

The Maltese teacher corps: from humble beginnings to unionisation – some observations

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The teacher corps in Malta has originated from very humble beginnings. In fact one cannot speak of a corps before the British period and even then, it is only from the late 1830s that the semblance of a formal teacher body can somehow be discerned. Yet, as time elapsed and teachers became more and more aware of their particular position, the situation began to gradually evolve. This process finally resulted in the setting up of the Malta Union of Teachers (M.U.T.) in the early years of the twentieth century. Teachers in Malta could now speak of one unified body as the M.U.T. gave the teaching corps protection, identity and the necessary focus for the corps' consolidation and professionalisation.

In the early decades of British rule – that is the first quarter of the nineteenth century – there was little schooling to speak of. There functioned only a small number of mainly private individuals and religious bodies that ran fee-paying education establishments who performed the task of teaching children some form of academic content. These individuals were definitely not trained for the job; in fact some may be considered as having had quite a dubious academic grounding by today's standards. Yet even those who could be defined as teachers in a more realistic sense, possessed little academic and even less pedagogical and methodological baggage. The dearth of teachers and teaching can easily be discerned from the observation that "In none of the villages is a public school established, the children grow up like other animals, ie. they eat, drink, work and sleep."¹ Something definitely needed to be done as this was a situation which cried for a remedy and, with the passing of the years, the British authorities began to realise as much. The setting up of a good system of schooling could serve a double purpose. Firstly, it could help

the British coloniser to establish a more friendly relationship with the locals and secondly, the people could get a little more education if this was for free. The contemporary author, E. Blanquiere suggested something on these lines when he argued that, "...should the British Government, impressed with a due sense of its importance, give to a system of public instruction that encouragement it deserves..." there would be a gradual decrease in the "jealousy and distrust so evident between us and the natives at present..."² This plea which was published in 1813 had, however, to wait till the third decade of the nineteenth century when a Royal Commission was sent to Malta in 1836.

At the time the two Royal Commissioners, John Austin and George C. Lewis, were carrying out their investigations, education in Malta was at a very low ebb – arguably the situation could hardly be much worse. The Royal Commission actually confirmed this through the observation: "The elementary instruction in Malta is small in quantity and bad in quality. In our opinion, it will never be extended or improved to any considerable extent, unless its extension and improvement is aided by the Government."³ The same Commission sustained further its observations on the poor state of both schools and teachers when commenting on higher education in Malta. Austin and Lewis remarked that, "The difficulty of finding teachers properly qualified for the business is one of the principal obstacles to the efficiency of the University and Lyceum."⁴

Teachers were the kingpin to a good and efficient educational service. Naudi made the point when he argued that it was well to observe that whoever wanted to become a teacher needed to adopt "*sentimenti tutto paterni*



Bust of Canon Paolo Pullicino, Director of Elementary Schools, found in front of the Education Division Head Office, Floriana

verso i suoi Pupilli" (paternal sentiments towards his pupils). Naudi opined that the teacher needed to return to being a child himself so as to be understood by his class. These were valid words indeed; however in Malta of his time, these were next to impossible to achieve.⁵ Teachers – the few that existed – did not have any training in the carrying out of their duties. There were no training colleges; indeed there was no form of apprenticeship. No teacher body could be identified till teachers became aware of their potential, skills, and abilities. These qualities and the realisation of their existence could only emerge with time and training. The first schools set up as a result of the 1836 Royal Commissioners' suggestions, were to be the spark that set off the development of the teacher class and its build-up into a strong, unified body. This process took about eighty years and culminated in 1919, when teachers finally organised themselves into a trade union to seek and strive for a brighter future.

