
**A union for all seasons – the first century
of the Malta Union of Teachers
(1919-2019)**

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The centenarian Malta Union of Teachers is today the oldest union in Malta.¹ Established in 1919 it has been militating unstintingly and continuously in defence of Maltese educational workers for the last one hundred years. Life has offered the MUT both good and bad times, some positive and other negative outcomes, heart-breaking and elating moments; but whatever the eventualities, its officials have kept loyal to their commitment of working for, and assuring that, the teaching corps, which they represented, improved and upgraded their working conditions while moving forward and advancing professionally. This is the story of the MUT.

Remote preparation – Mutual Help Society

In the second decade of the twentieth century the Elementary Schools' Department took the decision to set up a mutual help association. Known to the Director of Elementary Schools, F.J. Reynolds, a committee formed from among the teachers began to support distressed peers. So much so that from May 1915 to October 1916 this committee had distributed about £39 in assistance to needy colleagues.² By November 1916 the large majority of the teaching staff had voted to form a Mutual Help Society. The Committee comprised three headmasters, three headmistresses, two male and two female assistant teachers.³ The Teachers' Circulating Library, which had been set up previously, was now amalgamated with the newly formed Society.⁴ The members of the first Committee signed the Society's statute on behalf of the teaching staff thus signifying the teachers' agreement to this new organisation. The founding Committee members were: the Director of Elementary Schools F.J. Reynolds; G. Rossignaud – President ; C. Vassallo – Secretary; L.G. Doublet – Treasurer; and V. Busuttill, C. Ferris, M. Busuttill, E. Wooton, E. Testa, and M.C. Mamo as members.⁵ The MHS, which became official on 1 January 1917, was "entirely charitable, based on the principle that the richer should help the poorer."⁶

The work of this Society focussed on the relief from the poverty being suffered by a number of teachers, also due to the effects of the ongoing World War One. It was an undeniable fact that by 1918 many from the teacher corps were in dire financial straits. A free ladle of soup to a maximum of 120 teachers was offered by the Government towards relieving the most hard-pressed. Teachers needed to apply to the Treasurer of the MHS, Rogantino Cachia, to be considered for this charity.⁷ When the neediest were identified, their head teachers were informed, and they were given one portion of soup daily till the end of the month at 2 pence a portion. On pay day the head handed the month's bill of expenses to the Treasurer and payment was effected.⁸

A remedy in the offing – the setting up of a union

Though this communal help offered some relief, it was at the same time a far cry from a solution to the teachers' social and occupational problems. Furthermore the teachers' plight did not find the support it required; to the

contrary the teaching corps experienced the indifference and ingratitude of the authorities and the public in general. A report issued by a commission set up to review the salaries of the government employees was testimony enough. While all other Government workers were recommended for an increase the teachers were not! One could conclude that this omission was due to the teacher corps being an adequately remunerated group, thus not requiring further support;⁹ but this was utterly not the case.¹⁰ Ėllul Galea has argued that such an anomaly could be traced to the absence of a teachers' union.¹¹

While this may have become evident to many, one young teacher in particular took it upon himself to set in motion a teachers' movement which would remain strong and active to this day. This was Antonio Galea, supported by head teachers Rogantino Cachia and Joseph Giordano – respectively of Valletta and Floriana elementary schools. Galea came from the Valletta school and thus the staff there helped him to start the process which would stress the “justice of our claims” and highlighting “the miserable state in which the majority of Teachers are found.” This is what a petition of May 1919 from 28 Valletta staff, including Galea and Cachia, to the Director of Elementary Schools, had underlined. They implored the Director who had “at heart the welfare of the Teachers” to put their case “as strongly as possible.”¹² Yet, up till November of that year there was still no indication of any breakthrough. Galea thus moved on to the only plausible option open to teachers; he called a general meeting for Saturday, 22 November 1919. Two circulars were sent out to the different schools around Malta announcing to all the teaching corps a general meeting and inviting them to attend. Two items were on the agenda – the formation of a teachers' union; and the examination of a new salary scheme which the authorities had recently proposed.¹³



A young
Antonio Galea

Rogantino Cachia addressed the assembled teachers pointing out a number of caustic realities concerning his audience's status and esteem. He noted that while teachers were being labelled *ħabba assistent* and *ħabba surmast*¹⁴ by the people, due to their low salary, their financial situation was truly miserable to the extent, he continued, that “it was indeed very humiliating to see Teachers obliged to stoop down so low as to receive portions of minestra like paupers.”¹⁵ The colonial authorities had not published the complete salaries list but sent separate extracts to each school. Thus “no one could form an idea of the criterion on which the classification or rather declassification was made.” No one approved this Scheme and Cachia concluded that, “The general opinion is that it is bad in its conception and worse in its application.”¹⁶ With such an unsustainable situation, “We must unite together and co-operate to form a Union of Teachers which will safeguard the interests and rights of the Teachers.”¹⁷ This day, the 22 of November 1919, thus marks the birth of the Malta Union of Teachers with the three top officials being unanimously elected during this first sitting of the MUT committee.¹⁸

The persons forming the first MUT committee came from the committee of the Mutual Help Society. These were: Joseph Giordano – President, Rogantino Cachia – Secretary, Louis Doublet – Treasurer, Blanch Tonna Barthet LL.A., Paolina Busuttill, Giuseppe Borg Gauci, Anacleto Conti, Antonio Vassallo, and Antonio Galea. The de facto founder of the MUT, Antonio Galea,¹⁹ became the Union's organiser. He did not seek higher posts due to the "rigidly hierarchical nature of Maltese society,"²⁰ while both the President and Secretary of the Union were head teachers.

The newly-born union did not go down well with the Education authorities. Director Reynolds thought that teachers were seeing big; an attitude of which he did not approve.²¹ Yet the MUT was determined and knew what it wanted. This is encapsulated in Joseph Giordano's words of 29 December 1919: "Be sure you are right – Then go ahead." Within a month the membership had grown to 630 out of the 721 teachers then on the Government's books.²² Work started immediately to improve the sorts of the teacher corps.²³ MUT Secretary, Rogantino Cachia, had described this energised start thus: "The Teachers of Malta have arisen from their deep sleep, they have shaken off their apathy, they have realised they are members of one body..."²⁴

The road ahead would not prove comfortable or smooth. By early February 1920, the Union was already being assailed by some non-members who tried to weaken it through adverse propaganda, to which the MUT countered that "membership was continuously on the rise."²⁵ The MUT salary proposals were generally accepted by the Government, though the new Director of Elementary Schools, Dr A.V. Laferla, remarked that this incurred a large expenditure.²⁶ W.N. Bruce was also of this opinion when, in his report on education in Malta, he stated that without an immediate increase in pay one could not pretend to attract people to embrace a teaching career. Yet, this, he emphasised, required "a large increase in the biggest permanent item of an educational budget, viz. the salaries..."²⁷ This would be an endemic hurdle in the MUT's quest for teachers' conditions of work along its first century of existence.

Towards more exposure – affiliations, alliances and representations

The Union recognised that support from local and foreign entities, could contribute towards strengthening its status and standing in its dealing with the authorities.

From very early on the first local supporter of the MUT was the Malta Association of Civil Servants (MACS). Indeed MACS Secretary, Oscar Sammut, had given constructive suggestions towards the setting up of the Union as he believed that the civil servants sympathised with teachers and were thus ready to support their cause. Sammut was also of the view that the MUT's affiliation with MACS was not only desired but would also be mutually beneficial.²⁸ The Union also managed to get a meeting with the Lieutenant Governor, an

event that prompted Rogantino Cachia to expound that, "Never before in the history of the Elementary Schools have the teachers been invited to meet a Lieutenant Governor about their grievances."²⁹

Exposure meant expansion and this was also effected through the Union's extending its presence to Gozo where a sub-committee was formed on 21 March 1920. This was done following a members' meeting for Gozitans in Victoria,³⁰ and the selection of Pietro Zammit as Chairman, Antonio Vella as Secretary and Emmanuele Xerri as Treasurer.³¹

Opportunities for foreign support and alliances were of course not to be missed. When Miss Wood, the President of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) of England and Wales, offered her Union's "fraternal greeting" and stated that Maltese teachers were considered colleagues of the English teachers,³² the MUT grabbed the occasion and engaged in an association with the NUT which was to stretch from January 1920 to September 1964 (when Malta achieved political independence).³³

A membership campaign was put into place, establishing an annual fee of 2 shillings,³⁴ while from March 1920 the Union also started its official publication entitled *The Teacher: Organ of the Malta Union of Teachers* sold at 2 pence a copy.³⁵

