

TTUTA's 35th Anniversary Celebrations

PRESIDENTS ADDRESS

Salutations

Today we gather to commemorate the 35th year of existence of our union, the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association. This is a proud moment in our history and is indeed a milestone. When we look back at the circumstances that led to the formation of our beloved TTUTA, we are reminded that the struggle for social justice and equity must always remain paramount in our thoughts and focus. Indeed, our Association was born out of the struggle, not just to see the existence of one union for all teachers, but to ensure that the cause of education is promoted through the provision of decent terms and conditions of service for all teachers as well as appropriate remuneration.

Today, we look back at those formative years and celebrate the successes achieved and the long strides we have made, ever mindful of the long road that we still have to travel in order to ensure that all our schools are quality schools and that all children are able to take full advantage of the educational opportunity that are being given to them to realise their maximum human potential. In the process, we are striving to ensure that all our teachers, and by this I mean principals and

administrators as well, are seen and treated as true professionals. This was the vision of those founding fathers and we have a duty to ensure that the struggle to achieve these goals is never compromised or abandoned.

Many of the persons who are now joining the ranks of the retirees may have played a part in the building of our TTUTA during those early and formative years. You would have put your heart and soul into the creation of this strong and vibrant union, firm in the belief that with unity and a collective sense of purpose, the goal is achievable. Many of you would have been starting your careers around those early years and joined the struggle to unite all teachers because you believed that that unity of purpose is absolutely critical to the future of our country. You continued that struggle over the years, working very often in sub-standard conditions such as hot, cramped, crowded classrooms, dilapidated buildings and for 'small money'. You discharged your sacred duties very often without basic resources, ever mindful that the future of the nation lay in your hand.

You labour of love, your dedication to you charges, your passion and desire to make a positive contribution to the development of our society has not gone unnoticed by your colleagues. That is why today we salute you and thank you sincerely for the immense contribution each of you would have made to the cause of education over the years. On behalf of our entire membership, I would like to say thanks to all of you for the lifetime of selfless service you have rendered to the

nation's children. It is in this spirit of recognition of your contribution that TTUTA is committed to ensuring that your golden years will not leave you in a state of destitution. You all have a lot to be proud of and I urge you all to continue to give in the cause of education. May you continue to add value to your own lives and the lives of those persons around you and above all may you be happy and stay forever young.

Industrial Relations - Salary Negotiations Update

My dear friends, there are many challenges currently facing our union as we strive to execute our mandate as the voice of teachers. In our quest to obtain the best possible remuneration package for our members, we continue to have negotiations with the Chief Personnel Officer (CPO) with a view towards arriving at an agreement for the period 2011-2014. We continue to use the External Labour Market Survey (ELMS) as the basis for the settlement of teachers' salaries because we firmly believe that all teachers are professionals and should be paid as such. We must also ensure that the best and brightest minds are attracted to the teaching profession and having attracted them we must be able to keep them as teachers.

At present we have a sub-committee comprised of members of the office of the CPO and TTUTA working to collect the data and they have been given a May deadline to complete that exercise. Based on the data collected, discussions will

ensue to determine where we are in the market and if there is a gap, how we are going to treat with it. You may recall that in order to conclude the last round of negotiations we had to agree to salaries well below the ELMS because of the cap of the salary of the Chief Education Officer. This salary is set by the Salaries Review Commission and in order to maintain the integrity of the salary scales that is the inter and intra grade differentials, we had to agree to salaries that were below the survey results.

We are hopeful that we can have these negotiations completed before the expiration of the current negotiation period, September 30th. 2014, but we remain committed to ensuring that teachers receive the best compensation package possible. With regards to the non-salary items, we have had extensive discussions with the CPO since the start of this year, however to date there has been no agreement on any of the issues discussed and we await the CPO's responses to our presentations on these non-salary items. We have agreed that on certain matters, special negotiation sessions will have to be undertaken.

Among the other Industrial Relations issues your union is actively pursuing are:

1. Delays in the payment of increments and arrears
2. Non-payment of arrears to retirees and adjustments to pension and gratuity arising out of the last salary agreement 2008-1011. The current situation at

the Paysheet Section of the Ministry of Education where employees are only working half day for the past seven months due to health and safety concerns is severely hampering our efforts regarding these two issues.

