff over these people. As Briguglio puts it,

“many of these elements had become closely tied to ministers and other big heads within the Government and had cushy jobs, sometimes within ministries, or other jobs within which they could do whatever they liked.....Others set up businesses by means of special arrangements as a form of compensation for their roles as helpers to some ministers, which put them in advantageous positions next to their competitors” (Briguglio, L., 1986: 18).

Briguglio identifies a conflict of interest between Mifsud Bonnici and the Party's formal leadership on one hand and the criminal elements within the Party on the other hand. An example

of this conflict is that while the Party's electoral strategy was based on the image of Peace and Progress, all violent actions, such as those in Zejtun and Gudja, contradicted the slogans in question. Michael Frendo states that although violence could easily be controlled in a small country such as Malta, the truth was that Old Labour did "virtually nothing" to stop its supporters from resorting to violence, save for making a few public appeals. He adds that the amount of violence used by political thugs was sufficient to silence ordinary citizens (Nationalist Party Information Office, 1981a: 21-22). As he puts it, the violence used brought about fear and pointed towards an attempt to instil "the feeling of helplessness that is congenial to authoritarian rule" (1981a: 21-22).

The fact that Labourites and those close to the Malta Labour Party and/or Labour Ministers stood to gain from the Old Labour Government, brought about a lack of confidence towards the Government and its apparatuses by non-Labourites. Indeed, a survey carried out by Gallup during this period revealed that only 50 per cent of the respondents in Malta had confidence in the Police, unlike countries such as England and Ireland, wherein 86 per cent of respondents trusted the Police (*Partit Nazzjonalista*, 1987: I[13]).

Power of the Leader

During the Old Labour years in general and the Mintoff years in particular, the party's organisational structure was such that the leader was very powerful. Dom Mintoff was not only a strong leader, but he also possessed the qualities of what Weber would define as a 'Charismatic Leader'. Mario Vassallo argues that as from the time when he took over the reigns of the party in 1949 he "avowed himself in favour of a deep structural alternation in the traditional ordering of

Maltese social mores” (Vassallo, M., 1977: 239). Besides, Mintoff had lead the party for such a long time that its structures were highly influenced by his actions.

Jeremy Boissevain observes that Labour supporters would many times refer to themselves as *Mintoffjani*¹⁰ and would never question his leadership or decisions. Some of them would even copy his style of dress, wearing large belt-buckles or shirt and tie according to what Mintoff was wearing. Given the Mintoffians devotion to their leader, Boissevain concludes that he had a secure base to rely on (Boissevain, 1994: 412).

Both Boissevain and Zammit hold that by means of Mintoff’s speeches people felt united within a mass movement. By means of his rhetorical skill he was able to strengthen his arguments, which were themselves based on what Boissevain considers to be ‘transcendental’ values such as self-determination, self-pride, patriotism, and care for the people’s money (1994: 420). Boissevain also holds that Mintoff’s speeches in favour of a projectionist state capitalism is a “a common sense extension of the peasant *ghaqal*” (1994: 420). Therefore, Mintoff’s discourse fitted very much with materialist and traditionalist values. Besides, according to Joe Inguanez, Mintoff also managed to instil certain values in his supporters, to the extent that among people with a strong ego this turned from self-confidence into arrogance (Inguanez, 2001¹¹).

In his turn, Zammit adds that Mintoff’s followers considered him to be a man sent from God¹², just like patron saints of Maltese villages (Zammit, 1984: 58). Band clubs displayed pictures of their patron saints on their walls. Similarly, the Malta Labour Party clubs – which Mintoff made it a point to establish in a large number of towns and villages around Malta and Gozo – had

¹⁰ Tr. from Maltese: ‘Mintoffians’

¹¹ This opinion was expressed by Joe Inguanez during a conversation with the author.

pictures of Mintoff hung up on their walls, too. As devout Catholics the Maltese had pictures of their patron and favourite saints in their homes. Similarly, Labour supporters had pictures of Dom Mintoff and their favourite Labour candidates (Inguanez, 2001¹³).