Recruitment, appointment and classification

For whatever reason individuals aspired to become teachers, from the 1840s these

experienced a gradual standardisation of the methods, requirements and procedure for recruitment. The Government of Malta was the sole authority that could set and regulate teacher intakes into the various educational institutions. However, initially the mode of recruitment was erratic and this did not help much to give status to the teacher corps. By the 1850s the regulations became more refined but the teachers' image in Maltese society still suffered due to reasons such as the suspicion of favouritism in appointments and promotions caused by political and social exigencies. This unfavourable disposition towards the teacher corps was compounded by the practice of engaging anyone who had even a negligible capability to teach, regardless of age and academic background. This latter situation came about especially with the expansion of schools in many localities especially under the Directorship of Can. Paolo Pullicino (1850–80), as this rapid development in the sector created the problem of demand and supply. There were now more posts to fill than teachers to fill them. Those willing to start a career in the sector were more than welcome. This meant that even those still in their tender years – that is in the early teens – had to be recruited. Thus staffs in schools were a mixed group of ages; abilities, attitudes and experiences, and this further projected a wary impression as to what a teacher corps should be made of.

In this early stage of school expansion, even before the 1850s, some seem to have regarded teaching posts as attractive opportunities for employment. In 1847 for example, a mastership for the primary school of Cospicua, attracted eleven candidates, three of whom possessed a doctorate!⁶ And this was no isolated instance. For the post of assistant teacher the following year, another four candidates applied.⁷ Once the candidate was selected, the appointment was provisional for one year, subject to confirmation. If the appointee satisfied the superiors' expectations, s/he would be placed on the permanent establishment. For instance a mistress for the school of the Gozitan village of Nadur was put on a year's probation, "her appointment not to be confirmed until the progress of her scholars shall have been ascertained."⁸ This probation period only applied to new appointees; a transfer to a different school did not entail a new probation

period or further proof of teaching proficiency.

By 1850 the Government ran 24 primary schools in Malta and another four in Gozo, besides a night school at Zabbar and the House of Industry for female orphans in Floriana. As testified by Can. Pullicino on his appointment as Director of Primary Schools, the male teachers in these schools had varying levels of academic ability, and possessed very few skills in the methods of teaching, as they had never been given any training to this effect. The females were found lacking in both method and management skills. For Pullicino this emanated from the backward state of education of those social classes from which women teachers were recruited.⁹ This gave rise to his idea that teachers should thus be subdivided into three 'Classes'. Each 'Class' would correspond to one of three orders of schools based on size and importance. This, Pullicino hoped, would spur teachers to improve their performance, enticed by the prospect of promotion.

Pullicino transformed this idea into a concrete process when he specified how this would be carried out. The Class system was for those already serving in the schools. For recruits, considering the low level of ability teachers possessed at the time, Pullicino wanted to introduce a comparatively demanding and ambitious standard. As the system was to be introduced in a gradual way, it started with the male candidates who now would need a diploma or certificate of ability corresponding to the post, besides the presentation of testimonials of good moral and civil conduct. The female candidates would then fall under the same regulations once the system was finalised.¹⁰

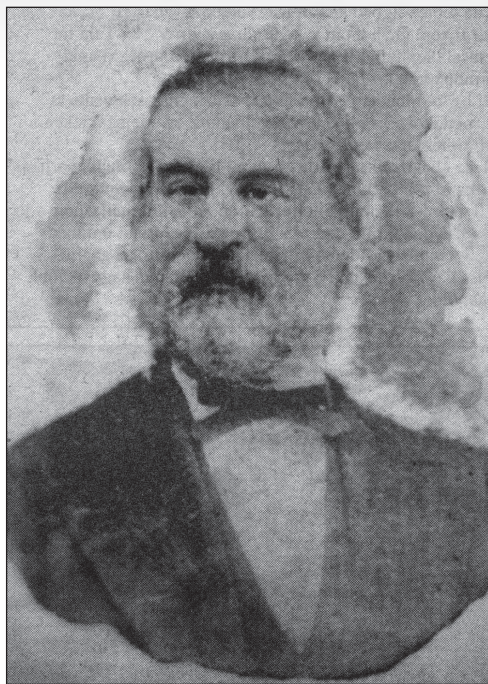
Thus, in Pullicino's plan, teachers would first be appointed to the Third Division of a Class grade and every two years the candidates would be examined by the director. This would result in either a promotion or demotion; otherwise the teacher would remain in the same Division for another period of time. Even entering into the lowest scale was to be done through a *concorso* – a selective process that would pick the best candidate.¹¹ Such requirements were meant to give status to primary school teachers as the vigorous requirements would reflect positively on the appointees and boost their

esteem within the occupational hierarchy.

