

The Virgin Islands Consortium

St. Croix Teachers, BOC Employees Protest At Government House For Wage Increase, Better Working Conditions

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ST. CROIX -- They said they couldn't take it any longer. Now, they contended, was the time to act. In fact, some argued that they'd waited too long to call on the Government of the Virgin Islands to raise their salaries; some of which have remained stagnant for over 10 years.

First, Bureau of Corrections employees -- around five of them -- gathered at Government House in Christiansted on Tuesday morning with signs calling for better wages. "We are law enforcement officers at the bottom of the pay scale," read a sign that was being held

by George Ventura, a corrections officer at BOC. Mr. Ventura, the apparent leader of the group, decried BOC employees' current salaries as severely insufficient.

"I'm working [at the Bureau of Corrections] for 25 years, and from '03, I haven't received a raise; and I think that's an unfair labor practice," Mr. Ventura said. "I'm really sick and tired of the promises and the lies... They always keep saying we're going to get our raise." Mr. Ventura added that he could not survive in 2015 on a 2003 salary.

Mr. Ventura, who said that not receiving pay increases since 2003 was "criminal" and an "injustice, spoke of the many overtime hours that BOC employees must work to make ends meet.

"For me to survive, I have to average at least 56 hours (weekly)," said Mr. Ventura, who currently makes \$36,000 annually but contends his salary should be at \$54,000. "I spend more time in the prison than with my family; and this is taking a toll on each and every corrections officer -- they're getting burned out."

Fankie Johnson, who now works at Government House as Governor Kenneth Mapp's senior policy advisor, is a former corrections officer himself. "He told us to keep fighting," Mr. Ventura said.

At 4:00 p.m., members of the American Federation of Teachers -- literally all public school teachers in the territory -- began descending on Government House in Christiansted with signs in hands, chanting keywords with significance to their cause. Well over 300 teachers are part of the public school system here, but less than a quarter showed up yesterday. Even so, the movement packed force.

Residents honked their horns as they traveled downtown Christiansted in a show of support. Teachers, facing Government House raised their voices in unison, calling for better working conditions and, most importantly, to sit down with officials of the Mapp administration to negotiate a new contract.

"The governor doesn't want to be around mold; why should our children suffer mold," said one protester. Another, educator Doneel Meikle, special education resource teacher at the Pearl B. Larson Elementary School, who has a bachelors in business administration, a master's degree in special education, and is currently working on her doctorate in administration and supervision, said she joined the effort yesterday in support of a new contract to include fair salary increases that would overtime compete with leading jurisdictions.

"I feel that teachers now deserve a new contract. I know that we have a new governor; things are fresh and new, and this is a good time to sit at the bargaining table," Ms. Meikle said. "I think we need to be at the bargaining table and assure that teachers get a new contract, and that's one of my biggest concerns."

Mrs. Rosa Soto-Thomas, president of AFT, echoed Ms. Meikle's stance. She said Mr. Mapp needed to appoint a chief negotiator and get back to the bargaining table with the Federation.

"Apparently, [Governor Mapp] wants to negotiate with the unions and that's a violation of the VI Code," Mrs. Soto-Thomas said, referring to a meeting that Mr. Mapp held with union leaders where he proposed a raise of \$5,000 to the base pay of \$32,000 of teachers, which would bring the total starting salary to \$37,000. Mr. Mapp's proposal included a 3-step salary increase for current teachers as well. But the governor also wanted to extend the school year by two weeks, a problematic stance for AFT, according to Mrs. Soto-Thomas. Asked if teachers were aware of the governor's proposal, she said it was made known to members of AFT via a newsletter the organization issues, and repeated in a speech she gave during a teacher's conference.

"But that's not the issue," she asserted. "That's not how you negotiate. Negotiation happens at the bargaining table. Anybody can make you promises, but you don't have anything in writing."

She added: "Negotiations is a process -- we get at the table, look at what the other team has to offer, we amend and make changes, and we take it back to the members for ratification -- it's a process, not a promise," she stressed. "There's nothing to take back to the members if you don't have a contract. Just like [ArcLight](#) has something written that we can see and are reviewing, the union has to review."

And Mrs. Soto-Thomas said money wasn't the only issue. She highlighted poor conditions at the territory's schools, and said new ones needed to be built to create a better teaching environment.

"It's not about money alone. It's about the students learning environment, and the AFT members working environment. Our schools are very old, some of them need to be demolished, and we need the government to build new schools. And we know that the Governor Mapp administration promised that they were going to do that, and they consolidated schools, and we haven't seen no contract yet," she said.

Throughout the protest, teachers remained consistent, and even if the action was the most serious and direct that AFT had taken in years, the mood was jovial. "Let me stop screaming so I could teach the people's children tomorrow," joked a protester, prompting laughter from others.

But, it was a quote from Marcellin Lockhart, an educator at the Education Complex here, that brought home the importance of yesterday's protest, which Mrs. Soto-Thomas promised would continue. Mr. Lockhart, recognizing the mental stress that is caused by the lack of finances, mentioned the trickle-down effect provoked by teachers who are not receiving adequate pay.

"Generally, so much is expected of teachers, and you don't get compensated for the kind of work that you are doing," Mr. Lockhart began. "So money is one of the key issues and generally you need a contract to get a raise.

"In reality, you have many teachers living in poverty; and to be working and living in poverty as an educator is adverse. And so if you have that level of frustration, how can you impact knowledge in the students? I mean, you expect teachers to be treated fairly so that they can do the work they're supposed to do with students," he concluded.

Feature Image: A collage of AFT union protesters at Government House in Christiansted on Tuesday.

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