Boissevain states that Mintoff could be harsh and cruel, punishing those who opposed him or those that he considered incompetent. Similarly to Macchiavelli's Prince, he was both respected and feared. Indeed, Boissevain adds that at times he could be very charming and hospitable, radiating an aura of confidence. In a nutshell,

“He behaved, in short, like the traditional Maltese father – aloof, mainly harsh and looked after his own. The authoritarian figure was familiar to all Maltese. Most of them had grown up in and formed part of families dominated by such fathers” (Boissevain, 1994: 411).

One of Mintoff's best shows of force was when he faced the loss-making Dockyard workers in 1973, many of whom were the hard core of supporters. For this occasion Mintoff was not wearing casual clothes, as he usually did for public meetings. On the contrary, he faced them in a dark suit, white shirt and tie. According to Boissevain, Mintoff was “emphasising his distance from them and the seriousness of his message” (Boissevain, 1994: 415).

The Dutch anthropologist argues that the way Mintoff insulted the Dockyard workers – telling them that they ‘had no balls’ – was a very powerful message to Mediterranean men. Besides, the manner which he gave the workers three choices, to be voted upon by means of a show of hands,

¹² Many times Mintoff was referred to as *is-Salvatur* (the Saviour).

¹³ This was remarked upon by Joe Inguanez during a conversation with the author.

is defined by Boissevain as “rhetoric on a grand scale” (1994: 415). Mintoff’s power as leader of the Malta Labour Party was defined as follows by Boissevain,

“Under his leadership the organisation of the Malta Labour Party was strengthened. He became the Party’s chief symbol, its undisputed leader. His tactical skill, knowledge of the political scene, his eloquence and energy all combined to endow him with unprecedented power” (Boissevain, 1994: 411).

Mintoff’s all-embracing paternalist image was strongly criticised due to his authoritarianism. Lino Briguglio states that the Malta Labour Party was made up of various categories of activists and supporters. These included those who believed that Mintoff was the only person capable of uniting the various factions within the Party, those who were trapped in Mintoff’s populist tactics and most of all, those who were in the Party for their personal material interests. The latter category, according to Lino Briguglio, criticised Mintoff in private but praised him in public. He also states that the sciences and the arts were also trapped in the process of strengthening the Mintoff personality cult. Indeed, Mintoff “has been transformed into a superhuman” (*L-Istudent*, October/December 1978).

Michael Frendo states that Mintoff’s rule had brought about near-dictatorship. As he puts it,

“Post Independence confidence has given way to neo-colonial subservience to an all-embracing father figure. To achieve this, Mintoff’s Government has had to chastise the Academics and the Students, the Doctors, the Lawyers, the Self-Employed, the Trade Unions, and many others, both individuals and groups who

stand in the path of monolithic Government” (Nationalist Party Information Office, 1981a:1).

When Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici replaced Dom Mintoff as Prime Minister and leader of the Malta Labour Party, he had many words of praise for his predecessor, thus projecting himself as a fervent follower. During a Labour meeting in Sliema on December 9th 1984, Mifsud Bonnici described Mintoff as the man who had transformed the Maltese population from a poor, ignorant and hungry one to a population which worked hard, is *biezel*¹⁴ and respected all around the world. Mifsud Bonnici added that Mintoff had dedicated his life to the country, saving Malta, liberating it from foreigners and transforming it into a nation that created work and wealth (Malta Labour Party Department of Information, 1985: 135). Mifsud Bonnici’s eulogy was so powerful that he added that “We will keep on blessing him [Mintoff] until the last breath of our life!” (Malta Labour Party Department of Information, 1985: 135).

In another speech during a Socialist Youths meeting, Mifsud Bonnici addressed his “Mintoffian brothers”, telling them that Dom Mintoff had made the history of the last thirty years of the century. He praised him to such an extent that he claimed that Mintoff’s ideals had now become part of the Party’s religion. In his words, “we could describe our faith and religion not only as Labourism, not only as Socialism, but as Mintoffianism” (Malta Labour Party Department of Information, 1987:12).