Even the confirmation of teachers in their post after the probation period elapsed, with time became stricter and more stringent. Pullicino confirmed candidates only if they satisfied his set of criteria. He was adamant to close one eye; any eye for that matter. An example of this can be gleaned from the case of the mistress of the Siggiewi School who was found inefficient in her output. Her probation period was extended by three months – in no way a sign of benevolence from the director – as Pullicino stated that, "...I hope in the meantime to be able to recommend for such a place a more competent person."¹²

Teaching grades in the second half of the nineteenth century were divided into fixed and temporary posts. While the 'fixed' assistant (as the teachers were called at the time) could more easily get promoted to a full teachership (master or mistress of the school), the temporary assistant had a harder time. To get a promotion/ appointment to school mistress for the Rabat (Malta) School, a call for applications was issued amongst the temporary assistants. Seventeen pupil-mistresses from different primary schools applied. After examinations (in History; Italian and English Reading, Writing and Grammar; Arithmetic; and the practice of teaching in class) spread over three days were held, one candidate was chosen. This was "a young girl of seventeen years of age, of excellent character, and trained from several years as Temporary Assistant."¹³

As time went by directors changed, and so did the procedure of appointment. During Sigismondo Savona's term as director (1880–87) the process to fill teacher posts became even more stringent. For example, in one instance, twelve assistant teachers sat for a two-day examination in the English and Italian languages (Reading, Dictation, Grammar and Composition), Arithmetic, Writing, the elements of Geography, and the History of England and Malta. The five selected appointees then had to abide by a Government Circular of 13 January 1885 and thus had to pass a medical examination. In this case Savona managed to obtain an exemption if these particular appointees presented a medical certificate of fitness from a Government Medical Officer.¹⁴ And standards continued to rise. Thus in the



*Director of Education and Rector of the University
Antonio Annetto Caruana*

following year (1886), School Management was added to the above-mentioned examinable subjects. Besides, teachers under whom the candidates had served were to provide a certificate of good conduct and ability. Therefore, for one particular post, the examination was set in two stages. Out of the original eighteen, six managed to obtain more than fifty per cent of the marks in the first part and thus pass to the second part. The assistant teacher who finally made it had five years experience behind him and was certified fit through the medical examination.¹⁵ Such instances suffice to indicate that where possible, appointments were given only after searching and serious examinations that testified to the candidates' abilities in class and their knowledge of subject content.

With the appointment of a new director to the headship of the Education Department, Antonio Annetto Caruana (1887–96), a re-classification of the teaching staff in the Government schools was launched. At the top of the teaching hierarchy there now was the 'Teacher'. Immediately following there was the 'Fixed Assistant Teacher' (two posts in all). Then came the 'Assistant Teacher' divided in three Classes. The hierarchy ended with the Monitorial Class. This classification did not include auxiliary teachers such as those of Drawing, Wood Carving and Modelling.¹⁶ Regarding the Monitorial Class, this was one

of those elements that created a most serious negative effect on the status and image of the teaching body. The monitors and monitresses were in reality grown-up children or young adolescents whose job was to help in the teaching of the younger pupils in the primary schools. These posts were the solution invented to mitigate the lack of proper teaching staff. Those joining or remaining within the Education Department were a perennial problem as supply never satisfied the demand; thus the Monitorial Grade was the compromise for the shortfall in qualified teaching personnel. Monitors and monitresses started at a tender age and their output was thus compromised by their lack of maturity. For example, in an 1895 list of appointments, one could identify a 15 year old and another two 12 years of age! The criterion for selection was based on the fact "that each has passed successfully the school examination, and is now first in Class." Even the Governor of Malta thought they were too young and solicited the director to try and find older boys and girls for the job. Yet A.A. Caruana pointed out that even with the best endeavour, in the villages it was difficult to find better candidates.¹⁷ With an intake of this quality – unqualified, without real training and, of such a tender age – teacher numbers were swelled by elements that were of negligible academic stature. This reality was of no real contribution to status, esteem and importance to the occupation. Though some were trained and qualified, a good percentage was not, and these tended to predominate on the school scene due to their sheer number.

