

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Local Workers Speak Out Against Hiring Practices, 'Abuse' At Propane Conversion Project Construction Site, Prt. 1

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Although construction of WAPA's propane storage facility on St. Croix has been underway since last June, reports are surfacing of disparities between local and imported workers, unsafe and unsanitary working conditions, improper equipment and tool supplies, and other problems at the Christiansted site, the *VI Consortium* has learned.

The *VI Consortium* was first made aware of the matter through a press release issued by Sen. Nereida "Nellie" Rivera-O'Reilly's office last November, citing numerous complaints her office received from local residents employed at the site and from labor union

representatives.

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The press release stated that despite the senator having had "multiple conversations with AT Construction, a Puerto Rico-based company with offices at the RT Park and assurances from its representatives, she continues to receive complaints from residents who have been denied employment at the site."

Furthermore, Rivera-O'Reilly said she received reports from labor union representatives and other concerned citizens "regarding what appears to be a disproportionate number of who are currently working on the project."



One of three buses transporting imported

workers to propane conversion construction site in Christiansted.

On Tuesday, *VI Consortium* reporters visited the site in an effort to speak with officials from Vitol Virgin Islands Corp., the main contractor for the project. However, reporters were pointedly asked to leave the premises by company officials after attempting to question the hiring practices and other issues at the site.

WAPA representatives were then called to the scene and spoke with reporters.

"We received a lot of inquiries from the Department of Labor and [they] had a lot of the same concerns," said Vernon Alexander, WAPA special projects director overseeing the construction of the propane storage facility, when asked about reports of disparities in hiring.

He continued, "So, we gave them contact number for the individual in Vitol who was best able to address their concerns. Since then, I have not had any follow-up calls from the Department of Labor, apparently whatever answer they received was satisfactory to them."

Alexander went on to say that at the time, he requested Vitol provide "a listing of all the individuals who are hired by the individual subcontractors," and to do so on a monthly basis. He did not state whether Vitol had complied with his request.

Alexander said there are three subcontractors working on the project, all of which "have a local presence." Two of those companies are AT Construction and Vivo. *VI Consortium* could not verify the third company.

Although he admitted to not knowing the official residency of any of the workers at the site, Alexander still said that as far as he knows, "the majority of the individuals who have been hired by the other subcontractors are local individuals." He did not identify which of the three subcontractors he was referencing.

"I would not deny that there are other individuals from off-island who the other subcontractor [AT Construction] has as part of his employee pool to bring over here," he said. He further explained that if a corporation like AT&T "was going to do a major project and they have people who form their core employee pool, they bring them with them, so



Two other buses transporting imported

workers to propane conversion construction site in Christiansted.

Alexander also pointed out that he discussed with the Department of Labor, and the department confirmed that "although we can encourage contractors to hire local as much as possible, you cannot force anyone to hire all local individuals, because you'd be in violation of the U.S. Constitution."

When asked if he could produce a list of employees with a breakdown of their residency status, Alexander said he did not have one readily available, but would request one from Vitol. He cautioned that the process could be a lengthy one, as Vitol would then have to request the information from all three of its subcontractors.

As of press time, *VI Consortium* had not received the information, although Alexander wrote in an email on Wednesday night that he had already submitted the request to the contractor and was hoping for "a response in short order."

What Workers Are Saying

Workers were prohibited from speaking with reporters Tuesday afternoon as supervisors looked on, but a number of them invited *VI Consortium* reporters to return to the site early Wednesday to conduct interviews before they clocked in at 7 a.m.

"We are being abused here," said one worker who is employed as a carpenter at the site with AT Construction. "Those of us locals who live here are treated like we don't know what we are doing."

He went on to explain, and Alexander confirmed being aware of the incident, that nine imported workers were brought in to construct the forming of a wall on the site "because

they did not think local workers had the skill to do the job." Before the wall was completed, however, it crumbled. The carpenter said local workers were then asked to reconstruct the wall.

Two other local workers who were hired as laborers with AT Construction say they have been doing "carpentry work and everything else around the site," but noted they were not being paid accordingly. One of those men, who previously worked as a skilled employee at HOVENSA for close to 20 years, said he was being paid \$9 an hour with AT Construction.

The men went on to cite other instances of what they called "unfair treatment" as it relates to locals and imported workers, such as locals being denied overtime, while imported workers are given extensive overtime hours.

"We are asked to leave the site at 4 p.m. and the other guys get to stay on and work overtime, sometimes as late as nine at night," the carpenter said.

Another worker told *VI Consortium* that local workers did not receive holiday pay or bonuses, but their imported counterparts did.

As reporters were interviewing the men, three 16-passenger vans arrived at the work site and the men pointed out that imported workers occupied the vans. They also said many more imported workers drive rented cars to the construction site.

When asked what they believed to be the ratio of imported workers to locals, the carpenter said, "It's sixty to forty, and that's being nice."

Another man disagreed, stating that he believed the breakdown to be closer to 80 percent imported to 20 percent local hires.

A visit to AT Construction's offices at the RT Park on Tuesday afternoon revealed, through a note posted on the front door, that the company was no longer hiring for work at the site. However, local workers at the construction site told *VI Consortium*

Wednesday that six more imported workers were expected to arrive at the plant that day and an additional six-to-ten were expected next week.

Sen. Rivera-O'Reilly informed the *VI Consortium* on Wednesday morning that after writing to WAPA's Executive Director Hugo Hodge and now-former Labor Commissioner Albert Bryan in November about the issues at the site, she still had not received a response to her correspondence.

"Hiring non residents is unconscionable, particularly if the knowledge, skills and abilities required can be secured locally," the three-term senator's office wrote. "The island's unemployment rate is at its highest level. When we hire locally we guarantee that salaries will be spent on-island helping to support the local economy."

Rivera-O'Reilly added, "Now more than ever we must ensure that all jobs created through government and independent instrumentalities are filled by local residents. It's good policy and it is the moral and ethical thing to do."

Vitol is financing all capital costs associated with project construction, which means WAPA will pay no upfront costs for the project, and will only begin to pay for the new facilities when propane begins to be used.

In Pt. 2, Dept. of Labor Acting Commissioner Catherine Hendry offers insight into the department's role in the matter. Plus, workers continue to speak out against safety and equipment/tool issues on the job site.