It was a time when Dom Mintoff personified and symbolised Old Labour, while practically all ranks within the Party identified themselves politically with him. In turn, Mintoff was capable of presenting discourse that fitted very well with the prevailing ideologies of his followers.

Old Labour's Ideology

If one were to take into consideration the various policies as well as interests of Old Labour, one could broadly define the Party's political ideology as verging on socialism on one hand and nationalism on the other hand, both of which ideologies formed part of the Maltese overdetermining characteristics, such as patronage.

As regards the link between socialism and nationalism, Edward Zammit notes that on assuming power in 1971 Old Labour created a legitimating ideological framework, within which workers who were governed by the Malta Labour Movement were told to pursue the national interests by means of restraint (Zammit, 1984: 51).

In his analysis of the 1987 general elections, Dominic Fenech considers the Malta Labour Party of the time socialist, although not extremely so. His line of reasoning derives from what he considers to be the Party's emphasis on equal opportunities, levelling out of incomes and a mixed economy (Fenech, D. 1988: 134). On the other hand, Mario Vella states that the ideology of the Malta Labour Movement, apart from being Social Democratic, also included populist and third-worldist strands (Vella, M., 1989a: 194).

An analysis of the political documents produced by Old Labour as well as the public speeches of the leaders of the Party demonstrates that ample reference is made to the Party's professed beliefs in democratic socialism.

¹⁴ Tr. from Maltese: 'active'

The 1971 electoral programme, '*Malta Maltija fil-Paci u l-Progress*'¹⁵, emphasised Labour's democratic-socialist credentials, the setting up of various reforms in social welfare, and the implicit belief in equality, both economic and cultural (*Moviment tal-Haddiema*, 1971).

In the 1976 electoral programme entitled '*Lejn Malta Socjalista 'l Quddiem fis-Sliem*'¹⁶ the term 'socialist' featured prominently. Indeed, it was stated that the Labour Movement believed in democratic socialism, and that Malta could evolve into one big "socialist family". Besides, the programme declared that the first requirement for human emancipation was work (*Moviment tal-Haddiema*, 1976: 15, 87).

The 1981 manifesto '*Mit-Tajjeb ghall-Ahjar*'¹⁷ affirmed the socialist mission of the Malta Labour Movement, which, in turn, believing in democratic socialism, "derives its strength from the unity of workers who share the same beliefs and who want to live free from all misery in a democracy based on the principles of social justice" (Malta Labour Party/General Workers Union, 1981: 3).

Once again, the 1987 programme emphasised Labour's democratic socialist principles and the belief that Malta comes first and foremost. Labour's declared mission was to bring about a modern society, characterised by workers' participation, a mixed economy as well as the participation of citizens in general and consumers and women in particular (*Moviment tal-Haddiema*, 1987).

The way Old Labour emphasised its credentials also gave importance to workerism and Catholicism. As regards the former, the terms 'worker' or 'working class' featured invariably in

¹⁵ Tr. from Maltese: 'Maltese Malta in Peace and Progress'

¹⁶ Tr. from Maltese: 'Towards a Socialist Malta, Moving Forward in Serenity'

Old Labour, Mintoff and Mifsud Bonnici communiqués. One notable statement in this regard was that by Dom Mintoff during a mass meeting in Blata l-Bajda a few days after Malta achieved freedom. Mintoff told the very large mass that the Maltese nation-state was "the only European nation built by the working class -whereas all others have been founded by the bourgeoisie" (*L-Orizzont*, 28th April 1979).