Exposure and officialdom also took the form of a logo, a motto and an anthem. The logo or emblem consisted of a roundel incorporating the intertwined initials 'MUT' superimposed over the white and red national colours and encircled by the motto '*Vestibulum Famae Doctrina*' and the foundation year '1919' over a blue background. This emblem was designed by A. Debono Bartolo from Mosta. The motto translates to 'Knowledge is the gate to fame'. The Union's hymn was written by Joseph Giordano, the Union's first President, while the music was composed by Mro Giuseppe Caruana.³⁶

The aims of the Union were at once clear. These were principally: the improvement of the welfare of Maltese teachers, and the development of education in Malta.³⁷ The MUT embarked on its role by establishing its unequivocal presence with the Education authorities. Its first intervention related to the 'New Scales of Salaries' appearing in the Draft Estimates for 1920-21.³⁸ It also submitted claims and observations concerning other matters, such as consultation with the Director of Elementary Schools (DES) concerning the appointment of a headmistress for the Training School.³⁹ It also experienced the first rebuttals from the authorities when the DES refused to discuss this post,⁴⁰ countered by the MUT when it did not recognise the appointee as it had not been involved in the discussions related to the said post.⁴¹

Such instances did not, however, demoralise the Union and it continued to vigilate upon whoever took the upholding of teacher status lightly. An incident in 1925 demonstrated this stance to the full. With the enactment of

the Compulsory Attendance Act (Act XXII of 1924) pupils who were enrolled in government and private schools had to attend until the age of 12 years (this being raised to 14 in 1928).⁴² The law specified that attendance was to be not less than 75 per cent of the total possible every month. Parents or guardians whose children defaulted were thus served with Absence Notices (Form IV). The responsibility of serving these Notices was initially put on the teaching staff. To this pretension, however, the MUT took exception as, it reasoned, this "can only have a most humiliating effect on the whole teaching staff of the Department as it brings teachers down to the level of the lowest grade of messengers and school-caretakers." It thus suggested that these Notices should be delivered by caretakers as was done with other messages of an important nature.⁴³ Dr Laferla did not seem to take this observation lightly and retorted by querying whether the Union would have objected had teachers been asked to do this service against a remuneration.⁴⁴ Standing by what it had said the MUT responded that teachers "are still in receipt of an inadequate salary and no doubt, they will only be too glad to add to their low emoluments though in a form different from the one suggested in your letter." For, "the service alluded to considering the position teachers hold in the public service, is degrading." And the Unions committee pressed on, "They add to say with regret that it is the first time in the life of the Elementary Schools that their position in the Department is considered no higher than that of a caretaker."⁴⁵ Evidently angered by the Union's stand, the DES remarked that, "it seems that your Committee did not understand that "Staff" has a wider meaning than Teaching Staff. The concluding part of this letter is most unfounded and uncalled for."⁴⁶ This exchange demonstrated the mettle of the teachers' representatives, hitting back with unflinching determination in defence of what they considered to be their just claims.

The MUT worked to have a permanent and visible presence, and one sure way was that of having official premises. On 25 July 1925 the Union thus inaugurated its club which was situated at 127, Strada Sta Lucia in Valletta. For the occasion the orchestra of the Union played to rejoice the guests.⁴⁷ This was followed by the issuing of membership cards to the Union members for the purpose of recognition.⁴⁸

Official recognition – a tough and tortuous goal

A most challenging aspiration the MUT faced from its establishment was the attainment of official recognition by the Government authorities. Though it was recognised as the representative of the teaching corps and its claims and requests were normally noted and generally granted, yet the ways to officialdom were much slower. The Union's work was evident, for example, in the abolition of the dated nomenclature 'Assistant Teacher' which thus created a more streamlined teacher hierarchy.⁴⁹ But such things did not seem to have impressed the powers that be. Notwithstanding effort to keep up as positive a relationship as possible with the DES and Government officials, this did not obtain the desired outcome.

Self-government in 1921 did not make much difference either as Maltese ministers too found it difficult to accept the Union officially.⁵⁰ On applying for recognition in 1923, the Minister of Public Instruction, Mgr F. Ferris, a clergyman of the conservative stamp, express his lack of sympathy to the Union.⁵¹ He believed it had caused former DES Francis Reynolds a whole year of trouble, and had protested against a decision in Parliament regarding a reduction of summer holidays and required that no transfers were to be effected without its consent. Mgr Ferris felt that "all this shows that the Union is animated by a spirit of insubordination against constituted (*sic*) authority." He therefore proposed to the Head of Ministry that Government should not grant it official recognition.⁵² A little later Laferla confirmed this policy of tolerating the MUT but not officially recognising it when he stressed that the Government could not "allow any administrative interference on the part of the MUT."⁵³ For instance, Laferla refused to allow any MUT representative on the Board of Education as it was maintained that the Department of Elementary Schools was already adequately represented by himself.⁵⁴

A glimmer of light appeared in 1932 when the Minister of Public Instruction appointed the MUT President to sit on the Committee of Management of the Malta Public Library for that year,⁵⁵ for which the Union promptly thanked the Minister and added that this decision had been appreciated by teachers and was seen as "a great step towards the official recognition of the MUT"⁵⁶

Teachers' conditions – ongoing efforts

Conditions of work can never be optimum, or remain so, regardless of all the goodwill on all sides. This because circumstances tend to change rapidly in a dynamic world and to keep up with all requirements is generally a tough affair. Working to gain some form of amelioration when conditions are at rock bottom becomes, to say the least, a gargantuan struggle. This latter reality was what the MUT faced in the 1920s and 30s. While much needed to be addressed, two particular difficulties concerned medical certificates and pensions.

Teachers in Malta have for decades been considered a depressed class. Low salaries were very much at the root of the depressed state of the teacher corps and it was because of this unhappy situation that when Circular No. 99 about sick leave was issued by the Government, the MUT was constrained to state that "many of the Class Teachers can hardly afford the double payment of a doctor's visit and certificate... [and] beg, you [the DES] will kindly obtain for the said Teachers the DMO's [District Medical Officer] visits and certificates free of charge."⁵⁷ Alas, this request was refused by the Minister of Public Instruction at that moment.⁵⁸ With time, maybe also due to a change in Government and a new Minister of Public Instruction, the request for free medical attendance and medical certificates⁵⁹ was granted, and both the regular teachers and the pupil-teachers benefited.⁶⁰

Another difficult point concerned the question of pensions. The Union had discussed pensions in a General Meeting and resolved to ask the government

for a reduction in the retirement age for teaching staff from 60 to 50 years, and that a pension equivalent to two-thirds of the salary would be granted after 30 years of service instead of 40 years.⁶¹ The pension reform was considered of vital importance to teachers, "as under the present circumstances it is hardly possible for a teacher to reach the maximum limit of service required by the present regulations."⁶² To meet half-way and hopefully gain the comprehension of the authorities, the Union in due time re-proposed a structure by which retirement could be taken at the age of 55 on a pension of two-thirds of the teachers' salary after 35 years in the service. The reason, it claimed, was that, "The majority of teachers will be unfit for their arduous work after 35 years of service and it would be very hard to compel them to retire without being given the maximum amount of pension to which other Government employees are entitled."⁶³ Notwithstanding all the facts and reasons put forward, the Government's reply was a dry statement that the request "cannot be entertained".⁶⁴

Of course, salaries remained the basic contention between the teachers and their employer – the Government of Malta. The Union made it a point to remind the Government authorities that it was in constant expectation of an increase in teachers' salaries. Thus, each time a new budget was being prepared the Union reminded the Minister of Public Instruction to include their claims in the General Estimates for the coming year. After the reading of the General Estimates, many a time the reaction would be that the MUT Committee "greatly regret the non-inclusion of the increase of salaries to the Teaching staff..."⁶⁵ It was a fact that salary increases had been a long awaited promise that never found a way to materialise. Some minor raises were granted along the 1930s but these were never really enough to make up for the dire reality and drudgery which was being experienced by Maltese teachers.

To complicate things, in 1939 the question of teachers' salaries took a rather contorted twist. The members of the Finance Committee within the Government structure opined that "Teachers are being paid full salaries for twelve months while working only eight". The MUT Committee at once wrote a letter to the Governor to counter such insinuations. The Union emphatically stated that "only a person who can really understand teaching and the strain it imposes on Teachers and pupils alike, especially under the local conditions with poor accommodation and overcrowded classes, can say how absolutely necessary holidays are." The MUT pointed out that, while other government employees were entitled to six weeks holidays annually, teachers were not. The Union emphasised that it was in a position to show that in the Mediterranean area schools are closed for longer periods than in Malta, as teaching became almost impossible due to the summer season.⁶⁶

The Union added that it resented the Finance Committee's proposal that "No more increases in salaries will be forthcoming in the future especially owing to the opportunities which teachers have for private practice." The answer to

this was that teachers should not need to depend on private practice to earn a decent living but should have a salary sufficient to permit them to live up to their standard. The Union further observed that, while other employees had the time and were allowed to indulge in private practice, teachers had to depend on it without having enough time to do private practice as this time was being taken by school work preparation and correction of students' work. Thus, the MUT considered these comments "to be a slur on the teaching profession as a whole."⁶⁷

In an official response the Governor however noted that he could not agree with the Union that a slur upon the teaching profession was intended or that this could be deduced from the remarks of the Finance Report.⁶⁸

Hard times with a silver lining – official recognition at last

World War Two reached Malta in June 1940. Teachers' lives, similar to those of their compatriots, were caught in the whirlwind of suffering and destruction. The war effort disrupted school life and those teachers who were not enlisted were employed in managing the needs called for by this time of emergency. Yet, while the MUT had to put any and all claims and trade union matters on the backburner till the return of calmer and more peaceful times, there was one very important trade unionistic development which indeed marked this otherwise turbulent period. The long-awaited, hard-fought-for, official recognition of the Malta Union of Teachers by the Government of Malta finally happened.