3. Representation of all officers involved in the business of education, including School Supervisors, Guidance Officers and Curriculum Officers among others
4. Implementation of the Performance Management and Appraisal Process (PMAP)
5. We continue to pay close attention to the developments in the ECCE sector and the plight of those teachers

UTT Graduates

There are many matters that are engaging our attention on the Industrial Relations front and the matter of our colleagues who graduated from UTT in 2010 continues to receive our active attention. Progress, albeit slow has been made towards a resolution for the teachers who did the ECCE and Special Education programmes. Most of the teachers who did the Primary Specializations have been upgraded. However the matter of those teachers who did the Secondary Specializations and are still in primary schools is yet to be resolved. TTUTA continues to actively

pursue a resolution for these teachers. Many persons are angry with us for not being able to resolve this matter but we remind persons that these arrangements were made consequent to a decision of the Ministry of Education, despite the advice and warnings of TTUTA and without the corresponding administrative arrangements being put in place to change the approach to teacher training.

We are in essence working backward and are trying to ensure that all the graduates from 2010 are upgraded before we move onto the graduates of 2011 and 2012. We hope that once the way is paved to treat with the 2010 graduates, treating with the graduates of the subsequent years will be less difficult and will be done in a much shorter time frame. In the interim we assure that the matter will not fall of our radar and we will continue to do all within our power to ensure that our teachers are all upgraded.

Health and Safety

While we continue to strive for professional working conditions for all teachers, we continue to be confronted with the spectre of dilapidated schools. The weaknesses of the Ministry's repair and maintenance programmes are causing many schools to be closed on a daily basis for varying periods. On many occasions we would have had to advise our members to exercise their rights under the law to remove themselves from places where they felt that their health and safety is

threatened. The fact of the matter is that the employer is obligated to provide all employees with a safe and secure working environment and teachers are no different.

We have been forced to remind the authorities of the provisions of the Occupational Safety and Health Act, in particular Section 15 which states that, “*an employee may refuse to work where there is serious and imminent danger to himself or unusual circumstances have arisen which are hazardous or injurious to his health or life or where the physical conditions of the workplace in which he works is likely to endanger himself*”. It further states in Section 20 (2) that, “*the employee who refuses to work under Section 15 shall be deemed to be at work and his employer shall pay him at the regular or premium rate as may be proper for the time extending from the time when the worker started to refuse to work under Section 15*”. Our teachers are entitled to safe and secure schools and we have been forced to adopt this line of action in our quest to ensure this basic right.

As teachers, we have always been patient and tolerant and very often exposed ourselves and our charges to undue danger by functioning in conditions that are sometimes deplorable. Our cries and pleas for improvement are consistently met with deafening silence by the authorities and the time has come for teachers to say enough is enough. Despite what some may think, we are not about shutting down school and we have no political agenda. We simply want all our schools to be safe

and secure teaching and learning environments, so that all our children can get the quality education they deserve. We make no apologies for this position and we will do all within our power to ensure that all our schools are up to the standards defined in the Occupational Safety and Health Act. We owe this much to our charges.

We call on the Ministry of Education, the Division of Education Youth Affairs and Sports and Denominational Boards of Education to ensure that they play their part in this process. Managing education is not only about glamour and the exercise of authority. It is a serious responsibility that they have undertaken and we intend to hold all involved in this process fully accountable. Those persons intent on demonizing us for that position will not deter us. Indeed we believe such persons don't have the nation's future at heart but are merely expressing selfish interests. We warn those in authority that any attempt to prosecute teachers for exercising their rights under the law to a safe and secure working environment will be met with staunch resistance from the union. We have already referred two matters to the Industrial Court and are not afraid to take as many such matters to the court as necessary.