As regards Catholicism, although Old Labour did not enjoy the best of relationships with the Church, this did not prevent its leaders from stating that socialism and Christianity had much in common. For example during a mass meeting in Sliema in 1978 Mintoff professed that the Malta Labour Party was socialist and in favour of Christ at the same time (Nationalist Party Information Office, 1981b: 75). Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici – himself an activist in the Young Christian Workers movement during his youth – reiterated this albeit in a more moralistic tone. During a Malta Labour Party seminar on October 12th, 1986, he declared strongly, regarding this issue:

“We socialists practised the beliefs of Christ in whatever we did. We put Christ’s teachings into practice and we have the right to say that there is no true Christian unless he is a socialist. Our socialism is based on the same commandment ‘Love your neighbour more than you love yourself’” (Malta Labour Party Department of Information, 1987: 149).

The socialism that was emphasised by Old Labour was at times European and at times Third Worldist. At times it emphasised its working class roots, at other times it emphasised the national overdetermining characteristics.

¹⁷ Tr. from Maltese: ‘From Good to Better’

Hegemony and State Power

The political and ideological strategies of Old Labour could only be successful if they took account of the overdetermining factors of the Maltese social formation. The following section will analyse some major actions taken by Old Labour Governments and verify their success in terms of creating hegemony.

State Power and State Apparatuses

As shown elsewhere in this thesis, the Old Labour Governments believed in widespread state intervention as well as stringent price, wage and import controls. Both Mintoff's and Mifsud Bonnici's Governments were determined to participate directly in the economy, especially where the private sector did not take the initiative.

According to Mario Vella the Labour Movement brought great economic changes in Malta as from 1971. Vella suggests that within societies in which an industrial capitalist class is missing, parties or movements who derive their political strength from the working class carry out the industrial process of the country. Therefore, given that the industrial capitalist class was unable to be hegemonic, Vella holds that the Malta Labour Party acted as a functional substitute for a non-existing "national democratic manufacturing bourgeoisie," by forming a contradictory social bloc made up of a new industrial bourgeoisie and the majority of the working class, and by using populist discourse (Vella, M., 1989a, 1989b).

Vella holds that the Malta Labour Movement adopted the role of “demolisher of social obstacles to the development of an industrial capitalism” (1989a: 166). On the other hand, he considers the Nationalist Party the “representative, on the political level, of merchant – as opposed to industrial – capital and the petty bourgeoisie” (1989a: 166).

In this regard, Antonio Gramsci affirms that where the working class achieves power in a backward country without a well-developed civil society, the state would initially have significant power due to the fact that various sectors would be heavily dependent on it. Gramsci referred to this period as one of *statolatry*, which, as observed by Simon, is nowadays generally referred to as *statism* (Simon, 1991: 76).

In separate writings, Briguglio (Briguglio, L., 1978: 13) and Schiavone (Schiavone, 1990: 54) analyse Old Labour’s adoption of the industrial policy built on low wages and control over industrial conflict. Schiavone also refers to various Old Labour policies that had negative effects on thousands of workers. One of the most notable policies in this regard was the creation of labour corps that functioned under military discipline and did not allow workers to join unions.

On the other hand, Dominic Fenech states that the Old Labour policies were class-conscious, as they emphasised the distribution of national wealth, by means of which lower-paid workers benefited at the expense of workers with higher incomes. Fenech states that a clear example of this was that the new incomes policy lessened the gap between different scales of the wage scale, to a high extent. The former general secretary of the Malta Labour Party adds that the Mintoff and Mifsud Bonnici Governments intervened to protect jobs and real wages by means of strict controls over profit margins, through bulk buying and import substitution (Fenech, D. 1988: 134-135).

The Old Labour state apparatus complemented its economic apparatus with various measures from the ideological state apparatus and the repressive state apparatus.

One important aspect concerning the ideological state apparatus is the fact that during the Labour rule between 1971 and 1987, local television and radio were entirely state-run. Private and opposition newspapers – such as *The Times* and *In-Nazzjon Taghna*¹⁸ – were avidly bought and read, though, and the Maltese also received and watched Italian television. Writing in a Nationalist Party publication entitled '*Is Malta Burning*' (1981a), Michael Frendo stated that this was a dangerous situation, even more so when the Government and the major trade union were tied together. Frendo said,

“Progress has officially become synonymous with Government activity and consequently Government’s critics have become reactionaries and dangerous seditious elements. As Mintoff continues to address the Nation while sporting his Party’s emblem, and as his speeches to the Party faithful at the Labour Party conferences are transmitted direct by the State media, the distinction between Party and State has become uncertain” (Nationalist Party Information Office, 1981a: 1).

