

## Challenging “Might is right” on Workers’ Day

Marco Bonnici, President of the Malta Union of Teachers

Few days away from Workers’ Day celebrated annually on 1<sup>st</sup> May, I shall share some thoughts regarding the intricate roles, challenges and difficulties experienced by worker representatives in an ever-changing collective bargaining scenario.

### The power imbalance

Negotiations involve two sides, the official side and the union side. One would expect that both sides are equal during negotiations or at least they consider themselves as such. This is not the case and it can never be. The official side has much more power than the union side. They have higher rankings in the organisational structure, they possess the inside information, they have support personnel, they have access to all data systems, they have the constant backing of a strongly elected government. On the other hand, the union side has the knowledge of the sector, which is often lacking from the official side, have the backing of employees and can resort to industrial actions. These three factors balance the role of the trade union with the official side. If any of these are absent, the power imbalance would be considerable and the union would be ineffective.

### Comparisons are odious

We negotiate with the government as the employer, with government entities, with the Church authorities on behalf of its separate schools and with the separate private employers that run independent schools. Despite the thousands of employees affected by these agreements, the employees are still considered a sector of the national workforce. Sectors compare different unions in the way they negotiate their respective agreements. The official side compares within and amongst sectors; individual members compare with their colleagues at the same workplace, with colleagues in different workplaces or having different grades. These comparisons render trade union negotiations extremely difficult because the official side would not be negotiating the particular agreement on its own but it would be comparing continuously the effect of negotiations on other agreements, thus limiting the gains which would otherwise be achieved.

### First come first served

At times, negotiations becomes a first come first served scenario. A particular request for improved conditions of work is not accepted by the official side simply because another agreement which the official side had signed previously with another union does not include the said provision. At times, it works differently by having a union copying a particular condition of work and requesting it in its agreement after learning about it from another agreement signed by the official side. This is one of the reasons why it is very difficult to obtain copies of sectoral or collective agreements of other unions. For this reason, some unions never provide a copy of the agreement to their members, which is clearly not the case with MUT.

### Spokes in the wheels

Despite all the personal respect and honesty expressed by both sides during negotiations, there are always hidden hands that derail negotiations. They may come from within the negotiations table or from outsiders and motives vary. The official side or its extended arm outside negotiations may have an interest in accelerating negotiations so that demands of a union are not met. They may campaign to put the union in bad light with its members or with the general public. They may also spread false

information about negotiations. Furthermore, they may initiate a personal attack to discredit the union or its lead negotiator and they may act in all licit and illicit ways to reduce the power of the union. On the other hand, the same tactics may be used by a competing trade union whose interests are to derail negotiations for its own personal gain. There are then other professions unionised or otherwise who want to protect their respective territory and do not want that another profession obtains any of their benefits. These would also attempt to sabotage negotiations. Finally, there are private employers who model their salaries on those of the government and who would find increased difficulties in their operations and profit margins if they were forced to move at par with improved financials issued by the government to its employees.

Yet, despite all the challenges and difficulties, we continue to negotiate on behalf of our members, even if an appreciation of one's work is not always forthcoming and we are often in the line of fire between employees and management. Best wishes to all employees of good faith on 1<sup>st</sup> May - Workers' Day.