

THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY Into the Nineties

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Today, at the start of the nineties, the construction industry of Malta looks ahead with weariness. It is facing a serious labour shortage, and unless the root causes of the problem are tackled, the trade will continue to decline. A total revolution in quarrying and construction methods is needed to bring new life to the industry.

Despite the high level of wages and salaries in the construction sector, the number of employees in this sector is continually on the decrease, as young people opt for cleaner, less strenuous jobs. Statistics for 1986, for example, show a decrease of 1,453 gainfully occupied labourers when compared to the 1984 figure. There are also fewer employees in the 16-25 and 45-55 age brackets, showing that less youngsters are choosing a career in the building trade and more workers are retiring early for a less strenuous job.

Training

Unfortunately, the number of illiterate workers in this industry remains high and this is keeping back the upgrading of standards in the trade. Although the construction industry represents a major sector of Malta's economy and stimulates many secondary trades, it has been relatively neglected in the field of training. Not only is there a shortage of labourers and stone masons, but the industry also lacks specialised middle management and

foremen.

The fault seems to lie in the absence of any central training institution specialising in disciplines related to the construction industry, similar to those available in various European countries.

Modernisation

However, a proper training set-up is not the only element needed to revive the construction industry in Malta. Most of the technology and knowhow currently used in the quarrying and construction industry date back to almost forty years ago and have been largely unaffected by the gigantic technological advances of modern times. The introduction in Malta of modern quarrying and construction methods would go a long way towards improving the efficiency and productivity of the construction industry.

Starting from the building stone blocks themselves, these need to be cut to a smaller size than at present, making it easier for them to be handled by labourers and stone masons. Within quarries the building blocks should be neatly stacked and strapped onto pallets, and lifted out by means of a gantry crane, and loaded on trailers or trucks. This would eliminate the need for fully laden trucks to dangerously climb up the quarry side to road-level. However, the main advantage of transporting building stone on pallets is that it can be un-

loaded at the building site by a crane rather than being tipped onto the site from trucks. This helps to eliminate the chipping and breakage of stone blocks and reduces the need to redress the blocks — a process that generates clouds of dust — much to the discomfort of labourers and people living in the vicinity of the building site. The system would also make it more practical to enclose the site with boards.

Less Dusty Environment

Another idea is the use of jumbo bags for the transportation of limestone dust (xahx), and sand. This would create a cleaner, more dust-free environment on building sites and would also mean easier clearing up of the area on completion of the building works. The old method of dumping sand in the middle of the street often means that much sand is blown by the wind and creates a dusty atmosphere and when the works are finished a residual sand dune is left in the street for months on end.

In order to enhance the workers' safety and reduce stress-related ailments a simple mechanical platform could be used for the elevation of stone slabs up to the required level. In this way the workmen could practically slide the smaller, lighter stone blocks onto the bed of mortar as they work. The introduction of the above-mentioned methods of construction could definitely help to

attract more young people to the building trade which in turn would help to modernise the construction industry in the nineties. Another innovation in the construction industry is the use of prefabricated concrete structures, prestressed concrete slabs and beams. These materials are ideal for use in the construction of large commercial and industrial buildings, since these can be built quicker, using less labour than by the conventional method of construction.

Regulating The Industry

To be a peanut vendor in Malta one needs to have a licence. However, to be a building contractor, a trade which entails many more risks and responsibilities, one does not require a licence. As things stand at present, a group of persons without the necessary equipment or experience, may tender for large construction projects worth hundreds of thousands of Maltese liri on the same footing as large, experienced building contractors that have invested in modern equipment and a solid organisation. Government tenders are often awarded to the lowest and cheapest bidder regardless of the set-up of the tenderer. This situation encourages sub-standard workmanship and discourages professionalism. Without some form of classification, large contractors are at the mercy of their own experienced foremen, who may decide to set up on their own to seize such opportunities: since they have fewer overheads they can charge lower prices and still make a profit.

The introduction of a classification system would help to ensure that projects are undertaken by suitable contractors who can guarantee quality and reliability while honouring the agreed completion periods. Clients should expect to pay more for the services of larger, more established contractors that can afford to provide professional training for their middle management (overseas if necessary) so as to achieve inter-

national standards of quality and finishes.

Conditions Of Contract

Another problem which requires immediate attention is the conditions of contracts being used today for Government projects. These are still the same as those used forty years ago, and are heavily weighted in favour of the government. The Malta Federation of Industry's recently-formed Building Contractors Committee is in the process of discussing with the authorities the possibility of introducing a revised set of conditions of contract for government

building and civil engineering projects. The proposed conditions of contract are similar to those used internationally and provide fair safeguards for both parties concerned and would minimise misunderstandings.

If one looks at the UK, one notices a small but steady rise in the percentage of students taking up construction-oriented studies. This is because the construction methods used are not as primitive as those still used in Malta. I am confident that Malta's construction industry in the nineties will take up the challenge to upgrade itself, just as the other sectors of industry are seeking to improve their quality standards. □

Any Offers?

The following is a faithful reproduction of an enquiry received recently at the office of the FOI Secretariat.

Dear Sirs

We are very delighted to have known a bit of you.

As one of the leading importer and exporter, we handling a bellow detailed goods.

We, XXX Co. LTD. was established april in 1985 in the centre of SEOUL.

Since then we keeping business relations with many companies throughout the world.

Quite a few month ago, we had in mind of expanding our activity to new area.

Al though so far no contact and dealing somewhat dissimilar items from you would be appreciate to co-operate with you as well.

Hoping establish a profitable partnership for mutual assistance which can meet request what both sides want.

Lastly, we'd like to have some information about you.

Pls explane yourself by return.

Thanks

****OFFER BUSINESS MAIN ITEMS**

1. Wrist watch, clock and their parts
2. All kinds of parts for electronic goods and car
3. Natual artificial leather products
4. General merchandise.

Sincerely,

Chong Ki Park
President