

## Bulletin on the Signs of the Times:

Education, Media and Culture

October 2024 – December 2024

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### Stories

In relation to **Education, Media and Culture**, three main themes led the news between the months of October and December 2024, these are: (1) **The MCAST Dispute**; (2) **The Fort Chambray Development** and (3) **The Jubilee of Hope Celebrations**.

The first story set in this bulletin relates to the ongoing **MCAST dispute**. At the beginning of the new scholastic year, on the initiative of the Malta Union of Teachers, MCAST lecturers held a protest. The lecturers complained that negotiations over the new collective agreement have been delayed for too long, as the previous one expired almost three years ago. During the protest, the MUT also announced that newer, stricter directives will be introduced. These directives instructed lecturers to limit their work to essential tasks (such as lecturing), boycott events, halt research activities and not attend staff meetings and school ceremonies. Directives to withhold grades for assessments and assignments from students and from the administration and to stop providing supervision for students' theses were reintroduced after they were revoked in June. The union also refused to negotiate with the new principal, Mr Stephen Vella, and stated that, instead, it was willing to carry out negotiations directly with the government, therefore, bypassing the new management. This decision was taken after the new principal proposed that the collective agreement is to be decided through an arbitration process rather than through direct negotiations.

#### Previous Story Update – MCAST Principle

In September 2024, Mr Stephen Vella, who previously held several managerial and leadership roles within the college, was appointed as the new principal at MCAST. He replaced Joachim James Calleja who, in June, claimed that his position as principal had not been terminated, but that his contract was not renewed after he reached retirement age. In August, *The Times of Malta* reported that Prof Calleja disputed his termination with his employer and education authorities in front of the Industrial Tribunal, claiming that his contract had been terminated prematurely. This court action was carried out following a report by the Commissioner of Education, who concluded that Prof Calleja's termination was unjust and unreasonable.

In October, approximately 100 MCAST students also held a protest outside the college. During the protest, the students demanded a swift resolution to this dispute between the MUT and the Government. They stated that they were caught in the middle of this dispute through the ongoing

directives, which have been in place since November 2023 and which have greatly impacted their education. During the protest students also expressed support for lecturers and their demands for fairer wages. Concern over this dispute was also expressed by the Commissioner for Education. The Commissioner said that union directives should be reasonable and that they should not interfere with students' rights to a proper education, as those who are set to graduate will be unable to do so due to their grades being withheld. The Commissioner also urged for the directives which are impacting graduate students to be lifted and called for increased efforts to conclude negotiations on the new collective agreement. In November, two student protests were held once more, one by Mosta MCAST students and one by Qormi and Paola MCAST students.

In December, the Commissioner for Education reported that students who successfully passed last year's examinations and were eligible for graduation were officially able to graduate. During this month, details of the proposals and requests made by the MUT were published by the Office of the Prime Minister Permanent Secretary Dr Joyce Cassar. Dr Cassar described how most of the proposals made by the MUT, including those regarding the financial package, were accepted by the MCAST management. Disagreements were over several proposals which include: 10 extra days of vacation leave, a €400 allowance for re-sit exam corrections, doubling the existing work-from-home provisions to 16 hours per week and capping the number of students for diploma courses. The *Times of Malta* (TOM) reported that talks over the collective agreement had been stalled, as Dr Cassar refused to continue the talks until all directives were revoked. At the time that this report is being written, the disputes are still ongoing.

The second story set relates to the **Fort Chambray Development**. In July, the newspapers reported that two applications for development within the site of Fort Chambray were submitted to the Planning Authority (PA). One of the applications proposed that 150 residential units, and a 5-star hotel with 64 ensuite rooms and 50 apartments are built within the site, while the second application proposed to dismantle the British Barracks and place its façade elsewhere within the building. Four NGOs (Din l-Art Helwa Ghawdex, Ghawdix, Wirt Ghawdex and Moviment Graffiti) voiced their objection to these applications, since the site is largely made up of Grade 1 and 2 scheduled buildings, buildings which are an important part of the country's heritage. These NGOs emphasised that this project, particularly the dismantling of the British Barracks, will be detrimental to the historical and cultural integrity of Fort Chambray. They also explained that the approval of these applications would violate the *Fort Chambray Development Brief's Existing Buildings Retention Policy* which states that the historic sites within the fort (including the British Barracks) are to be retained, restored and conserved. These NGOs also provided an alternative to the project and insisted that, despite being neglected for a long time, there was still time and opportunity to restore and salvage the building. They suggested that the needed restoration and a repurposing of the fort could aid with its conservation, serve the community and attract sustainable tourism. In November, activists, along with these NGOs, organised a protest at Fort Chambray, demanding that the site is returned to the public. The Gozo-based NGOs also requested the PA to schedule the British Barracks to protect them from being dismantled, however this request was turned down. The Maltese committee for the International Council on Monuments and Sites also voiced its concerns, claiming that the dismantling and relocation of the barracks goes against good conservation practices. A similar point was made by another NGO Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna, which pointed out that a similar relocation was carried out at Tigné Point in Sliema and this turned out to be a failed attempt at such a practice. On the other hand, the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage (SCH)

