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Talking Point

Deplorable and Unprecedented

This week, more than 2000 passengers booked on Air Malta flights ended up stranded at the airport, their flights cancelled. The cause of this was that, inexplicably, seventeen pilots simultaneously reported that they were unfit to fly. This mysterious epidemic happened to coincide with the time when the pilots' union – ALPA – was on the warpath with the management of Air Malta over staff shortages.

Observers could interpret this incident in three ways. First that this was an unhappy coincidence and that the pilots were actually sick; second that the pilots decided to override the union's dealings with management and resorted to an unofficial and illegal industrial action without their union's knowledge or support; and third that the pilots were underhandedly under instruction by their union to report sick for work.

MEA believes than any sane person above the age of three would find it hard to accept that these pilots were suddenly afflicted by some condition which has spared the rest of the working population at Air Malta and elsewhere. A mathematician could compute that the probability of this happening is similar to winning the Super Five lottery five times in a row with the same numbers. Therefore many would reach the conclusion that what occurred was an illegal industrial action which could have taken place with or without union authorisation.

If the action did not have union backing, ALPA should have done what any other union would be expected to do in similar circumstances, i.e. disassociate itself completely from such actions; insist with its members that any dealings with management can only be made through the union; and that it will not back any employees acting unlawfully or in breach of the conditions of the prevailing collective agreement. ALPA did no such thing, preferring instead to try to downplay the whole episode and accusing the airline of mismanagement.

This apparent unofficial industrial action had a very negative impact in terms of inconvenience to passengers, and it also caused material damage to the airline and to the tourism industry in general. It is ironic that pilots who earn a salary above €100,000, working for a national airline facing difficulties, gratuitously caused estimated damages of at least € 500,000. This loss will have to be made good from taxes paid by other workers. When employees go out on strike they forfeit their

salary, so it is easier, though not so noble, to fight for your cause or principles by feigning sickness and in so doing withhold your labour whilst keeping your full salary.

Furthermore there are other important considerations that have a broader impact on the domestic industrial relations scenario. Firstly, the fact that, as reported in the media, almost all pilots who called sick were certified as unfit to fly casts serious doubts on the professionalism of certain members of the medical profession. This is a cause for concern for all employers who rely on the expertise of company doctors or sub-contracted medical services to determine whether employees reporting sick are actually fit for work or otherwise. Secondly, copycat actions in other companies could be severely damaging for businesses, and equally disruptive in the public sector. Thirdly, similar deceitful actions change the rules of the industrial relations ballgame. Companies will find themselves subjected to the effect of a cessation of work without notification or authorisation by a union, and without the union holding itself accountable for it. Fortunately, this does not occur as, in spite of potential differences of opinion between unions and management on certain matters, industrial relations are generally based on a relationship which is fundamentally built on mutual trust and defined parameters. The removal of such parameters will result in an anarchic mess which can only spell disaster to social dialogue, enterprise and employment.

This is why MEA can only term the unofficial industrial action at Air Malta as being condemnable and unprecedented. It is essential for social partners - unions in particular - to understand the full implications of this event to avoid repetitions in other workplaces in Malta if we want to generate investment and jobs.

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