

The sad, sorry state of the unions

by Salim Mouzannar

Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests." This basic and fundamental right is recognised by Article 23.4 of the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The practice is something else.

Having worked for several years in a multinational enterprise, I did not harbour many illusions about the situation of the union of jewellers when I came to take over the small family enterprise after a decade of expatriation. I happily joined the union's administrative board, and I found myself photographed on the official picture – flanked by the grand old tenors of the profession – of part of the 'new' board.

Nor was I expecting traditionally empty rhetoric to subside overnight, but it did not take long before I was confronted with a maze of inefficiency which far surpassed my worst expectations: here was a professional body with no programme, no budget, no agreed plan of action, and no meaningful electoral process for its representation.

Three years hence, I am still bemused by the ability to play up to the same empty rhetoric. In truth, the profession is plagued with the same problems of most trade unions in the country, which suffer from self-perpetuation in the midst of characteristic inefficiency.

The equivalent to the Arabic *naqaba* for the jewellers' association is rendered in French under either *syndicat* (trade union) or *ordre* (order, which sounds more respectable as it attaches to traditionally 'free' professions like lawyers and physicians).

Irrespective of the translation, the jewellers' profession is not regulated as it should be, and suffers from a mixing of duties. In contrast to the lawyers' bar, or the association of engineers or physicians, which are regulated by law, there is little order and no respect for the rules in our profession.

Lawyers and medics have their own, deep-seated problems. But in the case of merchants or jewellers, the relation with state authorities operates without any serious regulation. This leads to the effective mixing of personal and common interests, and the whole rapport between state and union is dealt with in a socialising, haphazard and very unprofessional manner.

The jewellers' union suffers from problems endemic with most congregations of professionals in the country.

One problem is that the members are themselves uninterested. And there is here a vicious circle between individual disaffection and corporate inefficiency. Why should members care about their union, when it is not even able to impose a uniform system of work hours, let alone of holidays?

This is aggravated by the proliferation of unions in the same profession, with – except perhaps for banks – suffer from a total disinterest from the state. There are two unions for jewellers in the city of Beirut, and not a single common decision.

It can get worse: for hairdressers, there are four unions which, even when added together do not include a fifth of the active members of the profession.

Within the unions, there is a severe problem of communication between basis and summit.

Despite annual contributions which are regularly paid, there is little or no exchange between administration and members. In the jewellers' trade union, for example, there was only one mailing in the course of 1996, despite a LL300,000 membership fee.

The association of Beirut traders has not mailed a single item to its members in two years. General assemblies are emptied of any significance through a routine, mind-numbing itemisation of budgetary issues, without any serious discussion of programmes or prospects; unsurprisingly, then, rarely is there any significant attendance.

The sterile relations between basis and summit are consecrated by the lack of alternation at the top. The union of newspapers' editors has been headed by the same person for longer than one can remember, and those who are 'in' ensure that no significant outsider is allowed a meaningful role to play, thus perpetuating the stale system.

The lack of representation and change in turn affects the efficiency of the unions, who are unable to fulfil their basic role as supporters and propagators of professional teaching and specialisation, or as defenders of corporate interests. No union has developed a serious archival resource, let alone periodic publications or a public library.

Lebanon prides itself with having many more trade unions than most Arab countries. This may be true, but we should be less proud of having the largest number of inefficient unions in the region.

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