With regard to the repressive state apparatus, it has already been highlighted that Labourite elements and State organs carried out various acts of violence and intimidation, as well as transfers from one place of work to another, because of political allegiance, during Old Labour rule.

Such repressive acts were criticised in public not only by the Opposition but also by disillusioned Labourites and trade union leaders. For example, in 1983, former General Workers' Union General Secretary Attard Kingswell said that never before were workers' rights violated as they were then. In his words, "By using various methods, the present Government has managed to weaken all workers' organisations together with the apparatus which was set up in their interests" (Schiavone, 1990: 156).

Historic Bloc

Old Labour could not have remained in power for sixteen years without winning the general elections. Given that in two out of the four general elections between 1971 and 1987 Labour won the majority of votes, this implied that, at least from 1971 to 1981 the Malta Labour Party formed a historic bloc which carried out various changes within Maltese society. Labour's close ties and eventual merger with the General Workers' Union were the prime actors of this bloc.

According to Mario Vella, given that the Malta Labour Movement had to take up the role of the non-existing "national democratic manufacturing bourgeoisie," (Vella, M., 1989b: 4) it had contradictory roles to play. Thus, it often resorted to self-contradictory discourse – "a modernising discourse dressed in costumes of the past" (Vella, M., 1989a: 181).

Therefore, while the Government was a self-proclaimed workers' Government led by the Malta Labour Party and the General Workers' Union, the same Government had to carry out various

¹⁸ Tr. from Maltese: 'Our Nation'

economic tasks and act as employer in various areas other than the civil service, too. The support of the General Workers' Union was vital in this regard.

The General Workers' Union was by far the largest organised movement in Malta besides the two major political parties and the Catholic Church. By 1980, two-thirds of Maltese organised labour force of 39,238 workers, were members of the General Workers' Union (Nationalist Party Information Office, 1981a:2).

Dominic Fenech states that the participation of the General Workers' Union delegates in government cabinet meetings was very fruitful, to such an extent that it brought about an unprecedented stability in industrial relations which attracted investment (Fenech, D. 1988: 136).

On the other hand, Michael J. Schiavone says that the Union adopted an uncritical stance of the Labour Government, thereby ignoring workers' interests (Schiavone, 1990: 83). He gives various examples to prove his point. These include the following:

- The Union's silence when the Government introduced the labour corps under military discipline and with no union representation;
- The Union's lack of objection towards the reduction of public holidays and reduction of leave;
- The Union's silence towards the Government's stance that it would not tolerate partial industrial action;
- The Union's silence towards the Government's failure to enforce the Industrial Relations' Act to the full;

- The Union's lack of action against various injustices that were being carried out daily (1990: 83-84).

Schiavone also asks whether the two Union representatives in the Cabinet knew about the 1983 wage-freeze before the Budget was announced (Schiavone, 1990: 108).

The General Workers Union therefore played a pivotal role within Labour's historic bloc. Yet, there were other factors which enhanced support for the Malta Labour Party, not least of which was the wide range introduction of social benefits and social measures to all Maltese people. Another crucial factor was the bulk-buying policy that aimed to secure low prices and to combat inflation. Sociologist Noel Agius notes that although this scheme was unpopular with the middle-classes due to their cultural and financial background, "Ideologically this gelled very well with the Maltese materialist mentality by labelling selected goods as essential and placing importance on accessibility and utility value, rather than on consumerist principles such as choice and taste" (Agius, N. 2000: 20). This observation is even more credible when one considers that during the 1970s and 1980s Malta was a predominantly working-class society.

