

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mapp Says He Won't Negotiate With A.F.T. With 'Gun To My Head'

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ST. CROIX -- Governor Kenneth Mapp late Tuesday issued a statement following the [job action](#) taken by A.F.T. teachers in this district. In the statement -- requested by The Consortium Tuesday afternoon -- the governor expressed frustration with the strike, and said he was at a loss as to why the action was taken.

"On what basis or reason is the A.F.T. disrupting the school instruction process by abandoning their students and demonstrating on the public streets? While I want to understand the protest of the teachers, I am at a loss as I publicly announced months ago that I will increase teachers' salaries," Mr. Mapp said.

He added: "The AFT can be assured that I will not work with them with a gun to my head. I believe over the last 16 months my Administration has acted appropriately and responsibly with unionized government employees."

In a press release issued Tuesday afternoon, A.F.T. leaders in both districts said the job action was not sanctioned by the union, however they stood in solidarity with their members.

"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," said the union presidents in the joint statement.

Governor Mapp said his administration has been doing its best to do right by teachers, and he gave a timeline detailing his administration's efforts.

"Our public education teachers went seven years without any increase in pay and on October 16, 2015 the Education Commissioner, Dr. Sharon McCollum, and I met with both AFT Presidents, as well as the heads of the Education Administrators' Union. During this meeting at St. Croix's Government House, I advised Union officials that I was committed to meeting the Government's obligation under the collective bargaining agreements. In addition, I advised the union leaders that we would be proposing an across the board increase in the base pay of teachers to accomplish two specific tasks - to extend the length of the school year to three semesters and to alleviate the problem of teacher recruitment and retention," Mr. Mapp said.

He continued: "In December 2015, I announced that the Mapp-Potter Administration would begin implementing salary increases for government employees and, in late January, I announced that employees in the Department of Education would receive salary increases retroactive to January 1, 2016.

"I sent a bill to appropriate the funds to implement the salary increases to the 31st Legislature. The proposed bill included funds to cover all of the union increases owed for the Department of Education.

"During the last Administration, teachers suffered a two-year salary reduction of 8% for each year. All of my discussions with teachers and administrators have included the objective of paying teachers what they are owed and increasing their base salaries.

"I sent legislation to the senate to fund the increases and I've long since instructed the Director of Personnel and the Office of Collective Bargaining to prepare the NOPAs for processing overdue raises pending receipt of authorization from the Legislature. What else is the AFT asking?"

But the governor did not say in his statement that unions were being asked to forego retroactive pay as part of salary increases that were promised.

"There is a discussion that some of the contracts carry significant retroactive obligations," Mr. Mapp [told this publication earlier this month](#). "All of the unions are being asked if

they're willing to give up those retroactive payments and to be quite candid, some have volunteered to give them up if they can be brought fully on step."

The governor was clear in stating that negotiations were ongoing, but he suggested that if employees were willing to hold on to ten-year-old contracts and wanted lump sum payouts, there was not much that he could do.

"It's been ten years that employees of the Virgin Islands Government have seen any increase in their pay, and if you hold on and you say, 'well, I had a contract that's ten years old and I want all my money...'" The governor did not complete his statement; however his expression suggested that such a stance would result in a stalemate and thereby stall progress on the [promised salary increases](#).

But Natalie Tang How, the Mapp administration's chief labor negotiator, held an impromptu press conference at the Office of Collective Bargaining in Gallows Bay in an attempt to [clarify the administration's stance on the issue](#). The move came as residents had grown irate that the administration was attempting to erase [hundreds of millions](#) in retroactive pay in return for salary increases that would not be at 2016 levels.

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 appeared 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.

It remains unclear whether teachers would report to school today, but Education Commissioner Sharon McCollum said this morning that all public schools would be open for classes.

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