

logo not found or type unknown

Canceled Negotiations Frustrate Union; VIPA Remains Current on Contract While WMA and Health Facilities Risk Job Actions

Government / **Published On September 19, 2023 08:21 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert **September 19, 2023**

Image not found or type unknown



John Viguera, who serves as special representative to the U.S. Virgin Islands for the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) Union, said on Monday that union members, working at several important public agencies, are fed up of their current wage conditions and are ready to participate in job action if they are not made whole soon.

These members are employed at the Marine arm of the V.I. Port Authority; as security workers at several healthcare facilities, and law enforcement officers at the Waste Management Authority. He said a planned meeting for March 2023 with the OCB, led by [chief negotiator Joss Springette](#), was canceled and has not been rescheduled due to the OCB's employee shortage. However, Mr. Viguera stressed that this situation should not be used as an excuse to fail hundreds of employees.

"The Office of Collective Bargaining is always undermanned, understaffed, underfunded, and they've had a hard time to sit down and negotiate with us... Just to give you an example, this contract with the Waste Management Authority expired in 2019 — four years ago," he said. "We understand the situation with the funding and everything, but that cannot be the justification to not give the workers economic justice."

Security at the territory's hospitals is crucial public safety position. Law enforcement personnel working at the V.I. Waste Management Authority are also crucial, as are marine employees at VIPA, who are indispensable to the territory's cargo and freight operations. Mr. Viguera stressed that the Port Authority is current with its contract and therefore would not be affected by any job action.

As part of its negotiations, Mr. Viguera said the union is seeking wage adjustment of 25 percent for its members, as well as backpay. The union also wants to ensure that the Office of Collective Bargaining and the V.I. Public Employee Relations Board (PERB) are fully funded and staffed.

Mr. Viguera spoke of the rapid increase in the cost of living over the past few years, lamenting that workers must contend with modern-day prices on salaries that ceased to be sufficient in 2019. The U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics says consumer prices for all items rose by 6.5 percent from December 2021 to December 2022. Although the pace of inflation has slowed during 2023, prices are still rising.

Union leaders, including Mr. Viguera, are expressing concern over an apparent clause they claim exists within the territory's laws that prevents backpay. According to the union, workers should receive what they term as "make whole," which IAM interprets as a double-digit salary increase retroactive to when their previous collective bargaining agreements expired in 2019 and 2021.

Mr. Viguera notes that the union has tried almost every avenue to resolve the issue, including attempts to reach out to the Office of the Governor, which have gone unanswered. Despite this, IAM said it has received support from Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett and a number of local lawmakers.

With as many as 32 other unions negotiating with OCB, Mr. Viguera expressed uncertainty regarding when talks would resume, however, he contends that inaction could lead to serious consequences and adverse repercussions. "I had refused up to this point to talk about concerted activities, that was our position — we know this has not been done out of malice. Nevertheless, it may come to a point where some type of concerted activity [is necessary].... Our members are pretty passionate and they are angry."