

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Under Pressure, Mapp Administration Changes Tune On Retro Pay

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ST. CROIX -- At an impromptu press conference called by Government House on behalf of the Office of Collective Bargaining, the Mapp administration changed its tune on retroactive pay for government employees, with Chief Labor Negotiator Natalie Tang How stating this afternoon that all government employees would receive their salary increases that the governor [promised earlier this year](#), whether or not negotiations between the unions were settled. The move represents an about-turn for the administration that had only days earlier said [all unions were being asked](#) to forfeit the retroactive pay that the Government of the Virgin Islands owes its employees.

Mrs. Tang How, taking a combative stance, challenged reports that the administration had given employees an ultimatum, contending that [\\$19 million had already been appropriated](#) by the Senate for the raises. But in the same breath, Mrs. Tang How said some unions had taken the government's offer -- which she admitted included language asking employees to forego the retro monies -- refusing, she said, to wait any longer to receive their salary increases while negotiations continued. Mrs. Tang How added that employees who were part of unions that had agreed to the government's terms, would start seeing their step increases this month -- but not unions still in negotiations -- contradicting her statement that negotiations would not get in the way of increases.

When pressed to speak specifically to the issue of whether the proposals that the conforming unions agreed to included language that forfeited retroactive pay, Mrs. Tang How dodged.

"Different unions agreed to different things; I don't have the information for the various unions in front of me. But I can tell you that some unions have taken the position that their workers want to see their salary increases and they're not going to hold up or not address their salary increases by trying to hold on to discussions relative to retroactive wages," she said. Mrs. Tang How's comments appear to mean that the salary increases that Governor Kenneth Mapp promised are indeed tied to whether government employees were willing to forego their retroactive monies.

The Consortium asked Mrs. Tang How for clarification and to clearly state whether or not the unions that agreed to the government's proposal had forfeited their retroactive monies, but the chief negotiator's response remained elusive.

"I could tell you that those unions that have decided that they'd rather get their salary increases and not retro, are actually having NOPAs (Notice of Personnel Action) processed, so they can get paid and will be seeing in April, their salary increases," she said, again ducking the question and suggesting that retro pay and salary increases were inseparable.

Yet, even with all the elusiveness, Mrs. Tang How went on to promise that government employees would indeed receive their pay regardless of negotiations. She said when two parties are negotiating, it does not mean a final decision has to be made immediately.

On Thursday, the Virgin Islands chapter of the American Federation of Teachers issued a statement assailing the government, arguing that the Mapp administration's stance was an insult to its employees.

"While the government continues to ignore deplorable, unsafe school conditions, it is also showing deep disrespect for Virgin Islands teachers by reneging on an agreement it made with the St. Croix Federation of Teachers and the St. Thomas-St. John Federation of Teachers to provide teachers with retroactive pay increases," said the presidents in a joint statement.

St. Croix A.F.T. President Rosa Soto-Thomas was more pointed: "It's illegal and insulting for the government to refuse to pay teachers what has been negotiated fairly," she said. "The government's disrespect for public education and its teachers and students seems to know no bounds. Our schools continue to have deplorable conditions, affecting safety,

health, teaching and learning."

Mrs. Tang How fired back this afternoon: "A.F.T. is no stranger to negotiations; negotiations go back-and-forth," she said. "The union leaders do not call the shot on the final decision as to what the outcome will be." Mrs. Tang How said the unions, A.F.T. among them, received a copy of the proposal stating that retroactive monies could not be paid; another comment that again showed the disjointed nature of her press conference.

Near the end of questioning, Mrs. Tang How was again pressed, this time by multiple media outlets, to state clearly whether all government employees, regardless of union and stage of negotiations, would receive the salary increases promised in January by Governor Mapp.

She said yes.

Feature Image: Natalie Tang How during today's press event held in a conference room at the Office of Collective Bargaining, located in Gallows Bay in the Chandler's Wharf complex.

Image Credit: VIC.