

The Virgin Islands Consortium

WAPA Subcontractor Allegedly Importing Workers To Lay Tile, Arson Incident Under Investigation

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ST. CROIX -- For several weeks, the charred remains of a bulldozer, Jeep Liberty and crane have been sitting in a Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority (WAPA) parking lot where employees of WAPA contractor Vitol, and the employees of Vitol subcontractors park their vehicles before taking work in the mornings.

The news was never widely publicized because it was not reported to the media. However, after acting on a tip-off, *VI Consortium* visited the parking lot, located at WAPA's Richmond plant and saw the torched heavy equipment and vehicle, blackened and destroyed by the heat of fire.

Even then, the *Consortium* did not report on the story because of the lack of information.



3 particulars were one day

Torched Jeep Liberty at a

WAPA parking lot for VITOL employees in Christiansted

Then, on Monday, at a senate hearing held at the Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall in St. Thomas to confirm some of Governor Kenneth Mapp's nominees -- including VITEMA Director designee Mona Barnes, Department of Labor Commissioner designee Catherine Ann Hendry and V.I. Human Services Commissioner designee Vivian Ebbesen-Fludd -- some rather enlightening information was brought to the fore when Sen. Novelle Francis Jr., a former Police Commissioner and Police Chief, said information was given to him that employees working at WAPA's propane conversion project had set ablaze heavy equipment and Jeep Liberty in the WAPA parking lot. They did this, Francis said, because the contractors are hiring workers from off island while the local workforce, with the skills to get the work done, remains unemployed.

"There is something brewing here that could go out of order," Francis said. "I don't support what they're doing, but I understand it."

VI Consortium has heavily covered the issue of the unbalanced hiring practices of Vitrol, and was once asked to leave the premises while attempting to enter the propane conversion work site to speak to an executive. That encounter turned into an opportunity to speak with WAPA representatives.

"We received a lot of inquiries from the Department of Labor and [they] had a lot of the same concerns," [said Vernon Alexander in January](#), 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 Vitrol 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."

It was revealed by Hendry at yesterday's hearing that an investigation into Vitrol's hiring practices was underway, as the company has allegedly hired workers from Puerto Rico

for menial jobs such as laying tile.

But the unearthing of Vitol's hiring practices is not new to *VI Consortium*, as back in the 1990s they face daily at the



Torched bulldozer at a WAPA

parking lot for VITOL employees in Christiansted

What Workers Are Saying

“We are being abused here,” said one worker on Tuesday, January 15, who's 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 *VI Consortium* interviewed 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."



broken down to be closer to 80

Torched crane at a WAPA

parking lot for VITOL employees in Christiansted

A visit to AT Construction's offices at the RT Park on Tuesday, January 15 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 the following week.

Video: Former Vitol employee talks to VI Consortium about working conditions at WAPA's propane conversion project

[View the original embedded media](#)

VI Consortium was contacted today by Jean P. Greaux, Jr., Director of Corporate Communications at WAPA, who said that, despite Senator Francis' assertion that the torched Jeep Liberty and Heavy Equipment happened as a result of unfair hiring practices by Vitol and was perpetrated by disgruntled employees; authorities investigating the incident have classified the occurrence as an act of arson, as no information has been made available in relation to who committed the crime.

"As far as we know, VI police and fire were investigating as acts of arson, however no information we have gotten from either agency suggest that WAPA workers are involved in the touching of these vehicles," Greaux said.

The vehicles that were destroyed, Greaux added, were being leased by Vitol for the work at the project, and the hours that the work isn't being carried out at the propane facility, these vehicles are stored in the parking lot in the vicinity of the Richmond plant.

Furthermore, Greaux said WAPA does not have control over Vitol, or its subcontractors' hiring practices, and that the semi-autonomous entity can only suggest to the companies that safety is a top priority. That language is even more vague than not giving specific details.



Torched crane at a WAPA

parking lot for VITOL employees in Christiansted

Unsafe and unsanitary working conditions

A number of employees *VI Consortium* spoke with offered details of hazardous working conditions on the project site, with one laborer saying it would take him an entire day to describe the many grievances he and his co-workers have with the WAPA subcontractors.

One female worker who spoke with *VI Consortium* at the work site said many tools are broken, but workers have been instructed to use them anyway. She also said workers do not have the proper gear to safely complete their tasks. With that, she pointed to a worker walking nearby wearing transparent safety eye glasses. She said safety standards require the man to be outfitted with tinted ones to protect his eyes from the glare of the sun because of the nature of his job. The woman said there were no tinted safety eye glasses at the site.

"It's a lot to talk about, and it's not just going to be a five-minute or ten-minute thing," another man said, "because there are other people, too, who've seen things and who've been through things here."