had no objection to the dismantling of the British Barracks. The two applications were approved by the PA on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December.

The third story set relates to the **Jubilee of Hope celebrations** which were inaugurated on Christmas Eve by Pope Francis, through the opening of the Holy Door of Saint Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. The theme of hope, picked by the Pope, reflects the call for spiritual renewal and the commitment to transform the world. Catholics from around the world were invited to receive a plenary indulgence by passing through the Holy Door after confessing, receiving Communion and praying. In Malta, these celebrations were inaugurated on the 29<sup>th</sup> of December by Archbishop Charles J. Scicluna through a moment of prayer at St Paul's Grotto, Rabat. Following the prayers, a pilgrimage was carried out from St Paul's Grotto to the Mdina Cathedral, where Mass was celebrated. During the Jubilee Year, faithful will also be granted a plenary indulgence through prayer, participation in the sacraments, visits to one of a number of select churches and charitable actions. A similar inauguration was carried out for the Gozo diocese by Bishop Anton Teuma, who led a procession from the chapel of St Barbara to the Cathedral, followed by Mass.

## Commentary

The three-year delay for MCAST management and the MUT to reach an agreement on the new collective agreement for lecturers is unacceptable. Three years of delays have denied lecturers appropriate working conditions and a fair wage, which is to be on par with that of other educators teaching at their level. This delay has also resulted in directives which are impacting students' education, with some having been unable to advance to the following year, graduate or start working in their chosen profession. Instead of focusing on their studies and their education, these students are forced to protest and endure a situation which is out of their control and through no fault of their own. On the other hand, lecturers can only effectively demand for better working conditions through these directives.

With regards to the development in Fort Chambray, State authorities seem to have failed to listen to the community, the public and professionals and instead took actions in favour of private and commercial interests. The SCH also failed to fulfil its mission to preserve the heritage structures within the site of Fort Chambray, as it found no objection despite what professionals from other organisations were suggesting, particularly with regards to the relocation of the British Barracks. Now that the applications have been approved, it is the responsibility of these authorities to ensure that the Grade 1 and 2 scheduled structures within the site are preserved during and after the development works.

The celebrations for the Jubilee which inaugurated the Holy Year, bring to the fore an important message for hope, which is a relevant one, both for the world and for our country. For this Jubilee, Pope Francis calls for all Catholics to bring hope to the poor, the lonely, the victims of war and violence, and all those who are suffering.

## Reflection

The delay to finalise the MCAST lecturers' collective agreement is not an isolated case. Similar stories have been reported in the newspapers, such as the strike carried out by teachers in November 2023 and

delays in the ITS collective agreement. This calls for education authorities and teachers' unions to determine why these delays are so commonplace within the education sector and what can be done to prevent them from occurring again, since these are impacting the quality of education and, in the case of the dispute at MCAST, the wellbeing and future of students.

It is a shame that such unique and historically significant sites, such as that of Fort Chambray, are left neglected for years, only to then be turned into another heavily commercialised area. Such sites should not be given or kept in the hands of private individuals or entities which do not have conservation at the heart of their mission.

The Pope's message for this Jubilee of Hope invites us to reflect on how, through our actions and words, we can bring hope and solace to those around us. While we cannot change the world, we can make the world a better place for those close to us.

## Follow-Up

- Church commissions or organisations related to Church schools could offer to provide their experience, knowledge and support to help mediate the current ongoing dispute at MCAST.
- Commissions within the Church which safeguard our heritage, are encouraged to provide their support to organisations which share a similar goal, especially in cases such as those of Fort Chambray, where our cultural heritage is being threatened.
- Church organisations and charity groups are admirable and are encouraged to continue spreading their message of hope through their actions with the neediest. They are also encouraged to invite others to their cause to continue perpetuating this important mission.
- Parishes are also encouraged to continue spreading this message of hope to their communities, both within churches and mass celebrations and with the most vulnerable members of their communities.

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