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St. Croix Teachers Stage Surprise Walkout Over Poor Working Conditions

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Public school teachers at various school on St. Croix staged a surprise walkout on Wednesday, Sept. 20, 2023. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

On Wednesday morning, instead of stationing themselves in their classrooms, educators at various schools on St. Croix were instead seen holding signs outside their respective institutions, in a job action sparked by ongoing complaints about working conditions at the facilities.

Placards held by the protesting teachers pointed to the lack of adequate support personnel to deliver needed services, including custodians, food service workers, maintenance workers, and others. Other placards hinted that teachers were agitating for higher pay. “You can’t put students first if you put teachers last,” one sign read.

The action took union leaders by surprise. Consortium journalists reached out to Rosa Soto Thomas, President of the St. Croix chapter of the American Federation of Teachers, who said that she first learned of the teacher walkout as it was happening this morning. Nevertheless, she stood in support of her members, who she says have been suffering, not only from long-standing underfunding of school plants and other educational necessities, but from the debilitating heat. “The index is very high in all these schools from day-to-day,” Ms. Soto Thomas remarked. “I know people reading your story, they’re feeling the heat as well. The human brain, you know, has a limit of how much heat it can take.”

The union leader says that air conditioning units purchased with federal grant money had been installed at schools on St. Thomas, but in St. Croix, nothing is being done. Ms. Soto Thomas claims that documents justifying the use of American Rescue Plan Act funds to purchase air conditioning units for schools are just being submitted from the Department of Education today, leaving the schools on St. Croix in limbo as to when exactly these units will arrive in the territory and be installed. “In the interim, nothing was done to bring relief to the teachers and paraprofessionals and the support staff - nothing.”

The V.I. Dept. of Education this week announced several schedule adjustments, including shortened class periods and earlier dismissals for St. Croix schools, meant to begin on Monday September 25. The adjusted schedules, according to the department, are to ameliorate the extreme heat effects, particularly in several schools where more than half the campus lacks functional a/c units, including Juanita Gardine and Eulalie Riviera PreK-8 schools, John H. Woodson Jr. High school, and St. Croix Central High School, St. Croix Educational Complex, and the Career & Educational Technical Center.

Apart from the heat, AFT members have also expressed consternation over outstanding wage negotiations. Like the [International Association of Machinists](#), unionized educators are also working from an expired contract, with the Office of Collective Bargaining Agreement unable to provide dates to conduct negotiations.

This morning’s job action prompted D.O.E. to close all pre-K through grade 8 schools on the Big Island, along with the John H. Woodson Jr. High, with today’s school day to be made up in December. While Ms. Soto Thomas says she is not quite sure what her members will decide to do next, she made it clear that the union is standing in solidarity. “I am very proud of them this morning, because they call me every day. I’m inundated with calls regarding the issues. I am very happy that they decided to raise their voices today.”