During Napoleone Tagliaferro's term as director (1897–1904), the Monitorial Grade was kept, but it was now called the 'Apprentice' Class – just a cosmetic alteration. The differences between the teacher grade (head of school) and the monitorial class were so stark that the lack of homogeneity in abilities and competencies could not be missed. To become a head of school the candidate had to pass an examination made up of quite a handful of subjects. Thus, for example, six assistant teachers from the training school of Malta and eight from that of Gozo who competed for the post of head teacher for the school of Mosta in 1895, sat for English, Italian, Arithmetic, History of England and of Malta, Geography, Calligraphy, Sewing and School Management.¹⁸ This shows what pretensions there were for the highest posts,

therefore denoting the competencies expected from assistant teachers who aspired to rise to such posts. On the other hand, what monitorial candidates needed was knowledge of the alphabet and the rudiments of reading. They would then have their weekly lessons under their superior teachers and also attended the training school once a week. To become assistant teachers, they needed to pass an examination on the subjects taught in the training school.¹⁹ All teaching grades would be found in the schools, but the distinction which the administrators were surely aware of, may not have been – and most probably was not – grasped and understood by the general public. Thus the association with professional competence may have been quite blurred with so many different levels of competence in the same school.

The teaching occupation suffered from a chronic shortage of good teachers, indeed, it suffered from a nearly total absence of recruits. This was the case in the first decades of the twentieth century. Francis Reynolds as Director of Government Elementary Schools (1913–

20) expressed the veracity and gravity of the situation when he revealed that in the period 1915–17 only three suitable candidates had been found for a teaching post! Conversely, between October 1916 and October 1917, twenty-three teachers had left the Department, and between 1914 and 1917 not even one male candidate was found in the town schools. Reynolds therefore had to admit that classes in town schools were thus entrusted to “raw country lads, frequently with misery to themselves and little advantage to their pupils.” Therefore the outcome of all this was that the female teachers – or more correctly monitresses – had to be assigned to the lower classes in boys’ schools. This also necessitated the re-classification of the salaries for the female staff.²⁰

Salaries

This lack of teachers comes as no surprise when one considers the paltry salary structure existing in the pre-unionisation period. If *Il Portafoglio Maltese* is to be taken as an indication of this, the paper in one issue of 1858 complained about the “*meschinissimo salario*” [highly miserable salary] of the teaching staff. The paper showed its disappointment for the insensitivity of the Government towards the hard-working teachers and their toil to educate children. A reference to the required patience was also stressed. The writer then argued that teachers could not be treated like porters, messengers, guards and police constables, who were all, in fact, paid better wages. The teachers’ salary was barely enough for them to buy a decent dress in which they could carry out their duties.²¹ It was of no wonder that teaching was unattractive and thus not many were found to carry it out. Yet, there was no way how teachers in the nineteenth century could demand better pay. There was no teacher organisation, only teachers. What *Il Portafoglio Maltese* wrote was just one example among a multitude of articles in local newspapers, all to the same effect. Teachers tried to help themselves by supplementing their meagre salaries whenever they could. The most typical extra work was of course private lessons. *L’Amor Patrio* in the mid-1800s underlined the plight of one teacher who was transferred from Valletta to Qormi. The paper remarked that this teacher was now literally ruined. He had a numerous family and