The appointment of John Brennan as Director of Education may have had some influence on this change of mind on the part of the authorities. Dr Laferla had always viewed the MUT as an organisation which interfered with the (his) administration of the Education Department and was thus opposed to conceding any form of official strength to the Union. Brennan may have thought differently, especially as he now had other plans for education in Malta, including that of squeezing in all the pupils who wished to go to school, notwithstanding the very limited space available at the time. The cooperation of teachers was essential and a closer, friendlier, relationship with their Union would have probably facilitated the implementation of his Department's projects. Another factor which may have helped towards official recognition was the sterling selfless work carried out by many teachers for their country during the hard years of the war. The Government may have wanted to demonstrate its gratitude for the teachers' work and recognising their Union would surely be an appropriate gesture. As one author described them, "These men and women of the Education Department stood head and shoulders above the rest. They showed outstanding ability, initiative, and resource. They displayed tact, patience, and courage. They knew a firmer, quicker grasp of a situation than their fellows. They were uncomplaining and enduring..."⁶⁹

Peacetime – and a reinvigorated Union

The MUT found fresh energy in its new President, Francis X. Mangion. *The Teacher* reflected a newly-found enthusiasm which had somewhat waned during the previous years. In November 1943 the Union set the agenda for the future. "The present is indeed, no time to sit back and wait for the Golden Age that many fondly believe will make its appearance immediately after the cessation of hostilities...if we are to learn from the lessons of the past, we must not leave things to the time 'when the war is over'."70 The level-headedness which the Union showed in this statement indicated a clear vision of things to come in the sphere of education in Malta.

Official recognition boosted the image of the MUT and attracted the membership towards the Union. There were 800 teachers and head teachers at a meeting held on 31 March 1943. The Union's President could well affirm that the membership could experience a "meteoric rise" reaching the figure of 1,000 and this number of members "would always command respect and fill our demands with power".71 Indeed by 1944-5 the paid up members had reached 949.72

It was also at this time that as a trade union, it had to follow the Trade Union Ordinance and register with the Registrar of Trade Unions.73 Concurrently it also decided to look for new premises to accommodate the Teachers' Institute. While committee meetings were at this time held at 14, Scots Street, Valletta, it was decided to fast track the search process by finding a small house or a flat and install the Institute there rather than wait until a bigger place was located which would mean a longer time frame.74

As a teachers' union, the MUT comprised various teacher categories. By 1946 the technical school masters had joined the Union and at this time they asked for their case regarding salaries and status to be put forward. They wished to be recognised as secondary school teachers and their salaries to be raised to the level of those of the Lyceum masters.75 Technical school teachers were paid the same salaries as the primary school teachers even though technical schools fell within the secondary education sector. The Union thus took up their case with the authorities.76

It seems that at this time the Union was experiencing some difficulties with particular categories of members. In 1946 a number of Lyceum masters resigned from the Union. Their letter of resignation was considered by the MUT Committee as having "a deplorable tone...[and] left no way for a compromise..." It was made clear by the Union's President that this resignation had nothing to do with "the secession of the Secondary Schools from Union membership". It was further pointed out that a number of Lyceum masters and secondary schools teachers were still members of the Union and "as long as one secondary school Teacher would remain in the Union, it was the MUT's duty to fight for his or her rights."77 With secondary school

teachers leaving the Union, it stood to reason that the MUT would embark on a drive to recruit other secondary school teachers.⁷⁸ This would help to keep the MUT from losing its nature as a heterogeneous constituted body representing teachers from various sectors of education, an objective which has continued over time.

A trade union – but not only

The MUT has always felt that it had to contribute to Maltese education in general. As its President, Emanuel Tonna, reminded his Committee in 1947, "it was also the object of the MUT to safeguard the interests of Education in the Island." Consequently, he felt that representations should be made to the DE regarding the fixing of an age limit for secondary school admission examinations. In this case it was a request to offer a chance to candidates not yet 14 years old on 1 October 1947 to be able to sit for that year's admission examination.⁷⁹ This, of course, was not the first time that the Union had put forward its views on educational matters, and this it continued to do and in this way further assert its position which transcended a purely trade unionistic role.

Another area where the Union saw it necessary to get involved was teacher training. The MUT Council asked the Rev. Mother Bennett, Vicar of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, for an interview to discuss particular items concerning teachers. This meeting was held at the Sacred Heart Convent in St Julian's and the topics discussed concerned a proper teacher training system to be introduced in Malta; the present shortcomings of the education system; and, the inadequacies of teachers' salaries.⁸⁰ The female teacher training college was to be run by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart.

In its mid-year general meeting the Union also proposed a resolution urging the Government to step up its work for the establishment of proper teacher-training colleges and that the teacher-training course was to be immediately extended to one year.⁸¹ The Union also protested to the Lieutenant-Governor against the lowering of standards in the qualifications for entry into the new training colleges. At the same time the Union sent a letter to Rev. Brother Leo, Principal of St Michael's Training College, by which sentiments of welcome and goodwill were conveyed.⁸² Indeed, Bro. Leo not only appreciated the MUT's good wishes but also invited the Union's President and Secretary to the opening ceremony of the male training college on 17 October 1947.⁸³

At the same time the Union took close care of teachers who were selected to go to England for their training. The four (3 men and 1 woman) candidates needed accommodation there. Though the DE had promised to see what could be done while he was in England, the MUT on its part also took up the matter seeking accommodation for these teachers. Telegrams were thus sent to the principals of St Mary's Training College, Strawberry Hill, Middlesex; St Charles Training College, South Kensington; and Endsleigh Training College, Hull.⁸⁴ All three replies were however in the negative.⁸⁵

Internal reorganisation – a general Secretary, official premises and a patron saint

It was in 1950 that the Union realised that as its work was getting more complicated, a part-time honorary Secretary chosen from within the MUT Council could not handle a full-time position while also taking care efficiently of the many secretarial and administrative requirements of a big trade union. The time had arrived to engage a full-time General Secretary. A call was thus issued and Victor de Domenico RMA was chosen as the first full-time salaried Secretary of the MUT.⁸⁶ The post designation was that of 'general Secretary' and this position was regulated by the enacting of a bye-law passed in February 1951. In the same sitting another bye-law specified that the Secretary of each of the various MUT committees appointed by the Union's Council were now to be officially known as 'Honorary Secretary'.⁸⁷

Offices from where the Union and its newly appointed General Secretary could operate, became more of a priority. Up to this time Council meetings had been held at Floriana Elementary School. The establishment of a fixed official address had been on the agenda since the 1940s as the Union searched for a place from which the Teachers' Institute could operate. This search had not yet given the desired result, but a rent-free room had been offered to the Union in St Ursula Street, Valletta, which tended to fit the requirements. The Council thus accepted the offer and bought the required furniture for its new office.⁸⁸ In this way 9, St Ursula Street, would become the first official premises, while the Union continued its search for bigger and better accommodation to create the long-aspired for Teachers' Institute. During 1950 the Teachers' Institute was moved to 134, Britannia Street (now Melita Street), Valletta,⁸⁹ and in 1958 it was re-located to 7, Merchants Street, Valletta, which was officially occupied in January 1959.⁹⁰

The MUT had also by now chosen St John Baptist de la Salle as its patron saint. From 1954, the Union began to celebrate the feast of its patron saint as an annual event. In that year it was thus resolved to organise a religious rally consisting of Holy Mass on the first Saturday following the feast day of the saint.⁹¹

Emerging dilemmas – gender issues

A matter which the Union had to decide upon in 1954 was the situation of married women. At the time the nomenclature for these staff members was 'visiting teachers - married women'. One of the Union's Council members, Rev. G. Cassar, treated the subject from its moral and social aspects. It was observed that while in the past, governments had a policy not to employ married women as teachers, in more recent times this policy had changed and for many years married women were now attached to the Education Department. Their post, being described as temporary teachers - married women was, according to him, "merely a screen". The Union's Council

followed this presentation with a long discussion and then arrived at the point where a decision had to be taken. Thus two questions were put to the vote. The first asked: "Should married women be employed as permanent teachers?" To this question the absolute majority of the Council voted against. To the second question: "Should married women be employed as Temporary Visiting Teachers (1 Scholastic Year) in case of gaps formed by permanent Teachers' illness?" The vote, just barely, tipped in favour. Following this vote the Union decided to meet the DE on the matter.⁹² Evidently the time for women's emancipation was not yet ripe, at least on this issue.

