

# **From Conception to Birth**

## **A Brief History of the Formation of T&TUTA**

The seventies were restless times. The trade union movement was not enjoying its most powerful day. A decade earlier, the movement had been reminded of the attitude of suspicion, mistrust and antagonism towards it by the powers that be, when the Commission of Enquiry into the Nature of Subversive Activity was given a particular task of investigating trade unions. It is not surprising that while the Special Inter-Governmental Conference on the Status of Teachers in Paris (1966) was recommending that teachers' organizations should have the right to take action in defense of their legitimate interests, local trade unions were being fed by the revolutionary spirit already finding its place in a nation of paradoxes.

By the end of the seventies, Trinidad and Tobago was a volatile society that could only produce incessant political and industrial turbulence well into the 1980s. This preoccupation with accessing a better standard of living, the spirit of the struggle and a situation of ailing teachers' unions culminated in the ushering in of a new dispensation in teacher representation.

It was in this atmosphere that the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers' Association was spawned. While changes were occurring in the labour force and major construction and reconstruction projects were taking place, there began to emerge a rumbling among teachers in the country. They too were in the quest for change.

In 1978, teachers in the Teaching Service numbered 12,377<sup>[1]</sup>. Teachers in the country were represented by three unions: the Public Services Association (PSA), led by James Manswell, the Trinidad and Tobago Teachers' Union, (TTTU), whose leader was St. Elmo Gopaul; and the Secondary School Teachers Association (SSTA) headed by Osmond Downer and which represented teachers in the so-called "prestige" schools in the country.

Teacher dissatisfaction with representation by the three unions had grown in the seventies. There was the view that adversarial relations between the three units had severely hampered Industrial Relations in the Teaching Service. As early as 1966, there was a struggle between two of the three unions to be the sole representative for any class, or classes, of teachers. The Special Tribunal No. 10 of 1974, which stated that any one of the three unions could represent any class or classes of teachers, decided this issue. This resulted in rapid changes of membership among teachers. However, not one of these unions emerged as the majority union.

The implications of teacher representation by three unions had several serious consequences. Any issue raised by one union with the Chief Personnel Officer had to be discussed with each union separately. This resulted in the presentation of conflicting arguments to the CPO and his advisors by the different unions, a situation which acted to the disadvantage of teachers. Additionally, negotiations were often lengthy - the result a longer time period for settlement. The relationship between the three unions was thus described as one involving a great deal of "inter-union rivalry and fragmentation" which was seen as "the

biggest disadvantage when negotiating a collective agreement,” and more generally speaking, was inimical to the welfare of teachers of this nation.

Writing in the COMFUT Newspaper Issue #4, Frank B. Seepersad, the first and the late General Secretary of T&TUTA noted that fragmentation of the unions had caused them to pay little attention to advancing the cause of teacher professionalism. Two existing committees, the Appeals Committee and the Assessment of Qualifications Committee were not being closely monitored. The unions were paying little attention to issues, for example, in-service training for teachers and refresher courses. Also, the unions were not pressing for much needed changes to the syllabuses of both the primary and secondary schools.

This failure to adequately address teachers' issues resulted in irrational promotions and transfers, non-recognition of relevant qualifications, and the absence of a clear policy on study leave, staff shortages and late staffing. Seepersad observed that the unions were using teachers as “pawns in a power play”, and not seriously addressing those issues which were vital to teachers' professional development and to education. The teachers of this nation thus found themselves in an unsatisfactory state caused by three unions more intent on appearing superior to each other, than on the good of teachers they claim to represent.

These issues, together with other developments in the first half of the nineteen seventies in regards to the teachers and their professional and trade union matters, made the atmosphere ripe for change.