Director of Education Napoleone Tagliaferro

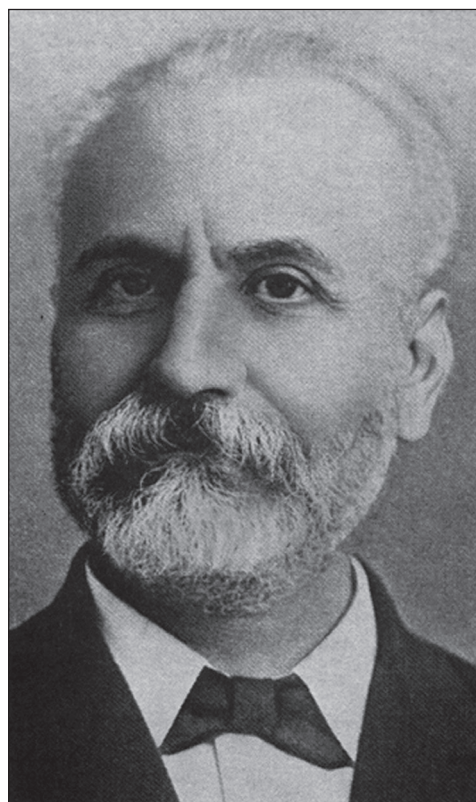
his fixed pay was not enough. However, "He did help himself in his free hours by giving private lessons. At Casal Curmi it is impossible to find scholars."²²

This was not merely criticism from outsiders. The official opinion was very much on the same lines. When Can. Pullicino proposed better pay for the teaching staff in the 1860s, he made clear the objectives for such a request. The Director felt it necessary "to more urgently recommend the increase to their salary, not only to better their condition, but also to have them not dissatisfied with their position considering themselves deluded in their expectations."²³ This was no novel situation; surely not for that period but neither for more recent times. As Pollard has aptly observed, "The rewards of teaching have never been financial."²⁴ Teachers' salaries have for a very long time been small, even meagre. Notwithstanding unionisation from 1919, the Maltese teaching corps has experienced this pecuniary condition not only along the nineteenth century but no less during a long stretch of the twentieth century.²⁵ This has affected their esteem for their own selves and their status *vis-à-vis* other occupations. In Malta in the 1800s, the lack of a decent salary was caused by the perennial problem of stringent public expenditure.²⁶ No wonder that there was a constant movement of young men from the teaching ranks to other jobs as soon as opportunities offered themselves. Just one instance will suffice to illustrate this reality. A certain Charles James Lowell in 1876 put forward a petition to request a transfer from the post of fixed assistant teacher to that of marshal in the courts of law. He had "faithfully served the Government" for 16 years. However, the annual £30 salary "not being sufficient to meet the daily expenses he is obliged to incur" constrained him to ask for the transfer.²⁷

Lowell was not exaggerating; he was not pretentious in his demands. He was realistic, factual and down to earth. None other than the Royal Commissioner Patrick J. Keenan was to confirm this. In his 1880 Report, Keenan was perplexed "how these poor teachers can thrive to clothe themselves as respectable as their official position demands of them, to find themselves with proper nourishment – bread being said to be dearer in Malta than in London."²⁸ On the basis of Keenan's observations and through

the hard work to adjust the salary structure entailed by Director of Education Savona, the situation improved slightly in the following years. As Apple put it, "many teachers ... work in conditions that would be laughable were they not so tragic."²⁹ And salaries were not only a means by which to live better. They signified much more. As the nineteenth century politician Salvatore Cachia Zammit argued, it was imperative to grant the teacher corps a respectable remuneration as it would have been beneficial to them, "whose importance and rank the public would necessarily estimate by the amount of their salary as being the stamp indicating the value of their services."³⁰

Maltese teachers could not remain much longer in a situation where, though those in power knew what they needed, yet no one seemed willing to do anything about it. The Government was the least likely to take the first step. As Bloomer, has observed in the British context, "the money required to finance a 1 per cent increase in salaries of teachers is sufficient to increase the pay of local authority manual workers by 1½ per cent or the pay of doctors by several times that amount." Thus "to Government intent on restricting public spending there can be few options which have as large an immediate effect as depressing the



Sigismondo Savona – politician and educator



The Maltese politician Salvatore Cachia Zammit

level of the teachers' salary awards."³¹ If no one was going to take the first step, some teachers realised that they had to do it themselves.

