

Collective agreement ends lengthy dispute at Malta College

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Relations between the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology and the Malta Union of Teachers were particularly strained during the academic year 2007–2008. The dispute arose over the signing of a new collective agreement and lecturers' workloads. Relations further deteriorated in May 2008 when lecturers refrained from all other duties except lecturing. However, the deadlock finally came to an end in July 2008 when a new collective agreement was signed.

Background to dispute

The previous collective agreement for the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST (<http://www.mcast.edu.mt>)) expired in December 2006. Talks on the new agreement were initiated in earnest between the employer and trade union side in June 2007. However, after the summer break, on 29 September 2007, the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT (<http://www.mut.org.mt>)) announced an industrial dispute. The main reason given was the alleged delay in talks for a new collective agreement, which, besides the issue of pay, was expected to address the matter of the ever-increasing workload of assignment corrections and form filling arising from the continuous assessment system adopted by MCAST.

Expressing surprise at MUT's announcement, the MCAST administration retorted that it was the union that had suspended talks on 2 August 2007, adding that it had contacted MUT several times with the aim of resuming discussions. For its part, MUT asserted that it had not received feedback on proposals it had put forward on 3 May 2007, as well as a long-awaited schedule for discussions. However, the factor which most probably spurred MUT into action was the issuing of applications by MCAST for new information and communication technologies (ICT) staff. In order to address the recurring problem of staff turnover in this area, the college was offering a much higher salary to prospective applicants. MUT claimed that this was in blatant breach of the collective agreement. Following the college's refusal to withdraw the applications, MUT ordered its members to hold a two-hour strike on 8 and 12 October. However, in the short interval between the scheduled strikes, negotiations were resumed and the second day of strike action was called off.

Developments in 2008

Four months later, MUT once again listed a series of complaints and declared an industrial dispute on 5 February 2008. The trade union criticised the intransigence of MCAST's management and the fact that its submissions were being ignored. MCAST responded by claiming that MUT seemed to reopen negotiations whenever agreement was about to be reached.

Matters came to a head on 4 April, when the union issued another declaration of industrial action due to the stalled talks. On 25 April, MCAST presented a newly revised agreement, but MUT deemed it unacceptable and ordered another two-hour strike on 30 April. MCAST expressed its surprise once again and insisted that the agreement had been discussed thoroughly with a delegation from MUT. However, matters between the two sides continued to deteriorate, especially after MUT accused the MCAST administration of breaching industrial relations ethics by issuing among lecturing staff a circular which was allegedly full of 'inaccuracies, half truths and misleading statements'. A subsequent conciliation meeting in the presence of the Director of Employment and Industrial Relations, Noel Vella, failed to settle the dispute, particularly after MUT claimed that the MCAST administration had stated it would not back down on the issue of lecturers' workload.

As a result, on 5 May, MUT issued a directive that lecturers should only give lectures and refrain from all other duties. This caused huge disruption at the college, with students bearing the brunt of the deadlock: assignments were not corrected; no feedback was given to students on the quality of their work prior to their exams; attendance records were not kept, which meant that students risked losing their stipend; and the mock exams and pending assignments were postponed indefinitely.

Agreement reached

On 20 May 2008, just before the summer break, MUT lifted the directives 'as a sign of goodwill and in consideration of students' concerns', after it noted positive developments during a meeting with the college's Principal and Chief Executive Officer, Maurice Grech, at the office of the Director of Employment and Industrial Relations.

Two months later, on 24 July, MCAST and MUT signed a new collective agreement for academic staff. MUT expressed its satisfaction with the successful conclusion of the long and difficult negotiations. The trade union stated that the agreement will result in better employment conditions, improved salary structures and greater opportunities for career progression.

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