Notwithstanding the gender dilemma related to married women, the Union had been striving for quite some time to achieve equal pay for males and females in the teaching profession. In fact in its last general meeting it had also approved the principle of equal pay for both genders. As the authorities represented on the Malta Government Joint Council did not seem to be sensitised to this proposal, in October 1955 the MUT decided that the motion which it had planned to submit through Staff Side on this Council, would now be tackled as a Union matter. This was to be done through a public awareness campaign about "the right claim of female teachers for equality of pay," by contributing articles in the local press.⁹³ The Union also followed what was happening abroad on this subject through the WCOTP.⁹⁴

Furthermore, when the Government led by Dom Mintoff, decided in 1956 to review salaries and conditions of work of civil servants, with the help of a Civil Service Commission formed of independent foreign experts, the MUT set itself to prepare a memorandum. The areas the Union was interested in being addressed were: equity of pay, recruitment, salaries, promotions, special teachers, conditions of service and superannuating, education, secondary school teachers, and, technical masters in the Technical Education Department.⁹⁵

After years of ups and downs the discussions on salary and the grade structure for non-industrial employees in the service of the Malta Government, in November 1959 a deal was finally struck between the Staff Side and the Official Side in the MGJC. Among the agreed items there was the acceptance that female regular employees would, in an established future date, reach parity of pay with males.⁹⁶ Salary negotiations continued with the Union trying its best to achieve the optimum for its members. The success registered in the salary negotiations resulted in an increase in the membership which took off in the last months of 1959.⁹⁷

Teacher training – an indispensable requirement

In the late 1950s it was becoming evident that this sector was experiencing a number of difficulties. The Union was preoccupied that the requisites for student teachers were sliding, and this was bound to effect negatively the status of teachers in the long run. The MUT worried that St Michael's Training

College, which was responsible for the professional training of male student teachers, admitted 30 new students per annum. Steps thus needed to be taken to raise this amount considerably. The Union's President, Alfred Buhagiar, thought of contacting Bro. Cuthman, who was in charge of the College, to discuss the matter unofficially before any further actions was taken.⁹⁸

The situation was similar at Mater Admirabilis Training. After an intensive meeting with Mother McCallum, in charge of this female training college, Alfred Buhagiar was left with no doubt in his mind that the situation "was no less than chaotic". There was the impending danger that the College would close down in three to four years, which was reflected in the lowering of standards for recruitment and the decrease in the number candidates. McCallum informed him that, though the College could accept up to 120 students, those enrolling did not even reach the quota of 90 which had been set by the Government. The Union decided to contact the DE requesting an improvement of the situation. Failing this, the MUT would take steps towards rescuing the training colleges.⁹⁹

During this meeting with the DE and the A/DE, the Union's President emphasised the serious problems being faced by the teacher training colleges and stressed that, unless drastic measures were taken to address the situation, the MUT felt that it would have no alternative but to inform the public about this reality.¹⁰⁰ The chaotic state of affairs was also being noticed in schools. Five 17-year old visiting mistresses had been employed by the Government in the schools, and the Union could not but protest "against this unprecedented method of recruitment, which cannot but lower the prestige of the Secondary Schools in the eyes of Educationalists here and abroad," and an objection was lodged with the Administrative Secretary.¹⁰¹

Training colleges continued to be of concern as by the first years of the 1960s they still lacked that boost which could attract more students to enrol. They were simply not appealing enough for prospective teachers to undergo training. Student teachers could vouch for this lack of attractiveness which was also connected to the allowance granted by Government while during the training period. Student teachers were members of the MUT and the Union sought to improve their conditions. In October 1964 the Union tabled a motion in the MGJC which read: "That this Council agrees that the allowance of £18 paid to student teachers at St. Michael's Training College and Mater Admirabilis Training College be increased to £144 yearly, and the allowance paid to married students (men) be raised from £145 to £345 per annum."¹⁰² However as student teachers were not yet Government employees the discussions could not take place within the MGJC but needed to be addressed to the Director of Education.

When the national estimates for the coming year became known it transpired that the student teachers' claim for an increase in their allowance had not been included in the Government's Budget. The MUT thus gave notice to the DE that an industrial action was being contemplated. It was felt necessary to

call a meeting for emergency teachers to discuss possible actions,¹⁰³ as it was this category that would have to undergo teacher training if they wished to be put on the permanent staff compliment.

Two meetings for emergency teachers followed and it was ultimately resolved that these would strike for one day on 25 June 1965.¹⁰⁴ Minister of Education Dr Antonio Paris thus asked to speak to the Union's representatives, in which meeting he promised to put the case before Prime Minister Dr George Borg Olivier if the strike action was postponed. The Union accepted to postpone the industrial action on condition that negotiations started immediately and that a final decision by Borg Olivier was taken on his return from abroad. In the meantime a meeting with high government officials took place and the student teachers' allowance was preliminarily discussed. An unofficial indication of the grant which the Government was ready to concede, was also disclosed. This was so trivial that the Union representatives made it clear that they would not even be prepared to discuss it if this increase was officially proposed. The Union was also vexed with the Minister of Education's conduct for not keeping his promise; in fact while the Prime Minister returned to Malta the Minister left for Italy on holiday!¹⁰⁵

Then, surprisingly, the Government decided to grant a raise in the student teachers' allowances from £18 to £36, which was communicated to the Union by means of a letter. The MUT Council at once protested as the Government had unilaterally terminated the ongoing negotiations and presented its decision as a *fait accompli* without the Union having the opportunity to give its views. The DE, however, appealed to the Union to accept the decision to implement this increase, adding that it had been an arduous task to persuade the Government to accept even in part to the Union's proposal. The Union thus decided to take the Government's offer only as a basis for further discussions and not as a final decision.¹⁰⁶ The Union also made it clear that it would not accept the implementation of this increase until it was made clear when negotiations would be resumed. It also decided that further procrastination would lead to industrial action. The strike action, which had been postponed, was thus still in force.¹⁰⁷

The general election of 1971 put the Malta Labour Party, led by Prime Minister Dom Mintoff, in government. The incoming Administration brought with it new circumstances and the MUT was trying to adapt to them. The unions were informed by Mintoff himself that the national financial situation was bleak. Discussions with the UK Government were ongoing at that moment and a measure of agreement had been reached on financial aid. The Government of Malta thus decided "as an act of faith" to raise the minimum wage by 15 shillings per week which would be reflected in all the other wages and salaries of those in Government employment.¹⁰⁸

While teachers were thus assured at least of this flat increase to their pay packet, the student teachers attending St Michael's Training College and

Mater Admirabilis Training College, were not. The Union argued that at this stage it more sensible and practical to ask for an additional 15 shillings a week to the students' allowance than to insist on its original £144 a year which it had asked for during the Nationalist administration.¹⁰⁹ As the £144 request had not been granted by the authorities, the Union appealed to the Government to give these student teachers the cost of living increase of 15 shillings, similar to the other workers.¹¹⁰ This was however also turned down.¹¹¹

A permanent Teachers' Institute at last – or was it?

In 1970 the Union's Council made a further attempt towards obtaining new premises. The out-going Council had in fact voted in favour of acquiring the building at 213, Kingsway, Valletta. However, during the vote there were two abstentions and two against. It was thus felt more reasonable to leave a final decision to the newly elected Council. The architect had been asked to draw up a survey and plans for the eventual improvement of the property, and this could thus be reviewed by the new Council.¹¹² The asking price for the building continued to be discussed and further reductions were obtained from the owner,¹¹³ while a loan was also granted by Barclays Bank to cover the purchase, the alternations, and the construction of a third floor.¹¹⁴ The new property was extended, on the advice of architect Italo Raniolo, who was in charge of this project, when the Union managed to acquire a garage situated adjacent to the new Teachers' Institute.¹¹⁵ This was not, however to be the last premises of the Union.

More difficult times – a more resolute Union

The MUT found that the Labour Government was not really receptive to its claims and that efforts at communicating with this Administration were proving frustrating to say the least. The case of the Union's claims in favour of instructors at the Government Industrial Training Centre suffice to illustrate this reality.