Towards unionisation

Teachers could not but react in the face of all these afflictions. At this point they sensed the urge to unite formally into one corps. They felt what Lortie terms the 'organisational imperative' and which Hoyle and John consider "crucial to the further emergence of teachers as an organised occupational group...."³² Unionisation and unity came through a process of sensitisation. By the turn of the twentieth century, the teacher corps in Malta, on its own steam, set the ball rolling towards the formation of a corporate body that could help them achieve what they considered to be their right, but which no one seemed prepared to grant them voluntarily.

It was in 1902 that the germ of unionisation took its first shape. The Inspector of Elementary Schools presented the Government with the Draft Regulations for what was being termed as the 'Malta Teachers' Guild'. This had the aim of helping distressed teachers and their families. The idea went further. A Circulating

Library was also to be attached to this Guild "to promote a spirit of mutual improvement and self culture." The Guild was meant to terminate a practice, which was "laudable...but humiliating to respectable persons..." as, when a teacher died, the colleagues collected from among themselves a sum of money to help the family of the deceased. Thus it would be the Guild's objective to promote the teachers' spirit of self-reliance, by encouraging them to put aside funds for any eventual misfortune, sickness or death.³³

This was not an organisation originating from the grass roots but it was a step taken by the educational authorities for the benefit of teachers. In fact, the managing committee was to be formed from all the different grades of the Elementary Schools Department³⁴ with the head of the Department as *ex officio* president. After two years nothing had been done. The answer to Enrico Magro's query showed that there seemed to be little real resolve on the part of the Government to do anything for teachers. Magro, as the official responsible for the primary schools, had pointed out that, "several teachers have anxiously enquired of late" about the formation of this Guild. The reply he got from the colonial authorities was that the Government was still working on a decision.³⁵

It took more than a decade before teachers were introduced to another initiative, this time in the form of a Teachers' Mutual Aid Society (T.M.H.S.) with objectives similar to the stillborn Guild of 1902. The management committee was also to be formed from staff members of the elementary schools but the head of the Department was now to be appointed honorary president.³⁶ This was a development of significance as the T.M.H.S. was to be run solely by teachers for the benefit of teachers. Its interests were the wellbeing of the teacher corps. The Department had given them this new role through which they could demonstrate and practise their administrative and coordinating abilities and by so doing they could get a first feeling of unity and cooperation. Of course, up till now this evolved only around the function of basic mutual help, as this Society was "entirely charitable, based on the principle that the richer should help the poorer."³⁷ This Society worked towards relieving the poverty experienced by a number of teachers especially during the

First World War years (1914-18). By 1918 the financial position of a large number of teachers was stretched to the limits. The Government granted a free ladle of soup to a maximum of 120 teachers and these were selected from those most deserving, that is, the more desperate cases. The teaching corps had to pass through the humiliating procedure of applying to the secretary of the T.M.H.S. for consideration.³⁸ Those persons who were selected were entitled to one portion of soup per day till the end of the month. Each portion cost 2d. (1.9 euro cents). The monthly bill was to be handed to the T.M.H.S. on payday to be paid out of its funds.³⁹

This was a situation that could not but show to what extremes teachers had been stretched. And if this was not enough, the Commission appointed to review salaries of Government workers recommended an increase for all employees except teachers. As Camilleri Flores aptly notes, "This strange omission might seem to suggest that in 1919 teachers constituted a relatively highly paid elite among Maltese workers."⁴⁰ But of course this could not be farther from the truth. Ellul Galea considers this anomaly the result of the absence of a teachers' union.⁴¹ No unified front could be presented and no one could speak to the authorities in the name of the teaching corps. This was an eye opener for whoever was keen enough to note and had the

