

## Workers in history



### In search of enlightenment: Maltese working-class perceptions of emancipation through education

*Labour Education is pleased to publish the following article contributed by the author as a piece of original research. The author is a member of the Oral History Society of Malta.*

As from the mid-nineteenth century on to the inter-war period, Maltese working class iconography represented class antagonism by symbolism connected with the struggle between light and darkness. This particular imagery was embedded in everyday discourse and in the exterior symbolism of popular pageant, festivals and other political rituals. It was also propagated in popular literature mostly read by the working classes. More importantly, it was transmitted from generation to generation by oral tradition, mostly through local folk singing.<sup>1</sup>

In the collective mentality, this imagery evoked notions related to the regaining of consciousness; awakening; change from night to day; emancipation; regeneration and resurrection. In particular times of social crises this tradition edged on the millenarian, whence illuminated individuals and groups stood by and heralded a kingdom of light which would bring total justice:

Preach to the Maltese People  
Not to keep asleep  
Let them wake to the light  
For the time has come!<sup>2</sup>

As the central aspect of class struggle was believed to be emancipation through education, the luminary imagery came to mean also strife against the darkness of ignorance and superstition as the main facets of colonial and class exploitation. The need for

workers' education was transmitted in political discourse. In fact, it was the most important concept evoked. The popular working class hero, Manwel Dimech,<sup>3</sup> whose life became engulfed in myth, made conscious

*Manwel Dimech, the Enlightened Master, pointing to a goat symbolizing "ignorance" in popular mentality.*



use of this imagery as the embodiment of his revolutionary ideas. For Dimech, education was organically related to the emancipation of the workers and the oppressed of society. In his view, workers' emancipation would begin with the first *light of education*. He defined the people's needs in these terms:

Our foremost wish is that darkness will vanish from Malta once and for all, then light will take over in the country. This we wish that everybody will become aware... We wish that the words King, Queen, Lord and Slave will be forever abolished from the Maltese language. We wish that all Maltese awake from the deep sleep they are in and stand on their two feet.<sup>4</sup>

Dimech created a whole movement based on these notions which evolved around the tenets of mutual aid. He significantly named his organisation *Xirca tal-Imdawlin* [League of the Enlightened], which was immediately

After Dimech's death his followers were to develop his ideas and preach mutual-aid principles which would later merge socialist and British trade unionist ideas. This development was transmitted through incisive imagery already ingrained in working class traditions.<sup>6</sup>

Dimech had taught many of his followers everything they knew: from basic arithmetic and writing to several languages. They also inherited their master's fascination with the luminary imagery. In fact they were popularly referred to as *Imdawlin* [the enlightened]. These Dimechians travelled all over the Mediterranean and Europe and made contacts with known intellectuals of the working classes. In fact, they were behind the first attempts to organize the first local dock-yard strikes.



*Il Cotra [The Masses]* was the Maltese Workers' Party's official organ which published debates on open and democratic views of education.

excommunicated by the Maltese ecclesiastical authorities because of its secular view of the world and because it propagated "enlightened ideas" such as gender and social equality. He also succeeded in organizing the local transport workers in one of the first Maltese unions. Dimech was exiled and later died in a concentration camp in Egypt. He had made enemies in all sectors of power: the Church, the colonial authorities and the local privileged classes, which he called the sectors of Darkness:

Tremble! flee  
Darkness followers!  
Because the children of light advance.<sup>5</sup>

In the early years of the twenties these Dimechians conceived the need for a political alliance between the workers and the progressive sections of the local middle-class. This was later realized – in 1926 – with the formation of an alliance (locally known as the *Compact* movement) between the Maltese Workers' Party and the pro-British Constitutional Party which was elected to govern with a programme of radical reforms. This alliance aspired to industrialize the country. However, the local landowning, colonial and ecclesiastical authorities opposed the reformist movement from the beginning. They struggled against the introduction of com-



*The emblem of the Xirca tal-Imdawlin: the dying tree is pruned into new soil and the grey clouds of darkness make way for light. An enlightened one is seen crushing the serpent's head, another popular symbol of evil.*

pulsory education which they believed to be a direct path to secularisation. Thus in this historical context, the local working classes began to perceive themselves as the only social force capable of carrying out a historical transformation of the country. The Dimechians were on the forefront of this movement, active militants in political, cultural and educational initiatives.