In August 1972 the MUT was informed that none of its claims regarding the instructors could be granted and moreover, the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Welfare did not consider the minutes of 4 November 1969 (from the previous Administration) about the instructors to constitute an agreement, as had been assumed by the MUT. This official response prompted the instructors to insist that an industrial action should be taken. For the MUT the accord of 1969 reached between the Union and the Director of Education was an agreement in its own right and the present Government was not recognising it to the detriment of the instructors. They had done their best to cooperate fully with the authorities and ensure the smooth running of the Centre, "especially since they had to overcome the great difficulty of training the members of the Emergency Labour Corps." Instructors were hurt as, instead of being appreciated for their efforts, the authorities wanted to deprive them of their rights. The MUT Council saw that with the failure of all

other measures it was now justified to call industrial actions in defence of its members.¹¹⁶

On 6 September 1972 the President and General Secretary had a meeting about this issue with Dr A.V. Hyzler, the Acting Minister for Labour, Employment and Welfare. Hyzler announced the Cabinet's decision that instructors who followed the Union's directives for a one-day strike on the morrow and other industrial actions which may follow, would be immediately suspended and their service terminated in the public interest. The Minister made it clear that the Government had a policy to implement and this would be carried out at all costs. It was determined that no one would be allowed to obstruct it and planned to go ahead even if this meant that a general strike would follow. The members of the Emergency Labour Corps were to go on with their training and if the instructors took industrial action these would be dismissed. He continued that instructors from abroad would replace them, even if this meant spending thousands of pounds. Hyzler sugared his blatantly unceremonious statement by telling the Union not take this as a threat but as an appeal for cooperation. The Union was being given the chance to reconsider its position. The Government side refused to talk about the 1969 agreement even though the Union delegates tried to open this discussion. The present Government maintained that this agreement had been illegal. Apart from any other consideration, according to the Minister, leave was a concession and not a right, and could be availed of when and if the Government thought appropriate. President Abel Giglio and General Secretary Alphonse Farrugia said that they "had been astounded" by this official position.¹¹⁷

With this meeting over and the result communicated to the instructors, these showed their disgust, and after a secret vote, it was decided that the planned strike would go ahead while all the other industrial actions were to be implemented as established. The Union's Council agreed that "this threat struck at the basic root of trade unionism" and it was believed that if it were put into practice this would constitute the virtual elimination of the trade union movement in Malta. While the Union wanted to believe that the Government's threat was meant more to scare and intimidate than to be actually carried out, yet the Council thought of steps to counter any actions if the threats were to be implemented. In the eventuality that the Government carried out its threat then the MUT would support the instructors to the end "both morally and financially, even if it meant using all the Union's funds including the selling of the new Teachers' Institute in Kingsway." On the basis of this situation, the Council voted by secret ballot (15 in favour, Nil against) to ignore the Government's threat and proceed with the industrial action as planned.¹¹⁸

Following the pre-established plans, on 7 September the instructors of the GITC Marsa went out on strike. As all the staff obeyed the Union's directives the strike was a complete success. On the following day, a public holiday, the Union's delegate at the school was contacted by the officer i/c of the Centre

to convey to him a message from the Minister of Labour, Employment and Welfare in which he was asked to meet him on the following Saturday. The delegate answered that he would only come if accompanied by Union officials. This was granted and the MUT delegation met the Minister, Dr Joseph Cassar, on 9 September 1972. Minister Cassar took on a conciliatory stance opining that this dispute must have resulted from some misunderstanding. He admitted that he was not fully aware of the conditions of service of instructors and it was not the intention to deprive them of the benefits to which they were entitled under the agreement with the Union. He emphasised that some of the provisions of the agreement could not be satisfied for the time being due to the special circumstances related to the Emergency Labour Corps. The Government would not ignore the 1969 agreement but in the present state of affairs the cooperation of the instructors would be appreciated. In these words there was no hint to the threats made previously by Acting Minister Hyzler, though Cassar did confirm that the decision in question was that taken by Cabinet. The Minister concluded that he was prepared to continue negotiations immediately on all pending issues connected with the instructor staff at the GITC. Following these reassurances the Union decided to suspend the work to rule directive, while the ban on evening classes was also lifted.¹¹⁹ Negotiations started immediately and progress was seen during the discussions. The Union was in no doubt that the industrial action at the Centre had strengthened its hand considerably in these talks.¹²⁰

A trade union at its peak – mettle, nerve and courage

In its more than sixty years of trade unionistic activism, the Union had never found itself in the situation which it was to face during the first half of the 1980s. For long years it had been requesting a salary raise for teachers. On 21 December 1982 the Administrative Secretary informed the Union that in view of the Government's policy of a salary freeze, there would be no more discussions on this matter "for the time being". Not taking this as a final answer the Union wrote in reply asking the Government to reconsider its position. This would help keep the process going, while pressure would be exerted by holding a delegates' meeting followed by a teachers' rally in the near future.¹²¹ This rally was in fact held at the ABC Theatre in Floriana on 31 January 1983. The place was "literally packed" and the last minute decision by Government to continue salary negotiations was very well received.¹²² It seemed that the planned pressure had given the desired results; at least discussions were continuing.

In the meantime a report in *l-orizzont* of 14 March regarding a speech of Minister of Education Dr Philip Muscat revealed that he had stated that teachers were lazy and referred to them as rats, to which the Union responded through a circular.¹²³ Some time later, during the Prize Day at Marsa Secondary School, the same Muscat was reported as having called teachers "below average". The Union reacted to this comment sending a letter to the Minister on 3 May. In his reply the Minister, denied saying this, yet at

the same time he pointed out that results at Marsa School had been very poor – the results were ‘below average’ – and this fact indirectly reflected on the teachers. The Union asked its members at the Marsa School to confirm the Minister’s comments, which they did, and the Council thus drafted yet another reply in this sense.¹²⁴

While clashes of opinion continued between the Government and the MUT, the situation became heated over the issue of the Union’s salary claim for the teaching grades. As nothing came out of the long-dragging discussions, the MUT decided that it was time to show its trade unionistic muscle, which coincided with another tough situation which was unfolding at this time – the confrontation over private schools. This latter educational issue while already complex in itself, involved the MUT on two levels: defending the interests of private school teachers, and supporting the right of parents to choose the type of education they preferred for their children.

In a meeting between the Administrative Secretary and the MUT representatives held on 14 June 1984, it was communicated that a response to the memorandum on salaries presented by the Union would soon follow. This seemed an empty promise however, and with no reply having been received after three months, stepping up Union pressure was thought to be in order. Thus a ban on mid-day break supervision was announced. The Union also contemplated strike action but decided to postpone a decision on this possibility to a later date. A plan of action was also discussed as had been prepared by the MUT Administrative Committee.¹²⁵ This plan was revisited in the following Council meeting and three membership meetings were set up, including a teachers’ rally for 19 September 1984.¹²⁶ Directives were drawn up:

1. All teaching grades were to report for duty at the established official time both for the morning and for the afternoon session. This meant that teachers would be in their classroom (or staffroom in the secondary schools if they did not have a class in the first session) at 8.30 a.m. and 12.30 p.m. respectively – or at other times as established according to the schedules of particular schools. Heads of school and assistant heads were to be in their office at the official times indicated above. Where a school assembly was held in the morning or afternoon session, this was to begin at 8.30 a.m. or 12.30 p.m., and in this case teachers were to participate in the assembly instead of staying in their classroom or staffroom.
2. All teaching grades were to refrain from undertaking any extra-curricular activities, such as mini musicals, drama festivals, Carnival festivities, exhibitions, Christmas parties, etc.
3. All teaching grades were to boycott Prize Day and any other official or unofficial function or ceremony. In the case of such function taking

place during school hours, teachers were to remain in their classroom or staffroom.

4. Teaching grades were not to carry out any work outside their conditions of service. This included: (a) clerical work, including sending absentee forms; (b) distribution and collection of books; (c) distribution of milk; (d) compilation of medical cards; (e) distribution of stationery, materials, etc.
5. Teachers were not to accept classes with more than 30 students (primary and secondary Forms I and II) and 25 students (secondary Forms III, IV and V) on the register. Where classes were lower than these maxima, additional students were to be accepted only so long as the established numbers (30 or 25 respectively) were not exceeded and, provided that in the opinion of the teacher concerned such additional students did not disrupt the class.
6. Teachers in secondary schools were not to accept substitution periods caused by teachers who were on the school premises.
7. Teaching grades which were not officially designated as holders of special posts (i.e. form teachers, guidance teachers, and librarians) were not to perform any duties pertaining to such posts. In the case of heads of department, guidance teachers, and librarians, the appropriate reduced teaching load (as agreed between the Education Department and the MUT) was to be observed in all cases.
8. All teaching grades were to withdraw from Parent Teacher Associations.
9. Teaching grades were not to form any school committee (e.g. welfare, discipline) other than the MUT school committee.
10. Teachers were not to make use of text books other than those provided by the Education Department.
11. Teaching grades were to refuse to teach/work in classrooms, offices, laboratories, workshops, etc., which were not sufficiently clean; or which did not have the necessary amenities, e.g. proper lighting, window panes, ventilation, etc. In the case of lack of basic hygienic requirements in general, in any school, the MUT would direct the teaching grades in that particular school to resort to sporadic strikes.

