



## **Memories of the walk along the Teachers Union path at Eastern University.....**

Memories of the walk along the Teachers Union path at the Eastern University.....I am pleased to record my path along the lines since my appointment to the Proposed Batticaloa University College (BUC in October 1981) in February 1981 as perhaps the first academic staff to the system. The Eastern University, Sri Lanka was established in October 1986. I have had a long association with the TAEU (EUTA-Eastern University Teachers Association, later renamed as TAEU) since its inception and served as the President when we had long disputes with the Vice Chancellors in Office in 1986-1989 and 2013-2015. The Vice Chancellors ended their term based on the complaints made by the Teachers association where one of the former VCs faced an inquiry committee by the UGC and then latter had a Presidential committee of inquiry.

I was terminated from the service following the trade union activities around 2000, and was reinstated by the Council following protest from all unions in the University Academic Staff, non-academic staff and students, following the interim injunction order from the Supreme Court on the termination. Perhaps, I hold history that such a person became the Vice Chancellor of the Eastern University later in life. Many what I pen below are from my memories and some are my opinion and thus may be corrected by others or differ in viewpoints.

EUTA was inaugurated around 1986 with Rev. Fr. Dr Cramer as the President and housed in the Senior Common Room (SCR). We also formulated two other organisations around the same time; Senior Common Room Society and the Faculty Club for the welfare of the staff all housed in the same site and operated fluidly. It is difficult for me to recollect all the events in chronological order from day one of the trade union, the Teachers Association of Eastern University. I can only highlight the facts from my memory to the best and those who are familiar may add addendum... no offence at all.

Rev. Fr. Dr. Cramer and I were appointed on 1st February 1981 to the proposed Batticaloa University College and I cannot remember even when we became the Batticaloa University College and if I remember correct it was October 1981. We were under the senate of University of Peradeniya at that time. I had left the University to UK in 1982 on study leave and returned in 1986. It was in 1986 we became a University - Eastern University, Sri Lanka.

I cannot recall having a UTA during the BUC but vividly remember the EUTA in 1986. Our common room and UTA office was the office of the Dean/Agriculture for long years. If my memories are correct Rev. Fr. Dr. Cramer was the first President of the EUTA. The first issues I remember was the protest on international scholarship to Agriculture staff when then VC, Professor. Arudpragasam, was not in favor of nominating those who had already registered for MSc/MPhil in agriculture with leave. We boycotted an event where none would be on the stage for the inauguration of the University in 1986.

There was wide protest on a long-term strike by the non-academics at that time, led by late Dr. Varanakulasingam who was a permanent sub warden at that time and as the president of their union. The strike went on the level of cutting water lines, electricity, etc. and we had to break the locks and operate water and electricity as it was necessary. Dr. Thayalan (was an Asst. lecturer at that time) who is in Canada at present, who was perhaps the key person at that time on these.

Many issues had been taken up by the EUTA then and had been resolved and the union was strong. It was during the election of VC after Professor. Sandanam the 'Batticaloa divide' started in the university where Batti-Jaffna sentiments were more open as it pitched against a possibility of Prof. Mano Sabaratnam becoming the VC and unfortunately this did not die with it but had continued for many years later where like in the wider Politics those who needed it was always using it.

There were write ups by the Nadesan, a great article 'Palkalai samugathil mulkividum pradesha vaddam' (பல்கலை சமூகத்தில் மூழ்கிவிடும் பிரதேசவாதம்) and subsequently assassinated on 31st May 2004, and perhaps it was the last article of his, in my memory.

This caused division among the members and caused the formation of another union, at that time, unfortunately mainly in the lines of supporting the VC and those who question him. However, with time, after the end of that VC there were amalgamation of these to split again during the period of Dr. Kobindarajah as the VC in 2013. This too was patched after his period but unfortunately to split again during the period of Prof. Ragel as the VC (2019-2022), as I understand. Trade union is for the members and making divisions based on the VC seems unjust as it tends to favour those with him and sometimes be negative to those who are in another union which is unfortunate.

**A few from the memories:**

- The Election of the Dean/Agriculture was a contested point by the union, where before the members of the faculty arrived the election was finished by the VC at that time. The Union took it at the Supreme Court to finally end in a negotiated settlement of sharing the Deanship by the two candidates Prof. Thadchnamaoorthy and Prof. Raveendranath. I remember with salute that end of 18 months, Prof. Thadchanamoorthy stepped down from the Deanship and Prof Raveendranath became the new Dean by formal election thereafter, to be there for next three years.
- We were able to reverse all honorary appointments made without advertisement and reschedule them around 1998.
- We were one of the Universities, which had the 100 day strike successfully almost meeting daily around the mango tree near the old SCR building.
- We had times when the Executive committee of the Union was threatened by the Minister to cancel our strike.
- We had the unpleasant threat from various sectors that made our leaders into hiding.
- The Union was inactive for a period of time for security reasons of members and reinstated for the need of the members.

**Experiences:**

I would like to share some values from my experience

- Always place a letter to the Head when you are engaging on a strike as they may not know whether you are part of the Union, which is on strike/trade union action.

- If an administrative position is also compromised, please hand over the keys to the superior Heads to Deans, Dean to VC etc. This was practiced at earlier times. Later there were confusion on these as to whether someone else would take up these positions. It is the collective strength that really matters and not the individual positions in real union work.
- The superiors must understand that it is not personal but a right that is enshrined in the constitution and law for the trade union to engage with actions. Negotiation is a better option that sabotage, as many of the academics also tend to be administrators in different time.
- Trade union leaders must always have patience; arrogance does not win but firm commitment and belief in the principles and you.

With best wishes to the TAEU team for this initiation and thank you for inviting me to share some of my views from my diaries of life....

**Dr. T. Jayasingam**

*Former Vice Chancellor*

*Retd. Professor of Botany*

*Department of Botany, Faculty of Science, EUSL*

\*\*\*\*\*