

The Virgin Islands Consortium

UPDATE: Frederiksted DPW Employees Back To Work; Union Chief Vows To Visit Site

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In October, the [VI Consortium reported](#) on the lack of equipment that had stalled work and the "ill treatment" Department of Public Works (DPW) employees in Frederiksted say they received on the job. A week after the story was published, the *VI Consortium* followed up with the workers and learned that their equipment had been returned and they were back to work.

In our first report, Frederiksted workers told the *VI Consortium* that the local labor union had provided little to no help in addressing the conditions under which they worked, namely being stationed at a deteriorating building, overnight break-ins at the facility, supervisor abandonment, unsanitary working conditions, and lack of equipment to

perform essential job duties. Not to mention, the workers say, low employee moral.

The *VI Consortium* recently caught up with Ricky Brown, president of Our Virgin Islands DPW employees and other workers across the territory. This is to the scope of the Union's influence in the workplace.



F'sted DPW workers sent in these shots showing the

work awaiting them when their equipment was returned.

"I didn't find an indication where the Union had any oversight over what the workers say they had been experiencing," Brown said, referencing *VI Consortium's* first article. "VI Code is very specific about the scope of the Union."

With that, he explained that only if work equipment is unsafe or if the workers themselves were in imminent danger on the job would the Union get involved, none of which, Brown said, the workers alluded to.

To that, Brown said he had not been made aware of any of the complaints the men raised, other than the issue of an office ice machine that remains broken for close to two years.

"We became aware of an ice and water situation and it was addressed," Brown said, adding that the workers are given "petty cash" to purchase their own ice and water supplies while out on the field.

When *VI Consortium* toured the facility, workers pointed out that the office had been left without water for its refillable fountain for over a week, even after contacting the main office in Christiansted. Only after he placed a call to OSHA, one employee told *VI Consortium*, did a single bottle of water arrive from Christiansted.

As it relates to the limited equipment--a single small dump truck--the Frederiksted workers say had been made available to them, pointing out that all of their other equipment had either been shipped to St. Thomas and never returned or taken to the Christiansted branch and never returned, Brown said it is not unusual for an employer to shift its equipment between locations.

"An employer has certain rights on the assignment of equipment and the Union has no say over that," Brown explained. However, he said workers are encouraged to inform the employer if they may deem unacceptable, as the Union provides training and workers could go about handling those matters.



Lots of work to do in Fsted now that equipment has

been returned.

"Workers have inherent rights without the Union's involvement," he said, adding that he is willing to listen to workers because he has "a moral obligation to do so."

When it comes to employee supervision, Brown said he was "surprised" the workers brought that matter to light.

"Most Public Works employees wouldn't want to be supervised because they know their jobs and what they have to do," Brown said.

Another thing Brown said had "surprised" him was the fact that Frederiksted workers had not complained of pay raises, noting that none of DPW's employees had gotten a salary increase since 2007.

According to Brown, a tentative agreement was successfully negotiated between DPW and the Virgin Islands Government in Nov. 2010, which would have included "significant improvement in salaries" for employees. However, after submitting the agreement to the governor in Dec. 2010 and him verifying the funds were available for the negotiated pay increases, Brown said Governor de Jongh "did not sign off on it." The Union filed suit against the government in Jan. 2011 and is still in litigation over the matter. Brown said had de Jongh signed off on the agreement, employees would have seen increases as of Feb. 2011.

As it relates to the Union's court case, from his vantage point as union president since 2006--a post to which he was elected--Brown said "employees must get together as a whole and strategise," in order to ensure they are being treated fairly. he added that "job action must be properly organized."

Brown also raised the issue of the lack of employee participation in the Union.

"People need to get involved," he said. "Nominations have gone uncontested because there are not enough people involved."

Furthermore, Brown said complaints have been filed against the Union due to elections not being held. However, he pointed out that he has maintained well-documented records that show many outreach efforts to local employees to attend meetings, adding that attendance continues to be low or non-existent.

"We are open to everyone who wants to play a role in the Union, whether as one of the official titles or as a volunteer," Brown said.

It has been well over a year since Brown said he last visited DPW's Frederiksted plant, something he vowed to do today. He said he looks forward to meeting with the workers and listening to their concerns.

Feature Image: Work underway as F'sted DPW workers use their equipment to clean up the town.