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Teachers at Charlotte Amalie High School Refuse to Work in 95-Degree Classrooms Amid Mold and Internet Issues

Union president highlights critical environmental hazards as teachers leave moldy, overheated classrooms and demand immediate repairs to internet and A/C units

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The Charlotte Amalie High School, St. Thomas.

Contrary to a memorandum circulated by the V.I. Department of Education, teachers at the Charlotte Amalie High School were not protesting on Thursday, union representatives told the Consortium.

“The Virgin Islands Department of Education acknowledges a teacher protest at the Charlotte Amalie High School,” the urgent alert said. However according to Leontyne Jones, president of the St. Thomas-St. John Federation of Teachers, teachers were just following the stipulations of their contract.?

The collective bargaining agreement governing unionized teachers in public schools requires teachers to leave classrooms that present an environmental health hazard, whether it be mold, excessive heat, or the like. “We have internet connectivity issues, and on top of that we have the issues with a/c units...and then we have the mold in the classroom,” Ms. Jones disclosed. “It’s problematic, and it’s really bad in Charlotte Amalie High School classrooms. I used to work there, so I know,” she continued.

Ms. Jones said that at the beginning of the school year, her members walked into classrooms that were ill-prepared to facilitate the learning that is supposed to take place within them. Fans don’t help with cooling in rooms tailored for air conditioning, Ms. Jones contends. “It’s circulating hot air. I walk into these rooms every day with thermometers, and the temperature is hitting like 90, 95 degrees. No one can learn, no one can teach in there.”

On Thursday morning, the teachers apparently decided that they would no longer occupy these classrooms while waiting for long-promised attention to the adverse environmental health conditions. “They’re very frustrated, and that’s the only reason why they decided just not to go into those classes,” Ms. Jones said. “What we are doing is holding them to our contract. We show up for work every day, we expect you all to make sure that the rooms are conducive to learning, and a lot of them are not okay.”

The problem, Ms. Jones took pains to highlight, did not lie with school administrators. “The principal at the school is wonderful. She has done everything in her power to make sure she is complying with our contract.” She also acknowledges that education administrators on the district level are also struggling to keep up with the mountain of work that needs to be done. “But it’s to a point. Whereas I’m telling my members ‘just hold on for another day, hold on for another week.’ And they’re like ‘how long are we going to do this?’ I am totally frustrated,” Ms. Jones shared.

Even the powers that be within the Department of Education have little sway against larger external forces. Ms. Jones pointed to the almost constant power fluctuations territory-wide as possibly bringing to naught any repairs done to equipment at the schools over the summer break. “We have a WAPA issue. WAPA takes things down,” she noted, echoing the accusations of Virgin Islanders across the territory.?

Teachers in unaffected classes quickly returned to their posts, while those in classrooms that had been compromised were temporarily relocated to the auditorium while a mold remediation team was mobilized to treat the affected areas. A technician for the non-functioning a/c units has also been dispatched, Ms. Jones said.

Meanwhile, School Construction and Maintenance Bureau Executive Director Craig Benjamin has reportedly shared with union members his vision to hire more maintenance staff, as well as made a promise to be more transparent and responsive when it comes to communication. Ms. Jones expressed her appreciation to Mr. Benjamin for the outreach, but expressed skepticism that his new agency would receive the necessary resources to become a truly effective delivery mechanism for timely school maintenance work. “It never seems like it’s enough,” she lamented.