Crisis of Hegemony

Labour's historic bloc eventually crumbled. By 1981 the Malta Labour Party had lost the support of the majority of voters, thus experiencing a crisis of legitimacy. In 1987, Maltese society was very much different from the society inherited by Labour in 1971. Standards of living and levels of education were higher, and social mobility increased. Besides, the various acts of violence

that occurred during the late 1970s and the 1980s must have left their mark, too, especially on non-Labourites who were becoming wary.

Class Contradictions

Mario Vella observes that during the 1970s many persons whose background was related to petty-commodity relations of production such as smallholding farming started to seek wage-earning employment within industry, tourism, services or the State. Given that more people were entering these sectors, Vella argues that the social privilege of civil servants, teachers and other categories within the middle-class started to diminish. The academic community also began to lose its privileges due to an increase in students within functional courses such as accounting and management. This political economist maintains that this was especially the case with the medical profession. The introduction of a national health service diminished the status of doctors whose private practice would no longer enjoy the status it had until then. A similar example earmarked by Vella was the private schools' issue. This was probably due to the fact that the status of teachers was being diminished by government policies in education and by failed negotiations between the Malta Union of Teachers and the Government. The teaching profession aligned itself against the integration of private education into state education (Vella, M., 1989a: 172).

Malta's traditionally Nationalist mercantile capitalist class was also missing out. Dominic Fenech says that due to Labour policies such as bulk-buying, businessmen who imported various products fared badly (Fenech, D. 1988: 135).

Although popular with those earning low incomes, bulk-buying was unpopular not only with members of the middle-class who gave importance to choice and taste, and to many importers themselves who were denied the right to import a wide range of products as normally found within a market economy.

On the other hand, Labour's social measures as well as the merger with Malta's largest trade union did not mean that Labour had the support of the entire working class. There are many arguments that could prove otherwise, including the following, all of which have been referred to above:

- The lack of basic workers' rights in various fields;
- The submission of the General Workers' Union to the Malta Labour Party;
- The various industrial disputes such as those with the Malta Government Employees' Union (later on renamed as *Union Haddiema Maqghudin*¹⁹);
- The various cases of political discrimination;

As the 1980s moved on, a major factor which negatively influenced the strength of Labour's historic bloc was the fact that more workers were experiencing upward social mobility.

Economic Contradictions

Noel Agius notes that during the period in question more people were buying goods such as cars and televisions. At the same time, through the 1982 Budget, the Labour Government imposed measures of belt tightening, import substitution, high tariffs, trade restrictions, and the wage

freeze. It was very difficult to buy certain products such as colour televisions. But it was absolutely impossible to buy other products such as foreign chocolate bars. Agius observes this contradiction, stating that it caused problems for the Malta Labour Party. He adds that the contradiction was even more acute because at that time the recently established private Italian television stations started achieving popularity on the Maltese airwaves. “Channels were now not only full of programmes that showed the ideal Western middle-class life but also advertised products which though not available at home, were only a short ferry-ride away in Sicily” (Agius, N. 2000: 24-25).

Future Labour leader Alfred Sant gave vent to this contradiction in 1984. In an article in *It-Torca*²⁰, he asked whether the Malta Labour Movement could be losing support from certain categories of people who had experienced upward social mobility during the thirteen years of Labour administration. Sant observed that

“some of these ‘new’ workers are no longer recognising that their interest was the same interest of all workers in the country. The problem will arise if some of the children of workers no longer think of themselves as workers, but as forming part of another class which does not depend on work for its living and prestige” (*It-Torca*, 11th November 1984).

According to Sant the solution to such a problem was that the Labour Government keep itself open to new ideas and aspirations with a sense of humility and determination, and without making compromises to the detriment of the country and the working class.

¹⁹ Tr. from Maltese: ‘United Workers Union’

²⁰ Tr. from Maltese: ‘The Torch’

Counter-Hegemony

At the same time that Labour's historic bloc was losing support, the Nationalist Party led by Eddie Fenech Adami was constructing a counter-hegemonic project.