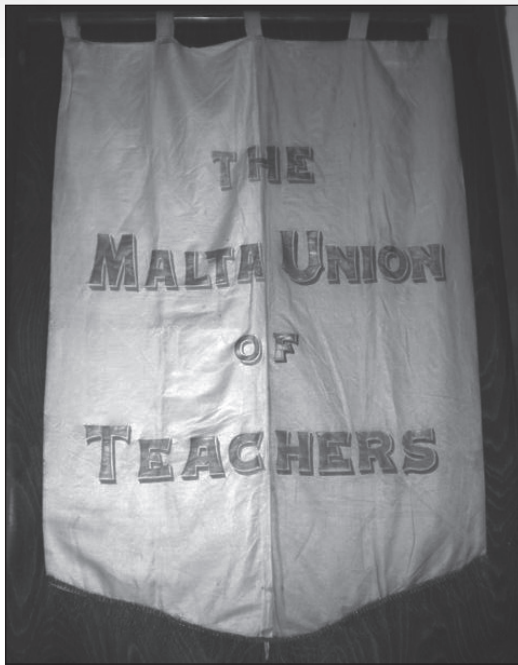


The young teacher Antonio Galea, founder of the Malta Union of Teachers

stamina to react. Though many may have taken note of the reality, there was one young teacher who seemed particularly keen on taking up the initiative; the step that would set the stage for the creation of a teachers' movement, which is still very much active to this day. This was Antonio Galea, an enterprising teacher who found the support of the two head teachers of the most important schools at the time – those of Valletta and Floriana. Together they initiated the spin to unionisation. Galea's initiative caused the General Meeting of 22 November 1919 with an agenda comprising two items: the formation of a teachers' union and the examination of a new Scheme of Salaries which was being proposed by the Government at the time.⁴²

From what was said during this meeting revealing facts about the Maltese teachers' situation came out loud and clear. As one of the speakers, the head teacher Rogantino Cachia, pointed out, teachers had been looked down upon by Maltese society "for no other reason than" the low salaries they received and thus, "they were considered of little worth." These Government employees were often called "*habba assistant*" and "*habba surmast*" (the term '*habba*' referred to the least-value coin in the Maltese currency – the third farthing). Cachia even claimed that one particular young man had not been accepted by the officers of the Malta Militia "for the great blot on his character" of having once been an elementary school teacher." The Government itself considered this class of workers "as low Employees" who were not deemed fit to attend official receptions.⁴³ Regarding their financial situation, Cachia made it clear that teachers were "entitled to receive living wages." The Governor himself had donated £50 from his own pocket in aid of the T.M.H.S. in its work among impoverished teachers. The speaker emphasised that, "it was indeed very humiliating Teachers obliged to stoop down so low as to receive portions of *minestra* [vegetable soup] like paupers."⁴⁴

This speech crystallised the teachers' double plight. Status was low, with social esteem even more so, and their salaries were a mockery. Not only were the people in authority usually unsympathetic, but more than that, they looked suspiciously on the teachers' new stance. Francis Reynolds, the Director of Government Elementary Schools, claimed that, after



The original banner of Malta's first teachers' union

Governor Methuen had commiserated their low wages, "many teachers had grown in self-importance, and dreamt solely of higher pay and better prospects but not of further efforts or greater efficiency." Therefore Reynolds argued that, "it would be a grave error to overlook indulgently the tone of the language used by Mr Cachia" in this November 22nd speech.⁴⁵

This date, 22 November 1919, is considered as the birth of the Malta Union of Teachers and from that moment, the Union's standpoint was clear as also were its objectives. Amongst the list

of first demands, salaries had to be raised for both head and assistant teachers; the increases were to be not less than £5 for the former and not less than £3 for the others. Besides, all acquired rights were not to be lost and night school duties were to be considered as distinct from those of the day school.⁴⁶

In one month, 630 out of the 721 teachers had already joined the Union. In Rogantino Cachia's words, "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..."⁴⁷

Maltese teachers have come a long way, passed through much hardship and suffered bad sorts. Before 1919 they could never defend themselves, as they were not an organised body. Each one was on his/her own in their classes, in their schools. Yet, when the spark finally set the events in motion, they answered the call as they realised that unionisation and organisation were the answer to their plight. Borrowing from Karl Marx a phrase he very much linked with the emancipation of workers, from a class on their own, teachers had become a class for their own. Through their becoming a united corps, their sorts could change, as in fact they gradually improved along the twentieth century, not least achieving professional status in 1988, thus establishing themselves amongst the Maltese professional bodies.

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