

The Virgin Islands Consortium

A.F.T., Senators, Stand By STT-STJ Teachers Following Strike; Education Commissioner Urging Educators To 'Return To Worksites'

Government / **Published On April 19, 2016 11:02 PM /**

Ernice Gilbert **April 19, 2016**



ST. THOMAS -- The Virgin Islands American Federation of Teachers Union issued a statement this afternoon expressing unwavering support for teachers in the St. Thomas-St. John district who staged a strike that effectively shuttered all schools here on Tuesday.

Avery Lewis, president of the St. Thomas-St. John Federation of Teachers, and Rosa Soto-Thomas, president of the St. Croix Federation of Teachers, said the union had no role in organizing today's job action, but they certainly understand the plight that teachers

in the territory face daily, and expressed support for the educators' decision to protest.

"Teachers, parents and students throughout the Virgin Islands are fed up with the continuing state of unsafe, unhealthy conditions in schools. To draw attention to the poor conditions that are being ignored by the government, we understand that hundreds of teachers on St. Thomas and St. John demonstrated today. The teachers unions did not initiate or organize the actions of teachers, but we certainly understand and share in their frustration," reads the statement.

We all work hard, we all deserve to be paid, we all need to be ready to sacrifice something to get what is rightfully ours.

The strike follows a stern rebuke from the territorial A.F.T. following a Consortium [report](#) that unearthed the Mapp administration's intention to tie to promised pay raises the forfeiture of retroactive monies that the government owes employees. Mr. Mapp later told this publication that all employees [were being asked](#) to forego retroactive pay, but after coming under intense pressure, Natalie Tang How, the administration's chief labor negotiator, [tried to explain](#) that the governor's assessment was incorrect.

"Negotiations between the teachers unions and the government are scheduled for June, but we believe they must begin much sooner," reads the statement. "Teachers want to discuss the deplorable school conditions that affect teaching and learning; the retroactive pay increases that teachers are owed; and salary step increases, including those previously negotiated but not paid to our members. Teachers have gone without a pay raise since the 2009-10 school year. It is our hope that this school year can end on a positive note, but it will take labor-government collaboration to accomplish that."

Senators Kenneth Gittens and Kurt Violet issued separate statements in support of the teachers. Mr. Gittens commended them for today's action and lamented that they hadn't received salary increases in multiple years.

"While I view the importance of education and the need for our students to be supervised, I certainly understand and salute the members of the A.F.T. for taking a stand today," Mr. Gittens wrote. "The A.F.T. members have been patient for a long time; being one of the unions who have historically been swift to move to the picket lines. It's been years (more than a decade) that they have sat quietly holding on to promises for pay increases and paid retroactive monies and they've received nothing.

"They were recently asked to forego their retroactive pay and I applaud them for banding together and denouncing such a suggestion. We all work hard, we all deserve to be paid, we all need to be ready to sacrifice something to get what is rightfully ours. Hopefully this matter can be resolved and we can even address the conditions of our classrooms," Mr. Gittens concluded.

Mr. Violet said that A.F.T. was right to stand its ground and not give up retroactive pay owed to its members.



Teachers left their

classrooms and headed to the streets of St. Thomas in protest against a myriad of issues, chief among them being salary increases and retroactive pay. (Sandra Goomansingh, Director/Anchor News 2).

"The A.F.T. union is right in their quest to not give up any retroactivity especially since most members will only receive a one step increase. While I applaud the Governor for these long awaited increases I encourage him to not let these stipulations be a hindrance for paying teachers what they deserve. Teachers are bombarded with mandates and it is only fair that they are rewarded," he said.

Department of Education Commissioner Sharon McCollum, careful in her wording, first praised educators for their dedication in a statement issued late Tuesday, and acknowledged that they are indeed owed wage increases. But she also urged A.F.T. to resolve those issues at the bargaining table, contending that strikes only work to hamper the learning process for students.

"The Virgin Islands Department of Education acknowledges the fact that all of our employees are due pay raises and do extraordinary work often under difficult circumstances. We have some of the finest employees in the Territory who can stand equal and above their counterparts nationally. It cannot be said enough how much we appreciate the commitment and passion our employees demonstrate on a daily basis," Ms. McCollum began.

"We are asking the members of the American Federation of Teachers to move their concerns to the bargaining process. The disruption of learning is a no-win for everyone involved. The disturbance negatively impacts our students, parents, employers, professional relationships and more. We need all hands on deck as we transform education through teamwork," she went on.

The commissioner urged teachers to "return to their worksites," while stressing that the focus should be the territory's students. "I am certain all matters can and will be resolved in a manner that is mutually agreeable," she said, adding that classes would resume on

Wednesday.

Attempts for comment from Government House were not successful at time of writing.

Feature Image: Teachers left their classrooms and headed to the streets of St. Thomas in protest against a myriad of issues, chief among them being salary increases and retroactive pay. (Sandra Goomansingh, Director/Anchor News 2).

© Viconsortium 2026