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Union Accuses Government of Abandoning Labor Talks for WMA and Health Employees; Says Understaffed Bargaining Office Hinders Progress

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The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) is calling for the government to immediately address capacity issues when it comes to labor negotiations. “Underfunding and lack of staffing has caused the Office of Collective Bargaining to fall years behind in contract negotiations with many public sector workers,” a recent statement from IAM contends.

Their members, workers at the Waste Management Authority and at several public healthcare facilities across the territory, have been suffering, the union says. The collective bargaining agreement with WMA expired in 2019, and according to IAM Southern Territory Special Representative John Viguera, negotiations on a new contract have been stalled since November

2022 because OCB representatives have not made themselves available. Mr. Viguera says about 5 articles are still pending with respect to these negotiations.

Meanwhile, the union has not been able to have their first meeting with respect to negotiations over contract with the Department of Health. Similarly to the delays at WMA, a lack of availability on the part of the OCB has been blamed.

Mr. Viguera says that IAM signaled their intent to negotiate a new contract well before both bargaining agreements expired, but since then, multiple requests for appointments have come to naught. “We have been at the mercy of the OCB,” he lamented.

In mid-August, representatives of the OCB testified before the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance, admitting to a [huge case backlog](#) when it came to labor disputes, caused by a lack of adequate personnel. They appealed to legislators to update Act 4440 in order to empower the governor to grant general wage increments to all unionized employees even during ongoing negotiations. Otherwise, according to Chief Negotiator Joss Springette, public sector workers could find themselves waiting years for finalized negotiations, a scenario currently being lived out by IAM’s members at WMA and Department of Health facilities.

While these public workers await new contracts, prevailing economic conditions are taking their toll. “With the cost of living continuing to rise, our members are having to take second jobs or leave their careers altogether,” said Mr. Viguera.

The union representative said that Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett was supportive of the workers’ pleas during a recent meeting, agreeing that OCB needed to be funded adequately. Support from members of the V.I. Legislature has also been received, with at least one senator reportedly indicating that they would soon issue a public statement to that end.

For now, IAM says that it will continue pushing for movement from OCB with respect to contract negotiations. “It is inexcusable for the government to be holding up negotiations due to their own lack of investment,” said Southern Territory General Vice President Rickey Wallace. The union’s efforts remain diplomatic for now, however they say they are determined to “use every resource necessary to get our members on the U.S. Virgin islands the strong contracts they deserve,” according to Mr. Wallace. What that means, says Mr. Viguera, is that if diplomacy fails, “we will use whatever tools and means we have at our disposal.”