This issue of providing safe and secure schools has been aggravated within recent times by the changes being made to the security provisions at a number of government secondary schools. This had resulted in the worsening of the fears of

teachers for their personal safety on school compounds. At a meeting held yesterday with the Minister of Education, TIWU, MTS and TTUTA the rationale for the changes were explained. The Minister indicated that it is all part of a ‘rationalization exercise’ and the Ministry is looking for ‘value for money’, based on the number of complaints it has been receiving about the inadequacy of the service being provided. TTUTA would have expressed a number of concerns about the proposed changes as well as the manner in which the changes had been approached, including the lack of consultation with TTUTA. It was agreed that the matter will be dialogued further to ensure that no persons are placed on the breadline and all these schools are safe and secure. We maintain that the safety of personnel on the school compound cannot be sacrificed on the altar of ‘value for money’. Indeed quality education is not cheap and we insist that money spent on education is an investment in the future of the nation.

Education Reform

The nature and purpose of education dictates that education reforms are an integral part of the landscape, since schools must take their mandate from the community they serve. Since the society is constantly changing, its needs are also changing and schools must be in a position to respond to these changes. While we are fully cognizant of this reality, we feel that some of the fundamental changes that are being attempted and implemented are rushed and hurried. In the process the

intended positive outcomes are jeopardized and as has happened in the past, many good reforms are doomed to failure before they start. A case in point is the introduction of the Continuous Assessment Component of the SEA.

TTUTA had repeatedly warned that the implementation of the CAC was very rushed and as usual our cries for meaningful dialogue and consultation on the matter went on deaf ears. Teachers are frustrated and fed up with the adhocacy of the Ministry of Education with regards to the implementation of this initiative. Inadequate resources and training for teachers characterized the implementation of the CAC from the outset. This state of confusion had been heightened by conflicting instructions from officials of the Ministry of Education as well as a lack of clearly defined roles of the Monitors hired to assist with the implementation of this initiative.

The imposition of unrealistic deadlines for the submission of assessments and marks also became a prominent feature of the CAC, not to mention the stress and trauma placed on teachers to come to terms with this major paradigm shift in primary education. Thankfully at a meeting held with the Minister of Education in January this year, it was agreed that the time had come for an independent evaluation of the implementation of the CAC and TTUTA would have made recommendations in this regard to the Ministry. It is hoped that the undertaking by the Ministry will not amount to an empty promise.

The Association is extremely perturbed at the situation at the St. Barbra's Spiritual Baptist Primary School where the Principal and certain other members of staff have been locked out of the premises. This is a repeat of the experience at the Tunapuna Hindu School and the San Fernando ASJA Girls College, where members of staff were locked out two years ago. The Board of the St. Barbara's School seems to be a runaway elephant, trampling on all who are committed to sound education practice and the development of the school as one that is comparable to any other in the nation. Indeed the school is being treated as the person property of the Chairman of the Board. As before the Ministry of Education is once again notably silent on the antics of the Chairman of the Board, after whom the school is named.

My dear colleagues, this is once again a most disturbing development in our education system. Unfortunately we know it will not be the last time we are witnessing such a development as more and more Boards become emboldened to act in ways that are in blatant violation of the Education Act and the Public Service Regulations. The time has come for us as a nation to review the role of Denominational Boards in the education system, since they have in many instances been operating as laws unto themselves. They are receiving state funds to run schools and seem to be accountable to no one. What is worse and probably

frightening is the fact that the Ministry of Education seems afraid to reign in these renegade Boards, for fear of the political consequences.

If we are to build a quality education system we must be prepared to confront these contentious issues and make hard decisions. We cannot continue to pretend that all is well with this arrangement. The Concordat must be revisited in the context of the existing laws of the land. While many are afraid to act, the nation's children and by extension the very future of the nation is being compromised by selfish interest groups, under the guise of religion. TTUTA will staunchly defend the rights of its members in all these situations, in the interest of social justice and equity. We are not afraid to act and act decisively. We have no political axe to grind and are not afraid of anyone. We have a duty to perform to promote the cause of education and to ensure that the rights of all our members are protected under the law.

As I close let me thank you all for your attention and the honour and privilege of addressing you as your president. As we celebrate our 35th year of struggle, I remind you that we still have a lot of work to do. The rights and privileges we have won for our members over the past 35 years must be staunchly defended through eternal vigilance. We all must be prepared to take a stand for education and to rally behind the Education International theme, "Unite for Quality Education". Long live the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association.

Solidarity Forever.

Thank you

26th April 2014