Technical education began to be appreciated as of primary importance to the Maltese workman.<sup>7</sup> It was at this time that Fabianism began to capture the minds of some of the main labour intellectuals. Projects such as those suggested by the progressive liberal August Levanzin for the creation of Maltese legions of workers to be technically educated, manifested Fordist aspirations.<sup>8</sup> Other intellectuals of a pro-market stand pronounced themselves against the teaching of humanistic subjects as time-consuming and non-utilitarian. However, within the trade union movement a much more open and democratic

view of education triumphed.<sup>9</sup> It is within this democratic conception of education that most working-class intellectuals – many of whom were influenced by Dimechianism – formed a fervent intellectual *avant-garde* in the inter-war period.<sup>10</sup> These “enlightened teachers” were all knowledgeable of the fact that they were carrying the torch for the local *enlightenment* tradition. Many of these intellectuals opened their own evening classes where basic arithmetic, art and writing skills

*Many “enlightened teachers” opened their own evening classes.*

Fitt tal-pacenzia dattur u misso.  
disfacha tar mill-tahseb int.

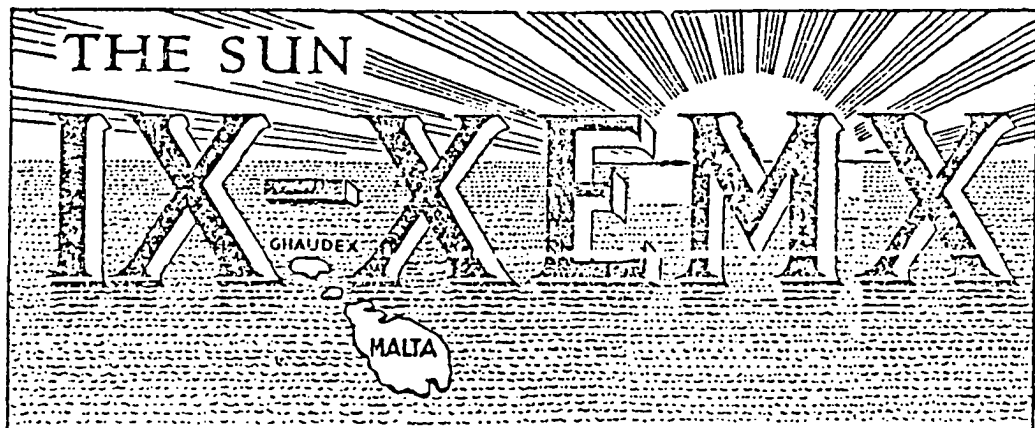
(firmat) F. AZZOPARDI P. L.

SCOLA PRIVATA  
TA  
**Tancredi Borg**  
L'ISLA.

Gia assistent l-Mr. O. Luigi Borg's Educational Institute, l-Isola; l-universita' ta' Malta, li jusa il-Hugo's simplified system of learning languages.

L-Isola li scola privata, eull jum mill-4 sas-6 30. p. m. jintgħataw lezzionijet teorici-prattici, tal-lingua Ingliża u Taljana, Aritmetica, Geografija, eec. eec. necessarj għal esamijet tal-apprendisti. tal-Dockyard u tal-telegrafu, boy-writers, messaggieri u impjegħi oħra.

Informazzionijet u condizionijet oħra jittieħdu min għand il-direttur ta li stess scola; 21 Strada Porta Marina, l-Isola.



The torch and the sun were used as the main working-class iconographic representations.

were taught. They advertised their classes in popular newspapers. In many ways, especially in their pedagogical approach, they followed the methods used by Manwel Dimech, as inscribed in one of his language manuals:

The phrases plain; big words I hate.  
To teach is not to show  
What I can say or what I know.  
As rules alone, however clear,  
Afford but little help if any,  
The rule doth in this book appear  
Without examples – I know many  
Who, having learned a thousand rules,  
Are to this day the greatest fools.<sup>11</sup>

Together with the organization of private evening classes, conferences, public meetings and oratory (full of emotion and rhetoric) were the main instruments used by social and political organizations to communicate their ideas to the workers. Some orators became popular for the way they disseminated their political messages. Such conferences were characterised by the use of figurative language, rich in imagery and emotionally loaded with frequent recourse to messianic visions and rhetoric. The use of parables and myths, as well as excerpts from the Gospel and the Bible were part of the expressive mode of the *enlightened* orators:

See it with the eyes of your mind if you can . . . Oh yes, you can, you children born in an island of Darkness . . . because here you aren't supposed to see with your physical eyes . . . in this Reign of Darkness under the tyranny of the followers of Hell . . .  
Terror! Darkness! Leave the people alone! Leave these Islands alone! Make haste for Light for it is approaching us!<sup>12</sup>

Working-class intellectuals and trade union organizers were typically proud of their libraries which they created out of subsistence wages. One of the leaders of the *Imdawlin* saw books as *sacred objects* because of their rarity in the country and the aura they evoked as “weapons against darkness”.<sup>13</sup> This reverence for books was typical of a whole lot of Maltese working-class intellectuals. Many workers, especially those who worked in the dockyard had good collections of books, many of which were illegally brought into the island to evade local censorship.