Other possible directives were: a ban on mid-day break supervision; and general and/or selective strikes.

Student teachers and part-timers were exempted from certain directives, but were still directed to:

1. carry out only duties connected with the teaching of their normal class;
2. decline from accepting in their class any students of teachers following an MUT directive;
3. refuse posting in schools during their study phase (applicable to student teachers only).¹²⁷

The planned rally attracted an attendance which was described by the MUT President as "extraordinary". The Union's directives had been received by acclamation. Following this rally the Minister of Education notified parents and members of the Parent Teacher Associations to go to the schools on the morning of 20 September as he was going to address them over the cable radio during a school broadcast. During this broadcast the neo-appointed Minister Dr Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici launched an attack on the MUT and told parents to approach teachers and find out who would be following the Union's directives. Thus teachers were approached and asked whether they were going to adopt the MUT's directive. In some instances incidents were reported as teachers declined to disclose what they were going to do. Mifsud Bonnici asked to meet the MUT Council, this meeting taking place on Friday 21 September at 11.00 a.m. The Union delegation was informed that he could not accept its directives as, according to Mifsud Bonnici, this meant that while teachers would not be doing their duties they would be receiving their salary just the same. The Minister then addressed the Union's representatives in their position as teachers in the Education Department. Starting with the President, he presented to him a declaration which stated that he, Mr Buhagiar, would not be obeying the MUT's directives. The President naturally refused to sign such a declaration whereupon the Minister handed Mr Buhagiar a letter – with the Minister's printed name but no signature – which declared that he was locked out. This same declaration was meted out to the Union officials Mr Napier and Mr Naudi. On the strong protests of the MUT representatives, the Minister retorted that as an employer he had the right to resort to such action in terms of the Industrial Relations Act. It later transpired that before this meeting, the Minister had sent for the three heads of school serving in Valletta and when they refused to sign the said declaration all three were also locked out. The MUT Council could not submit to this Ministerial decision and saw that it was necessary to call another rally to give the required directives to teachers. The rally was convened on 23 September at 10.00 a.m. at the ABC Theatre.¹²⁸ A two-day strike was announced for 24 and 25 September to which education officers, student teachers in their work phase, and instructor grades were also called to participate, while part-time instructors and teachers, and student teachers in their study phase were exempted from this industrial action.¹²⁹ According to Union calculations the response was 80 percent for the first day and 84 percent for the second day.¹³⁰

On 25 September, the Constitutional Court commenced hearing the case which the MUT had instituted against the Government.¹³¹

The strike action was then extended by a further three days (26-28 September) while another rally would follow on Saturday morning, the 29th, in the grounds of St Aloysius College in Birkirkara.¹³² After the rally Alfred Buhagiar returned home but at around 9.00pm he was called by a lady who lived close to the Teachers' Institute who informed him that people had broken into the MUT premises. The Police were called and a magisterial inquiry was initiated. The Council noted that the attack had taken place soon after a meeting held at the GWU headquarters where Dr K. Mifsud Bonnici had delivered a "highly charged" speech against the MUT and the teachers' strike.¹³³ Regarding this momentous period, Alfred Buhagiar expressed his conviction that "this Council session is being held at a time when the MUT is facing one of its most difficult situations since its foundation." Police protection on the other hand was not available. The "air was highly charged" and this created further difficulties, not least as the Minister of Education had asked fellow Ministers to each take charge of a group of people who were instructed to block children from entering those private schools whose license had been withheld by Government.¹³⁴



Alfred Buhagiar

The Teachers' Institute was now to be made more secure and many had offered brand new office equipment to replace that which had been destroyed by the rabble. Certain documents were removed from the TI and taken to Council members' homes for safekeeping. The Teachers' Benevolent Fund and the Finance Committee were also to set up a Solidarity Fund for the teachers on strike.¹³⁵

Mediation offers were received; one came from the Peace Lab which was accepted by the MUT. Another attempt at establishing contacts was being tackled by Salvino Spiteri, the Confederation of Malta Trade Unions President. Meanwhile the Union's premises were attacked once more when unknown persons burnt the side door of the Teachers' Institute.¹³⁶

Following a meeting held on 1 October when a CMTU delegation met the Minister of Education, a second meeting was scheduled for 3 October. This time the CMTU delegation would comprise an MUT representation – in line with a strategy that had been previously agreed upon.¹³⁷ It was from 4 October that the Police accepted the MUT's request for a 24-hour police protection, and thus the Teachers' Institute was now guarded round the clock.¹³⁸

Regarding the 3 October meeting, the Ministers present told the MUT representatives that they had chosen the wrong timing for its actions as the Government was engaged in the private schools issue. In these circumstances, the Ministers added, their only counter-action to bring an abrupt end to the salary claim dispute was the lock-out option. According to the MUT President, the meeting was at times quite stormy, and Minister Wistin Abela even told

the General Secretary Alphonse Farrugia to be careful lest he would let loose his thugs from Zejtun. When the Union brought up the matter of teachers who went on strike being coerced into reporting for work, Minister Abela replied that just as the Union had the right to picketing, the Government had the right to try to persuade teachers to return to their place of work. Here the Union made it clear that it left teachers at liberty to decide on what to do. Moreover the Union did not even organise picketing. The Government side pointed out from their end, if the Union withdrew its directives, then the lock-out would be lifted and there would be no need for any signed declarations by teachers. Negotiations could then be resumed as long as the claim was structured on some basis other than professional equivalence. The Union delegation felt that the Government was concerned that if it accepted the teachers' claim then workers from other sectors would submit their own claims for salary adjustments. While around the table the Ministers brought up the private schools issue, with the MUT countering that this was a separate subject altogether. The Government side however pointed out that the Union had directed the private school teachers in August not to accept the Government's offer of a job and insisted that the Union should remove this directive or else talks on the salary claim could not resume. The Union protested and maintained that the Government was mixing the issues. At this point the Ministers seemed to have realised that mixing issues was not going to work and thus changed their position on this point.¹³⁹

Following the meeting the strategy adopted was that, in support of the MUT, the CMTU Council would order a one-day strike and direct the affiliated unions in the Confederation to collect a levy from their members which would go towards alleviating the financial burden of the striking teachers. On its part the MUT decided to extend the strike by five more days (8-12 October).¹⁴⁰

When the planned one-day strike took place response was calculated at around 30,000 workers. The strike ordered by the CMTU was in protest against the lock-out of teachers. From feedback arriving at the Teachers' Institute, the MUBE claimed that all its 1,000 members had responded. The UHM reported that the number of striking workers was approximately double its membership strength. From the University of Malta, it was reported that the strikers there reached 88 percent of the workforce.¹⁴¹

The court suit instituted by the MUT was finally decided in front of Mr Justice Filletti. The sentence delivered recognised that the Government had the right to use the lock-out tactic against a section of the workers, and this decision was based on court decisions in previous similar cases. Mr Justice Filletti however referred to the lock-out as "a loathsome weapon used against workers". The MUT decided to appeal this sentence while it was also made clear that this court decision had no bearing whatsoever on the Union's industrial dispute.¹⁴²

The mediation process carried by Fr Dionysius Mintoff of the Peace Lab seemed to have arrived at its limits with the mediator informing the MUT that it should now lift the industrial actions. The Council felt that by this declaration the Peace Lab had effectively ended its mediation, so Fr Mintoff was approached to clarify certain points and possibly be persuaded to conclude the mediation rather than leaving matters half-way.¹⁴³ This proved futile as Fr Mintoff did not budge and added that he had felt annoyed seeing newspaper reports using the word "mediation". For him, this mission was never intended to bring the two sides around a table but was simply an exercise to clear the way towards an eventual solution. At this point the Union identified a new person who promised to take over the role of mediator.¹⁴⁴

With the new mediator working towards a solution, and with matters seemingly a little more positive, the Government side came out with a new request; that of asking the Union to remove the directions given to private school teachers. The Union President held that this was definitely unacceptable as it amounted to a betrayal. Moreover, considering the Government's official declaration by which it was threatening to take over the private schools, such a request was probably intended to make this takeover easier through a simple requisition of school premises.¹⁴⁵

The industrial action and weeks of mediation, by 2 November seemed to have led only to a situation of stalemate. The Government did not want to budge until the Union removed the clause regarding the resumption of talks. For the Union however the inclusion of that clause was essential.¹⁴⁶