There were several issues, in particular, which aggravated the feelings of teachers about their representative unions. In 1971, the unions representing teachers entered into negotiations for salary increases for teachers. The STATT had invited the president of the PSA, James Manswell, and the President of the TTTU, St. Elmo Gopaul, to sit on a joint negotiating panel to negotiate new salary agreements for teachers with the CPO. The thinking behind this was that joint negotiations would yield a quicker settlement on salaries for teachers. Manswell had refused to do so, his reason being that the PSA would not sit with “minority unions.” The result of this decision was that the salaries issue was referred to the Special Tribunal and teachers had to wait almost nine years for a settlement of this issue.

In 1974, as well, the Special Tribunal had called for joint negotiations through a joint negotiations committee. Once again Manswell had refused to deal with minority unions.

The eventual result of the reclassification caused further stress for teachers. The three unions, which represented teachers, had entered into negotiations with the CPO for reclassification of Teachers 1, who comprised 80% of the Primary School teachers (of course, the PSA acted independently). The appeal was for this group to be moved from range 28 to range 40. At the same time a similar reclassification exercise was going on for policemen. There was an application for Police Sergeants who were in range 28 to be reclassified to range 40. While the police sergeants were moved to range 40, the unions were only successful in having teachers moved to range 33. This greatly incensed members of the fraternity, who felt that their unions had not done enough to improve their status.

Further, as a result of this reclassification, Teachers 1 who had as much as 25 years service were receiving salaries that were minimally different from those of their junior counterparts, paralysed as they were as a result of longevity brackets.

Adding insult to injury in 1971 was the fact that the PSA, which usually went in first in negotiations, signed a four-year contract with the government. This was contrary to the usual procedure as three-year contracts were normally signed. Teachers were grossly dissatisfied with this development as the government proceeded to treat with the other unions in like manner. This event triggered an exodus of teachers from the PSA.

Efforts at having the three unions representing teachers come together to seek the interest of the group which they were representing were futile. Sectarian interests took precedence and the teachers, the group that was paying its dues to have its concerns addressed, were too often left out in the cold.

In general therefore, the teachers of this nation had found the representative process of their unions to be oppressive and undemocratic. The conduct of the PSA president has already been discussed. The Secretary General of the TTTU, had appeared to have entrenched himself in office for life. In fact, it was stated in some quarters that he had accorded himself the position of Secretary General for life. His wife was the president of the TTTU. This situation was captured in a ditty later composed by teachers during their struggle for representation by a single union. The words were "Secretary for life with the President for his wife."

As the decade came to a close, the teachers of this country were therefore very dissatisfied with their conditions and with their representatives unions whom they felt were not putting their interests first. This dissatisfaction came to a head in 1979. On March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1979 approximately 150 teachers gathered at the Mt. Hope Junior Secondary School to discuss the unsatisfactory state of the teaching profession, and the less than desirable image being projected by the three unions, among which there was internecine rivalry.

Accounts as to the exact catalyst for this meeting vary. Suffice it to say however, that the major actor in calling the meeting was Frank B. Seepersad. The view given by Fr. Gerard Farfan, who was also at that meeting, was that the idea of bringing teachers together to discuss the state of the teaching profession was something that had been on the drawing board for some time before. He stated that this was an issue that he had discussed with Seepersad prior to Farfan's one-year posting in Ireland in 1978. He noted that having returned and recognised that things were much the same with respect to teacher representation; he again broached the idea of a meeting of teachers with Frank B. Seepersad. This resulted in the historical March 31<sup>st</sup> meeting at the Mt. Hope Junior Secondary.

Apart from its concentration on the less than desirable state of the teaching profession, teachers at the meeting discussed the unprofessional image projected by the three rival unions in the conduct of teachers' affairs. The meeting adopted a resolution seeking to ensure one autonomous body for teachers. A decision was also arrived at to establish a steering Committee of 22 to oversee the formation of one union for all teachers. Volunteers were sought to

serve on this committee, the Committee for the Unification of Teachers (COMFUT)

At another mass meeting, May 5th 1979 at the Mucurapo Senior Comprehensive School, a resolution was adopted to have COMFUT seek legal advice as to how it should proceed towards its goal of establishing a "...single autonomous professional organisation of teachers, where every individual teacher has a say in policy-determining decisions of the organisation through proper representation in the management of the organisation."