It was a custom for literate workers to read journals and other literature to huge groups of friends in bars and cafés.<sup>14</sup> Workers' debating societies and social clubs organized their own lending libraries. One of the most popular, and undoubtedly the greatest workers' reference library in the island was to be found at the workers' club at Senglea – the centre of the dockyards urban area.<sup>15</sup> Numerous detailed descriptions of this library written by the workers themselves who frequented it, describe it as a “centre of light”. The reading room was decorated with pictures of working-class reformists and educators, and the furniture was made by the most respected master artisans.<sup>16</sup> Another example was the circulating library operating in the dockyards themselves whose organisers were later to be raided and arrested in the famous Sedition Raids of 1932.<sup>17</sup> The idea of creating workers' libraries which would be separate and different from those of the State



# Vella's

## Evening Classes

7 SDA DESAIN VITTORIOSA



Giovanni Bartolo

*Evening classes were advertised in popular newspapers.*

or the Church had a long tradition which commenced in the mid-nineteenth century. The numerous *Mutual Help Societies* and *Workers' Benefit Societies* all aspired to educate the children of their members. The

organization of their libraries and reading rooms was imperative for such objectives to be realized.

Thus, within the historical experiences of the Maltese workers, the struggles for class emancipation was intimately interrelated with that for education. These struggles were conceived on a symbolic level and represented in an evocative imagery related to the eternal strife between light and darkness. This imagery came to be part and parcel of the working-class mode of expression and thus of their collective consciousness. These verses from the then popular *Hymn to lights* show this clearly:

Dear Light, so long awaited!  
Towards freedom have you guided us.  
Tremble! Flee!  
Because a slave  
is risen now, to show how great he is.

John Chircop

### Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> J. Cassar Pullicino: "Folk ballads and Folk music in Malta", in *The Sundial*, Vol. 4, No. 5, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> *Li Standard*, 6 Feb. 1904.

<sup>3</sup> Manwel Dimech (1860-1921) was a self-made intellectual who spent his adolescence in prison when found guilty of murder and of circulating counterfeit money. In 1911 he founded the *Xirca tal-Imdawlin* [League of the Enlightened] which was excommunicated by the Maltese clerical authorities because of its secular and enlightened outlook. The motto of the League was *Praevaluit Lux*. Later, he was exiled to a prison camp in Alexandria, where he died in 1921. H. Frendo: *Birthpangs of a Nation: Manwel Dimech's Malta*, Med. Publications, Malta, 1972, pp. 60-72.

<sup>4</sup> *Il Bandiera tal-Maltin - gurnal tad-Dawl* [The Maltese flag - a journal of light], 20 Sep. 1902.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> In visual representations on banners, flags and various forms of printed material, the Torch, the Sun and other symbols connected with light were reproduced. Working-class discourse and literature were replenished with this kind of symbolism. See for instance such articles as "Uasal id Daul" [Light has arrived] in the weekly newspaper *Malta tal-Maltin* [Malta of the Maltese], 10 Aug. 1922.

<sup>7</sup> August Levanzin's letters in *Malta tal-Maltin* in July 1922.

<sup>8</sup> "Technical Schools - l'Offerta tal Prof. A. Levanzin", in *Il Hmar* [The Donkey], Aug. 1922.

<sup>9</sup> Numerous polemics filled working-class papers in the thirties. For instance in *Il Cotra* [The Masses],

which was the Maltese Workers Party official organ, one finds numerous debates over this question, e.g. *Il Cotra*, July 1933.

<sup>10</sup> John Chircop: *The Maltese Labour Movement*, Mireva Publications, Msida, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Manwel Dimech: *Il Chelliem tal Erbat IIsna*, Malta, 1907.

<sup>12</sup> *Il Ljun*, 23 Dec. 1922.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> G. Strickland. Evidence in *Minutes of Evidence, Malta Royal Commission 1931*, London, 1932, p. 61.

<sup>15</sup> Some of the most popular conferences which were published dealt with the multifaceted problems faced by the workers in their daily lives, such as health problems, emigration, education, working conditions and working-class organization. For instance, U. Azzopardi: *Il Fakar* [Poverty], 1927; A. M. Galea: *Xoghhol ta Mhabba* [Work of Love], 1925 and G. Cutajar: *Il Capital u x-Xoghhol* [Capital and Labour], 1929.

<sup>16</sup> *Il Cotra*, 11 Sep. 1930. Another similar but smaller workers' reference library had been opened up in Valletta, *Il Cotra*, 5 May 1927.

<sup>17</sup> In the Sedition Raids of 1932, foremost workers' intellectuals were arrested and accused of having read illegal and seditious material. They were also accused of having written, printed and distributed anti-colonial and radical literature to the workers. J. Chircop: *The Left within the Maltese labour movement*.

<sup>18</sup> *Innu tal-Imdawlin* [Hymn of the Enlightened], *Il Bandiera Maltia*, 1 Aug. 1914.