The Virgin Islands Consortium

OCB Chief Snubs Senate Hearing as Union Negotiations Stalls Amid Discontent

Springette's Absence Sparks Criticism: Senators and Union Leaders Seek Answers

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OCB's Chief Negotiator Joss Springette. **By. GOV'T HOUSE**

Yet another workers union has expressed great dissatisfaction with the Office of Collective Bargaining.

On Thursday, OCB's Chief Negotiator Joss Springette declined an invitation from Sen. Marise James to provide testimony before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development regarding ongoing challenges between OCB and United Steelworkers. The

hearing was at the behest of USW, as the organization wished to voice a laundry list of issues and complications plaguing ongoing union-related negotiations.

In a missive explaining her decision to absent herself from the hearing, Ms. Springette told the Legislature, “I am very disappointed that [USW has] not contacted me to have these discussions. Instead, they have opted to disregard the CBAs [Collective Bargaining Agreements] and risk divulging confidential information about their members in one of the most public forums.”

However, Daniel Flippo, director of District 9 for the USW, argued that it was possible to have the conversation without referencing specific cases or matters under negotiation. Instead, he said, USW was simply interested in healthy dialogue on outstanding matters, since members “rightfully expect that when they negotiate with the government, reach a tentative agreement, and then ratify that agreement, that government will honor what they indicated in the now ratified agreement.”

Several agreements, he explained, expired in September 2022, and “the Office of Collective Bargaining has yet to accept our offer date for these negotiations.” Delayed negotiations include contracts with the Virgin Islands Territorial Management Agency (VITEMA), and the Supervisors Masters Agreement. OCB’s ongoing staffing challenges are understood, Mr. Flippo said, but maintained “we also know and understand that agreements are made with an expiration that requires diligence when it comes time to schedule and negotiate a successor agreement.” Thanks to delays with 2022 negotiations, recently expired 2023 contracts now face similar delays. “It honestly adds insult to injury,” Mr. Flippo complained.

It’s not the first time that unions say they have been frustrated by the foot-dragging on the part of OCB with respect to pinning down negotiation dates. Senator Novelle Francis would later refer to that matter as low-hanging fruit, and chastised the OCB, saying “a date is not unreasonable…what the hell is the problem to give you a date?”

Despite her stated umbrage at USW appealing to the Legislature, senators learned that Mr. Flippo and Ms. Springette met in person, for the first time, one day before Thursday’s hearing — a fact that Mr. Francis found rather interesting. “Every time we schedule a hearing with some entity, they're quick to meet with that entity beforehand so that they could have a preemptive strike. So this is not for nought,” the Senate president remarked.

Mr. Flippo, voicing his dwindling patience with the OCB, told lawmakers he was particularly disappointed when an agreed-upon negotiation for VI Waste Management Authority workers was later rescinded. “[OCB] reduced its proposal for 2023, 2024 and 2025, from a 4% increase to zero in 2022 and 2023 and 3% in 2024 and 2025.” Members, he said, expect good faith during the negotiating process from both their representative union and the government. He suggested a “lack of respect for the process.” Speaking bluntly, Mr. Flippo told lawmakers that the union believes that “the integrity of our agreed-upon procedures has been threatened by the lackadaisical manner in which the government is addressing our grievances.”

For Senator Franklin Johnson, those revelations were “a slap in the face for the working class men.” He applauded the union’s patience, and said, “I applaud you for all the avenues that you're trying to avoid what might be the ultimate choice.” Still, the senator

hinted that it might be time to increase the pressure. “I think you guys know what you need to do,” Mr. Johnson told the union leader, pledging his support.

Joining a line of disappointed legislators, Senator Carla Joseph noted that “what I'm hearing to me doesn't speak well of our governance and leadership.” Meanwhile, Senator Javan James Sr. chose not to grill the USW representatives, saying, “the real questions need to be directed to the entity who is not here today. It's so unfortunate.”

In her letter, Ms. Springette told the Senate committee that part of the reason for her absence is her concern that “such a meeting will only create confusion…considering that the committee does not have full working and legal knowledge of labor relations and government.”

Government and labor relations expertise aside, Mr. Flippo argued that the entire problem can be boiled down to a matter of respect. “All we're asking is the same respect back to our members. They deserve it.” Mr. Francis seemed less than optimistic, reminding the union leader that “you're not the only ones waiting. There are so many more like you, unfortunately.”

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