According to Dominic Fenech, the Nationalist Party had always been a middle-class party with middle-class values and a warm relationship with the Church. On the other hand, Fenech defines the Malta Labour Party as a working-class party that did not advocate class struggle. Given that by 1987 various social changes had occurred within Maltese society, Fenech observes that both major parties were trying to win votes from beyond their traditional bases of support. The Nationalists recognised that support from the working class was lacking, and, according to Fenech, took pains to project a more pro-worker image (Fenech, D. 1988: 134).

Mario Vella puts forward an observation along the same lines, stating that the Christian-Democrat populism propagated by the Nationalist Party attracted intellectuals and "intelligent young people" (Vella, M., 1989b: 6). Indeed Vella states that the Party presented itself as the solution to the contradictions that had arisen under Labour Government.

"to the wage earner who was asked to renounce to higher wages it promises higher wages, to the middle class consumer of goods and services whose 'right of choice' was limited by economic policies it promises unlimited choice, to the importer it promises free trade, to the industrialists it promises continued profits, to traditionalists it promises tradition and to those eager to adopt the patterns of behaviour of the metropolises it promises modernity" (Vella, M., 1989a: 166).

Under Fenech Adami's leadership the Nationalist Party also presented itself as the Party for national reconciliation. It augured an end to political violence and discrimination as well as a more democratic society along European lines. The Nationalist strategy finally managed to dismantle Old Labour in 1987.

Conclusion

The chief overdetermining factors during the conjuncture led by Old Labour were mainly connected with the fact that Malta's economy was moving away from its dependence on the British military base and developing into an economy dependent on the export of manufacture and on tourism. While the Maltese economy had grown in the 1970s, the 1980s were characterised by relative stagnation and higher unemployment rates. The class structure at the time was mainly working class yet upwardly mobile, and the dominant ideologies were materialist and traditionalist within a highly polarised political situation. The Maltese people tended to give importance to post-materialist values too. By the end of Old Labour rule, the Maltese people enjoyed a much higher standard of living than that of their previous generations. At the same time they faced a situation wherein their materialist and post-materialist aspirations could not be met due to the lack of economic freedoms.

Together with the international crises such as the 1970s' oil crisis and the 1980s' recession, many policies of the Old Labour Governments directly influenced the economic situation in Malta. The Old Labour state apparatus heavily favoured direct state intervention within a mixed-economy, both in terms of ownership of enterprise as well as in policies such as income-substitution and

bulk-buying, leading to a situation with less choice for consumers. Work for the sake of it was prioritised over trade liberalisation and better working conditions. The wage/price freezes were direct examples of this policy.

Old Labour's foreign policy stressed Malta's Mediterranean dimension, maintaining equidistance from North and South and from East and West and was highly nationalistic. The philosophy behind that policy was the attraction of foreign investment and the availability of markets for Maltese products.

The Mintoff and Mifsud Bonnici Governments declared themselves to be working in the interests of the working class, strengthening their convictions by means of the merger between the Malta Labour Party and the General Workers Union. Yet the Government also wanted to bring about industrial capitalism, acting like a capitalist by means of economic intervention. This resulted in the historic bloc that incorporated Malta's largest trade union on one hand, and conflicts with various other classes, categories, unions and associations on the other hand.

Party interests were given priority under Old Labour, and discrimination against non-Labourites was common practice, together with violence, threats and arrogance, as has been mentioned before. Within Old Labour, Dom Mintoff held almost absolute power, functioning as a charismatic leader equipped with evident rhetorical and communicational skills.

The main reasons for Old Labour's hegemonic crisis were the rising discontent with the prevailing instability and with the Government's restrictive economic measures. These reasons were deeply related to Old Labour's conflicts with various sectors of Maltese society, including the middle classes, the alienation of the upwardly mobile categories, as well as the success of the

Nationalist opposition in presenting itself as a populist, moderate and modern alternative which prioritised work, justice, freedom and national reconciliation.

Old Labour could be considered as incorporating both socialism and nationalism in a workerist ideological set-up, together with ideological strands heavily biased towards populist traditional values such as patronage.