On 5 November 1984 Alfred Buhagiar's brother and sister suffered serious damages to their Valletta house and the shop that was part of it, when a bomb was planted and later exploded on the doorstep. The bomb caused considerable damage but no one was hurt. The MUT at once issued a statement to express its solidarity with its President and condemned this "cowardly" bomb attack. The CMTU followed suit with a press statement expressing solidarity with Mr Buhagiar.¹⁴⁷ Solidarity with the President was conveyed also after the teachers' rally of 7 November which was held in Gozo for the local teachers. These teachers not only massively expressed their support and solidarity but also sent a token of this solidarity in the form of a gift to Mr Buhagiar.¹⁴⁸

While mediation continued it did not seem to be leading to any fruitful conclusions, as the Government side stuck to its basic requests, with the Union doing no less on its side. Then on 3 November, Mr Albert Tabone, who had been conducting mediation up to a week before, informed Alfred Buhagiar that the Prime Minister had sent for him personally and told him that the situation in the state schools had developed in such a way that he (Mr Mintoff) was now prepared to take a stand on the issue. Mintoff proposed that the Union's directives should be lifted and the lock-out would also be withdrawn. The strike should be called off and negotiations resumed



Teachers participating in the strike manifesting their requests

when the MUT lifted its directive to private school teachers. The Union saw in this latest development the creation of a very serious situation. The MUT could not betray the private school teachers. Buhagiar argued that, "We have a grave responsibility, we are faced with a very complicated situation." The Prime Minister had made it known that he would not wait any longer and was prepared to implement contingency measures. It also transpired through an influential person that the current dispute was on the agenda of the next Cabinet meeting scheduled for that same evening. The Council had to deliberate on what the Union should do. General Secretary Alphonse Farrugia concurred that this was a crucial decision. "It could be the most important decision in the Union's 65 years of existence. Blackmail is the name of the game even in international circles." Farrugia continued that the Union was faced with a similar severe test as that of 1972 regarding the case of the GITC instructors. In an analysis of what could happen, the General Secretary said that if the worse came to the worst the Government could amend the Industrial Relations Act so as to include teachers within the list of categories that were not permitted to strike. On the other hand the Government could not sack anybody. "It would be a question of calling his bluff." The Government's reaction was interpreted by the Union as coming from the fact that the lock-out had disrupted the schools and the Government was in a state of panic "and with their backs to the wall." Pressure had mounted as the Government had given a time limit up to 8.00 p.m. of that evening

(8 November) for the Union's response. However, as there were various viewpoints and the only specific point on which there was no divergence was that the private school teachers' directive should stay, the President felt that no rash decisions should be taken. Thus a decision which would be more unanimous was left for the morrow.¹⁴⁹

On 9 November the Council reconvened to ponder on the next move. The first point of the Government's offer was the lifting of industrial actions by both sides. The second was that negotiations would resume when the private schools issue was resolved or when the Union lifted its directive to private school teachers. Up till the day before, this latter point had been adamantly kept – the private schools directive was not to be withdrawn. Now, the Council began to reassess the reality of the situation and following the President's observations focussed on the advisability of otherwise of pressing on with the strike action. One had to keep in mind that the Government had overnight made it public that it intended to replace striking teachers with casual teachers.¹⁵⁰

The Council was invited to deliberate on the advisability of taking up the Government's offer which included its acceptance to reverse the decision of demanding the individually signed declarations. In the meantime it was hoped that the problem of the private schools would come to a solution and thus negotiations could start. The Union needed to keep in mind the tension which at that time was "visibly effecting" teachers. Buhagiar stated that "We managed to keep teachers out on strike for 7 weeks and this in itself is a great victory for the Union. We managed to put up a very noble fight in defence of our rights." The President asked if the Government had ulterior motives related to its offer. He wondered whether the Government had in fact been banking on teachers not returning to the schools, and thus volunteers could take over the schools and "sow political indoctrination". Buhagiar stressed that the Union needed to be responsible enough to realise what he was describing, and also to appreciate that recruiting casual teachers was no minor thing. Even if just 100 casual teachers were recruited, this would be enough to effect the morale of the striking teachers with catastrophic results. The financial situation also needed the Union's attention. The President believed that, "If need be we must sacrifice the salary negotiations to safeguard the private school teachers. We will never betray anybody – the directive to private school teachers remains." Thus, one would have to consider if it were not wiser to lift the strike, resume work and continue pressing for negotiations "from a position of strength" rather than prolonging the strike and see it gradually collapse. The General Secretary added that at least the Union needed an assurance for the teachers' safe return to work and the normalisation of schools.¹⁵¹

At this stage the lifting of the strike directive was considered. This would diffuse the situation as the Union could not take any more risks. The Minister of Education's response would however be sought before any other steps were taken. Certain clarifications needed to be obtained before the final step to call off the strike and withdraw all other directives was put into effect.¹⁵²

On Friday, 9 November, the mediator informed the Union that a number of assurances had been given by the Government.

1. Over the weekend the Minister of Education was to appeal to all concerned to remain calm and welcome the teachers back to school.
2. The Minister of Education was to meet an MUT delegation on Monday, 12 November, between 10.00 a.m. and 11.00 a.m.
3. There were not going to be any transfers from Gozo to Malta or vice-versa.

Though no assurance had been given that no transfers would be carried out within Malta or Gozo, it was however realised that before the strike certain schools were understaffed while others were overstaffed. Thus, it was expected that there would be transfers according to the exigencies of the service.¹⁵³

The General Secretary then read the full text of the letter to be sent to the Prime Minister in which the MUT communicated its decision to remove all the industrial actions on the understanding that the Government would lift the lock-out and desist from demanding signed declarations from teachers.¹⁵⁴

Thus, on Saturday, 10 November, the MUT called a teachers' rally in which the lifting of the strike action was announced. The message given was a prudent one not to jeopardise the various issues that were interwoven within the current situation. Though there was a clear sense of preoccupation of what teachers may face on their return to their schools, the Union needed to project an image of courage and that the teachers were not afraid as if they were guilty of some crime. The press release on the termination of the industrial action was then read.¹⁵⁵

Strike Called Of

As a sign of good will, and because it has the interest of children at heart, the MUT has withdrawn the "work to rule" directive of 19th September and called off the teachers' strike with effect from today November 10.

This decision was taken by the Council last night following the assurance that the Government will lift the "lock out" and that teachers will not be asked to sign any declaration.

A meeting between the MUT and the Ministry of Education will take place early this week.

A.M. Farrugia
10th November 1984
General Secretary

Though the Council hoped that normalisation would be the next step this was far from what followed, as signalled by Dr Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici's speech at Sandhurst School, Pembroke. Alarmed by what had been said, the Council was convened on Sunday morning to deliberate on the Minister's indications regarding mass transfers and not transfers according to the exigencies of the service. The President described this as "a vile act, like a stab in the back". He believed that this move had been planned beforehand, but he warned that the Union should not let this decision serve as a weapon to break up the MUT. The Union needed to be wise in this circumstance as after the strike the teachers had "emerged as people of dignity". The President stressed that they should be leaders and the MUT Council should expose the Minister's "ungentlemanly act". Buhagiar feared that this ministerial decision would ruin the whole educational set up. The mediator too had been surprised with this news as he expected only transfers in the normal course. He gave the Union his word of honour on this and also confirmed that teachers were supposed to return to work on Monday. Now the Minister was saying that teachers were to go to the schools on Tuesday. The meeting ended with the President and General Secretary appealing to the Council members to uphold their image and to keep a grip on the situation. Alfred Buhagiar appealed to one and all, "We must not let our members lead us. We must lead them. We have to act as one coherent body."¹⁵⁶

On Monday, 12 November 1984, the Union and the Minister of Education met as scheduled and Mifsud Bonnici opened the talks by informing the MUT delegation that he could not start discussions unless the directive given to private school teachers was removed. Alfred Buhagiar retorted that the private schools issue had nothing to do with the Union's salary claim, and continued that the MUT's position was clear – it could not accept a situation where the resumption of talks on the salary claim were conditional to the removal of the directive to private school teachers. It was also stressed that this condition did not appear in the agreement previously reached with the Prime Minister.¹⁵⁷

Regarding the question of mass transfers, the Minister argued that these were not transfers but new postings made necessary for the teachers' own security. While the MUT protested strongly against these transfers, it made it clear that the reasons given in an attempt to justify them were "so transparent that one could easily see the vindictive element against those who went on strike," and what was being done violated the Industrial Relations Act. In conclusion some arrangements and assurances were agreed.