The Unification Committee acted as directed and based on this legal advice, drew up an action plan which included the following:

- Stirring up teacher participation by using several publicity techniques, bumper stickers, buttons, rallies and public meetings;
- Seeking and obtaining about 9,000 signatures to the call for a single union for teachers, and an amendment of the Education Act (Act 1 of 1966) to facilitate teacher representation by a single majority union;
- Seeking the resignation of the Officers of the existing unions so as to make room for a single union;
- Fund raising activities to assist the cause.

Members of COMFUT thus undertook a mammoth task in 1979. Their aim was to unite teachers into a single professional organisation. The road ahead was not going to be easy, as the Committee faced opposition in the form of propaganda from the other unions, and from the political directorate. Its most challenging task, however, was to get teachers of the nation to make the paradigm shift that was necessary for the success of the unification effort.

The Committee set about its task with tremendous energy. It arranged and held a series of meetings in Port of Spain, San Fernando and Tobago. At each meeting the Committee received votes of confidence from teachers. Campaigning in schools in Trinidad and Tobago was an important facet of its work. Fr. Farfan explained that this took a lot of time and was done by a few members of COMFUT. He explained that members of COMFUT who were teaching O'Level and A' Level Classes, which were at the time in examinations, made the time to pay visits to schools throughout the country. He explained that during these visits members received many expressions of support from the teaching fraternity. Many teachers who were spoken to felt that the "...three unions were standing in the way of progress, salary-wise, classification-wise, profession-wise." The teachers also indicated that they wanted the union of all teachers under one umbrella body and that they were prepared to achieve this goal, with or without the support of the Officers of their respective unions.

We have already noted that one of the main strategies in the entire process of securing the goal of teacher representation by one union was to have teachers sign their names to a demand for a single union for all teachers. The Officers of this body would be elected by popular ballot. Teachers were also required to place their signature against a demand for the amendment of the Education Act to ensure that one union; the majority union would be recognised as the bargaining body for teachers. Ten thousand (10,000) teachers' signatures were needed to ensure recognition as the majority union

From March 1979 to December 1981, when T&TUTA was finally granted recognition by the Registration, Recognition and Certification Board, the leadership of T&TUTA, together with the membership, waged a relentless struggle with the authorities in support of the cause for one union for all teachers. Thousands of teachers marched around the Red House and through the streets demanding that there be one umbrella body for all teachers. Teachers also congregated at the Ministry of Education and canvassed support for their just cause, from persons external to the teaching service.

On April 24<sup>th</sup> 1980, T&TUTA was registered as a Trade Union. In March 1981, under much duress, the state presented a draft revision of the Education Act 1966, which allowed T&TUTA to be recognised as a union for teachers, alongside the three other teachers unions in the country. This proposal was strongly rejected at a mass meeting of members of the Association in March 1981. Under continued pressure from the mass of teachers in the country, the government finally gave in. The Education Act, 1966 was amended to give T&TUTA full recognition as the majority union for teachers of this nation. The Registration, Recognition and Certification Board accorded official recognition of the Association in December 1981.

#### Members of the Committee for the Unification Teachers (COMFUT)

1. Gerard Farfan
2. Austin Almarales
3. Utanpad Maharaj
4. Gerry Alleyne
5. Harold Taylor
6. Lennox Denoon
7. Alston Baker
8. Brigdelal Baldeo
9. Selwyn Sookoo
10. Thakoor Moonan
11. Anthony Amir Ali
12. Trevor Oliver
13. Jack Warner
14. Elizabeth O'Connor
15. Trevor Davis
16. Winston Thomas
17. Bisnath Rameshwarsingh
18. Christendath Ramkissoon
19. Courtney Brown
20. Paula Mark
21. Vena Jules
22. Roy Augustus

[1] Obtained from CSO data 1978.