

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Implementation Of Salary Increases Arrives As Mapp Signs Bill Into Law; Tells Teachers He Won't Reward 'Bad Behavior'

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ST. CROIX -- Sounding frustrated, Governor Kenneth Mapp on Tuesday said he would wait until teachers and their unions could clearly state what they wanted before attempting to find additional funds for further salary increases for educators, after the promised raises took effect. The territory's leader made those remarks at Government House here this morning, while announcing that he had signed legislation that would see increases coming to a host of departments and agencies.

"I have today signed bill No. 31-0230, now Act 7873, [which] provides monies for the Bureau of Corrections, the Bureau of Internal Revenue, the Division of Personnel, the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, the Virgin Islands Fire Service, the Department of Human Services, the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs, the Virgin Islands Police Department and the Department of Education for salary increases pursuant to collective bargaining agreements," Mr. Mapp said. The governor said he has directed Milton Potter, director of the Division of Personnel, to begin with the implementation of salary increases for public employees.

According to the chief executive, on May 26, B.I.R., V.I.F.S., D.L.C.A., Department of Tourism, Department of Finance and the Division of Personnel will receive their salary increases, and on June 9, these employees will see their retroactive payments for increases that would have taken effect from January 1, up to the pay period of May 13.

But Mr. Map said he was grieved by the recent job action taken by teachers, and would temper his excitement to bring teachers up to step until the unions could sit with the government and make clear their frustrations. He explained that his administration took office on the premise of bettering the lives of Virgin Islanders, a process he said began with paying over \$90 million in tax refunds, started the work of instituting pay raises last December, and in February sent a bill to the Legislature asking for an appropriation for government departments and agencies to begin the fulfillment of their commitment. Therefore, the governor said, he was "perplexed" that teachers were striking on the basis that they would not see pay increases.

After all this, "Now in March and April, I have unions undertaking job actions -- teachers showing up at school, walking out the door, abandoning the children and forcing the management of the Department of Education to scurry about to find adults to care for the children while they're in school, on some premise that the teachers are looking for their pay raises," Mr. Mapp said. The governor also mentioned the [job action taken by police officers](#) in St. Thomas, when 96 percent of the force did not report to work on j'ouvert morning, "on the premise that they too were looking for pay increases."

"So I am perplexed. I am a bit confused," the governor admitted. "Because in 15 or 16 months in office, we have clearly demonstrated by our actions, that we intend to increase the pay, the working environment and the quality of the people of the Virgin Islands. Now we have an outcry, disdain and really disapproval and so I'm going to implement these increases as I have committed to do and as the Legislature has authorized. The remaining departments and agencies who have not been named, the financial team has been directed to go ahead and reconcile their pay increases, and those increases too will be implemented.

"But I must advised unionized government employees that my exuberance, my motivation, my haste to get you at a livable wage is tempered and I will in fact retract, backup, take a break and maybe listen to you more carefully because we're not communicating very well. The lieutenant governor and I are about paying you a wage pursuant to your work, [but] some of your are about arguing and fighting over the past which the lieutenant governor and I have no ability to change. And so before I continue to run up the highway and look for additional funds to pay you, I am going to settle down and give you an opportunity to speak with me directly and through the Office of Collective Bargaining about what your priorities are," Mr. Mapp said.

He added: "But [as I said](#), and I want to repeat here, Kenneth Mapp will not do business with anyone with a gun to my head. So when we're ready to sit and be reasonable and rational people and discuss and come to some reasonable and rational agreement, then we will be in a position that we can proceed in the best interest in the people of the territory."

The governor further chided teachers for the job action: "Unionized workers must recognize that it's the taxpaying public that pay your salary. When you abandon their children or you leave them exposed to violence and unsafe conditions to protest actions that you know are not true, then you are acting irresponsibly, and we do not reward bad behavior."

The Consortium was strangely not allowed to enter Government House, although one of its reporters arrived there at 9:30 a.m. to set up (the press conference began at 10:00 a.m.). The reason for keeping the reporter out of Government House was because those preparing the ballroom were still occupied; a strange answer as reporters are generally allowed to setup long before an event begins.

The administration's PR team later apologized for what was described as a mix up, but the result of the faux pas was that The Consortium was unable to question the governor on the important issue of retroactive pay. And attempts to speak with the territory's leader before publishing this story have been unsuccessful.

The governor, not once during his talk, acknowledged that he had made some comments that may have fueled the recent [job action](#) by teachers.

"There is a discussion that some of the contracts carry significant retroactive obligations," Mr. Mapp told The Consortium on April 5, after being asked whether his administration, in negotiations, had asked unions to forego retroactive monies owed by the government. "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," he said.

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](#).

And Mr. Mapp, sensing the delicacy of the matter, said his administration was not placing a demand on government employees to give up their retroactive pay; and again stressed that negotiations were underway.

"I am very committed to raising the salaries of the employees, and to the extent that they give me the opportunity to be able to do that with the resources that are available, they're going to get their money," the governor said.

Today, however, he did not acknowledge the bone of contention with the retroactive pay issue, which was made abundantly clear by teachers as one of the reasons that they had taken the job action.

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