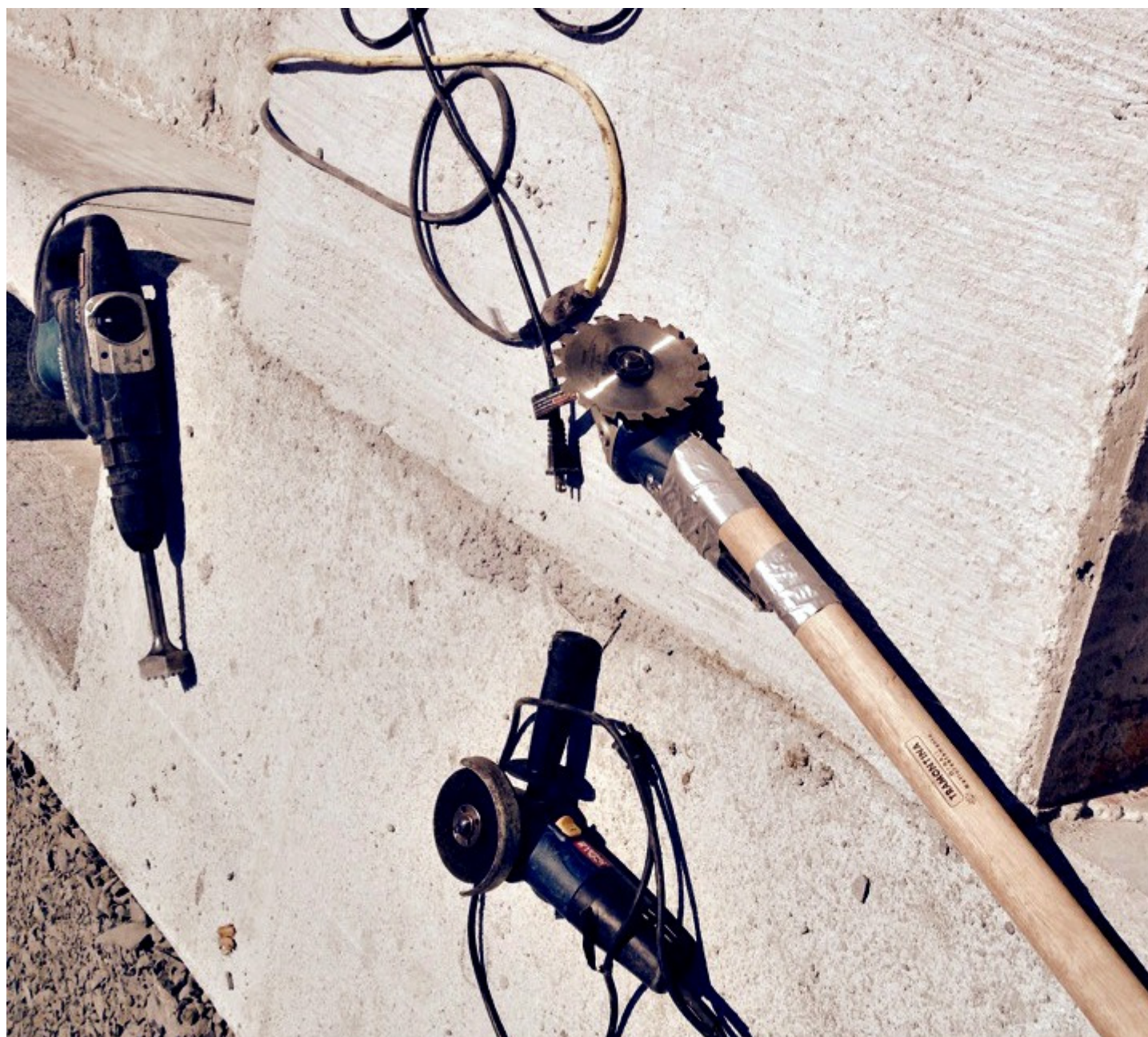
The man, who worked for AT Construction when he spoke to the *Consortium*, went on to say company officials have not heeded workers' complaints.

"The safety is not for us, the safety is for the company," he said. "We go to them with safety issues and they still turn it around and make it look like it's our fault. We have faulty equipment."

Images of one of many makeshift tools, a pencil grinder, workers use at the WAPA site was sent to *VI Consortium* and can be seen in the image gallery below.









Then, trailing off in frustration, he added, "Man, it's too much."

"This was going on throughout the month of November, and when I speak up, I look like a bad guy, but I'm supposed to stand there and take it?" he said.

VI Consortium reporters witnessed an outdoor meeting with workers and company officials the morning of Jan. 14. In a telephone interview later that same morning, workers told reporters the gathering was a safety meeting company officials held every morning.

When asked if workers have the opportunity to make known their grievances at that time, the man scoffed.

"When you bring up the concerns, they don't want to hear it," he said. "They say, 'This is not the place and the time for that'."

He added, "So, where is the place and when is the time?"

The man, who has been working at the site since last August, also highlighted unsanitary conditions on the job.

He said from the time he began working there, he had been requesting water and soap be placed in the portable bathrooms. Those requests fell on deaf ears for close to five months.

"You know when they put water and soap there," he asked, "December thirty-first."

The man also spoke of the poor drinking water quality at the site. He said he covertly put company management to the test to see if they maintained the water filtration system as they said they did.

"What they don't know is that I put a piece of tape behind the filter when I first started working here. So, if you take the filter cover off, you will break the seal. Then, I came to the meeting and asked them about the filter, and they said, 'Oh, yeah. We changed those filters this week.'"

After that meeting, the man said, he checked the back of the filter only to see the same piece of tape he had placed there undisturbed.

"That's just to show you the crap that's going on," he said.