1. For the rest of the week the schools were to keep their half-day arrangements.
2. There was to be maximum police protection in schools.
3. Only the heads of school were to run the schools.
4. None of the student teachers were to be transferred.¹⁵⁸

As expected, on the first day, Tuesday, 13 November, some incidents were reported related to the teachers' return to the schools. In certain schools the transfer of responsibility was smooth with the volunteers handing over the class to the in-coming teachers. In other schools, however, the volunteers remained on premises and the situation was quite tense. The worst incidents took place in the Cottonera area and especially at Senglea Primary and Paola Secondary. At Paola where Mr Buhagiar had been posted, a group of about 20 persons hurled insults at him and at Mr H. Bonello – the teacher who was accompanying him and who also had been assigned to that school. Though during the day the situation in the school was tense, yet nothing serious happened. At the end of the school day, at 12.10 p.m. a sizable crowd congregated in front of the school where there was only one policeman on duty to monitor a shouting crowd of about 300 persons. While the Director of Education was informed, Mr Buhagiar felt it more prudent to remain in the school and wait for police re-enforcements to arrive. The head of school suggested that he may leave by the back door, but it seems that the caretaker overheard this advice and part of the crowd went to bang on the back door of the school. Eventually a police inspector and a police sergeant arrived and one other teacher, Mr J.D. Fenech, managed to get his car near the school, and Mr Buhagiar, escorted by the police, could reach the car. Though the mob manhandled the car, Mr Fenech managed to drive off without hurting anyone. Mr Bonello who was still in the school, decided to leave for his car parked some distance away. He was followed by some thugs who had recognised him and he was beaten. These also damaged his car and broke the windscreen. This teacher who was 58 years old at the time suffered from severe shock as a consequence of this ordeal.¹⁵⁹

Other incidents happened in Fgura, Zabbar, Vittoriosa and Senglea. Mr Buhagiar went straight to the Education Department to discuss the incidents with the Acting Director of Education. The staff of Senglea also went to the Education Department at Lascaris and a complete report was given to the Minister of Education. Dr Mifsud Bonnici sent them home on leave with pay until further arrangements could be made. In a meeting with the Minister the Union pointed out that one particular news item being broadcast by Xandir Malta was likely to create more trouble. The Minister concurred and phoned the station to stop this item at once. On the insistence of the Union, Dr Mifsud Bonnici also conceded to go on television to calm down the volunteers and parents, while launching an appeal for teachers to be left to work in peace. He also said that he would issue instructions to all volunteers to leave the schools. In the presence of the MUT delegation he also phoned the Commissioner of Police insisting on full protection for teachers in schools.¹⁶⁰

Another achievement – teachers' professional status

The general election of 9 May 1987 resulted in a change in Government with the victory of the Nationalist Party led by Dr Eddie Fenech Adami who thus became the new Prime Minister of Malta. Dr Ugo Mifsud Bonnici became the

new Minister of Education. Talks began soon after with the Union resuming negotiations on the state school teachers' salary claim. This issue had been dragging for so many years that the membership had now become quite disgruntled. When on 2 December 1987 the MUT inquired about the salary claim, the Minister of Education informed the Union's delegation that the Government had accepted its claim for professional status for teachers. This status, the Minister continued, would automatically be established through the new Education Act which was soon to be enacted. Teachers' salaries would thus improve without any repercussions for other grades. The Minister also informed the Union about the preparations to set up a Commission to reform the Public Service. The MUT expressed its strong reservations about the long delay which would obviously ensue if the issue was left to the enactment of legislation, and even longer if this Commission were to be entrusted with its consideration.¹⁶¹ In a following meeting the Minister gave details about the said legislation which was in preparation and which was to be passed on to the MUT in draft form before its publication. It was planned that this legislation would have been approved by Parliament before Easter of 1988. The Union insisted that the provisions envisaged should include backdating, to which request the Minister at that time was "rather evasive".¹⁶²

Talks also continued on the new Education Bill which was being drafted. The revision exercise for the teachers in state schools was to be implemented in two stages. The first involved the granting of professional status to teachers in terms of the new Education Act. This meant that teachers would be placed in the appropriate scale within the salary structure in place at the time. The second stage was the negotiation of a new reorganisation agreement which would lead to improved salaries in a new structure as determined by the Commission which had been set up to tackle the reform of the Public Service. The Union at that stage was insisting with the Minister to expedite the finalisation of the new Education Act.¹⁶³ This would at least grant teachers the long aspired-for professional status.

With the enactment of the new Education Act on 27 July 1988, teachers in both state and private schools were to be granted a teachers' warrant in line with their new professional status. The MUT examined the new application for the warrant and found no objection to its structure.¹⁶⁴ Thus teachers could apply for their warrant.

Another element of the Education Act concerned the introduction of a teachers' Code of Behaviour. Minister Mifsud Bonnici expressed the wish that this Code should be drawn up "in consultation and preferably in full agreement" with the MUT.¹⁶⁵ This Code of Behaviour (Ethics) was in fact forwarded to the Union and was discussed at length in the Council. The Code was generally acceptable to the MUT and was sent back with some amendments to the Minister in September 1988.¹⁶⁶ These amendments were accepted by the Minister of Education and the Code was thus finalised.¹⁶⁷ It was published in the following weeks in the form which had been accepted by the MUT.¹⁶⁸

A new millennium – trade union life continues

In 1995 a new institution was established under the name of Ġan Franġisk Abela Junior College. It replaced the Sixth Form and was put under the responsibility of the University of Malta. The launching and running of this institution created particular problems from its inception. One problem was related to the work resources which the academic staff of this new College were to be granted to support their professional output. The problem was created by the fact that the original negotiations with the University on this matter had been worked out on a complement of 400 full time academics. The fund had thus been of Lm400,000. The Minister of Education was not disposed to increase this sum, yet the University staff now included the Junior College members, which thus topped up the total number of academics to about 650. The MUT held that these new members from the Junior College were entitled to work resources and thus resolved to make representations on the matter. The Council also decided that if no progress was registered an action plan should be prepared.¹⁶⁹

The MUT continued to stress that the academic staff at the Junior College was no different from that working at the University in Tal-Qroqq. It maintained that the conditions of work were the same for both staffs and there was no status difference. With no positive developments in sight the Union decided to direct the Junior College staff to report for work two hours late on 7 October 1999.¹⁷⁰ With this action seemingly leaving little effect as no progress was registered, the Council deliberated on calling a four-hour strike the following week.¹⁷¹

With time matters began to settle and some work resources were handed to the Junior College staff. However the relationship between the two bodies within the same institution never seemed to normalise. The academic staff at Tal-Qroqq sought to set up their own union called UMASA, founded in 2001, but for negotiations connected with collective agreements both unions were to be present for the dealings. This practice continues to this day and both bodies are affiliate members of FOR.U.M. Unions Maltin. The FOR.U.M. President is at the time of writing Mr Marco Bonnici, who is also the President of the MUT.¹⁷²

Another institution which the MUT needed to address was the newly set up MCAST and by a letter of 25 January 2002 requested the Principal of this College to recognise the MUT as the union of the academic staff.¹⁷³ This recognition was confirmed by the MCAST Principal through a letter of reply dated 5 February 2002.¹⁷⁴ As soon as the Union had been recognition by this College negotiations began on a collective agreement. This was finalised with its signing on 16 March 2004. The MUT Council in fact approved the final draft agreement as this was considered to be a very positive one for the staff.¹⁷⁵ Representation continues to this day.

Regarding a third institution, the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS), by May 1999 the academic staff of this Institute joined the MUT and thus the Union requested discussions for a collective agreement for these new members. A

meeting was held with the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Tourism and with the Director of Tourism where the setting up of the Tourism Authority was discussed. It was agreed that as soon as this Authority was established talks would begin with it on the collective agreement.¹⁷⁶ Collective dealings thus took place and agreements were reached.

In the last decade till the 100 year birthday, the MUT was active in achieving the best conditions for the educators it represents. Success included stronger collective agreements for MCAST and ITS staff, and for a number of independent schools. Another collective agreement was signed for all Civil Service employees, while in 2012 the Teachers' Code of Ethics and Practice was also approved.¹⁷⁷ Between 2012 and 2019 the Union concluded seven agreements which included also those concerning the Church schools, while the process towards further agreements has also been started.

100 years old – and counting

The MUT has at the time of writing nearly 10,000 members. It has also moved out of Valletta to 759, St Joseph High Road, Hamrun. The new MUT offices were thus officially inaugurated on 9 October 2019. It continues to strengthen its two roles. The trade unionistic role is the oldest one as it started with the inception of the MUT in 1919. The professional role came much later and was triggered by the growing importance of the teaching profession and the requirements for a stronger and evermore efficient corps of educators.¹⁷⁸

The MUT is Registered Trade Union No. 1. It has a status to defend and a mission to uphold. The next 100 years are bound to bring their challenges and debates, but if the past century is a mirror for the future, the Malta Union of Teachers will be able to overcome them for the benefit of its membership as it has always done.



The centenary logo

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