

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Educators Gather At Government House St. Croix In Protest Of Low Wages, Working Conditions

Education / **Published On April 19, 2018 09:26 AM /**

Staff **April 19, 2018**



ST. CROIX -- Educators here led by St. Croix Federation of Teachers President Rosa Soto-Thomas, descended on Government House in Christiansted on Wednesday for a protest action to raise awareness on a myriad of issues facing teachers, including stagnant wages and the condition of learning facilities.

While the turnout was not large -- roughly about 30 persons attended -- the action reminded the public of the high level of frustration with the public education system in the Virgin Islands, which has been losing educators for years.

"We are over here having a demonstration to bring awareness to the working conditions that are happening in our schools; the issue of long overdue salary increases, and we're also echoing the same thing that is happening on a national level," Mrs. Soto-Thomas [said](#), referring to the National Day of Action Against Gun Violence in Schools, set for April 20 across the U.S.

"There are many issues going on in the Virgin Islands. Our students are getting four hours of education and that's a major issue for all of us here in the community. We're hoping for changes, and we're hoping that our schools are up and going," Mrs. Soto-Thomas added.

Protesters could be seen holding up signs with various grievances. "We demand definitive deadlines," read one sign, ostensibly pointing to the Department of Education's lack of solid dates for the installation of modular units and sprung structures at various schools -- a move that would bring an end to split sessions.

"We are owed wage opener, old retro, new retro, [and] 8 percent restoration," read another, highlighting the number of areas that teachers believe they are being wronged.

Another read, "Personal leave, it's mine! Leave me alone." There were also signs about mold and even one that sought to highlight the Government Employees' Retirement System, which educators pay into and whose survival is in doubt.

Wednesday's protest action spoke to the compounding problems facing the Department of Education. D.O.E. has been losing teachers at an unsustainable rate. [As of January, there were 137 teaching vacancies](#). Since August 2017, the department had 60 separations: 17 teachers from the STTJ District and 13 from the STX District, and the remaining 30 in support staff. The problem? Educators continue to leave en masse for better opportunities elsewhere, decrying the low pay and unendurable number of deductions from the already low pay.

So they leave, looking to better their lives. "After much thought and trial in trying to make ends meet here, I must inform you of my intent to depart from the D.O.E. .. This is by no means a hasty decision, however, due to the fact I have \$500 coming out of each paycheck, I can no longer keep up with my bills," one departing teacher told D.O.E. in a letter announcing her resignation.

The problem was [bluntly admitted](#) by D.O.E. Commissioner Sharon McCollum last year: "Applicants' interest quickly dissipates when they attempt to negotiate incentives and salary schedules. Our department is simply at a disadvantage and unable to compete with school districts nationally in regards to monetary compensation," she said.

During [a Consortium interview](#) with Governor Kenneth Mapp in January, where the publication chose most of its questions from the community, Mr. Mapp said he could not give a timeline on when teachers would see a pay increase.

The governor said pay increases for not only teachers, but other government employees would come, "As we improve the economy, as we're able to collect the revenues and support for doing that. But I as a governor would not want to take an irresponsible position, negotiate for higher wages and then send people home," he said.

Mr. Mapp was responding to a question posed by Mrs. Soto-Thomas on the Consortium's Facebook platform, asking the governor when would he retract an executive order that placed a halt on all salary negotiations. "We are in 2018 and getting paid in 2010 salaries," Mrs. Soto-Thomas said. "Teacher vacancies continue to mount. You promised educators that you were going to fix their starting salaries, instead, their expendable income continues to shrink with the slew of deductions."

The governor, in explaining why he signed the executive order halting salary negotiations, said that when the U.S. Third Circuit Court of Appeals [ruled in November 2016](#) that the 8 percent pay cut was unconstitutional, that ruling came because the Virgin Islands government negotiated for wages, came into an agreement with the union, signed a contract and then wrote legislation to reduce wages. "So [the government] cannot negotiate for money it does not have, and then find some other way to cure the deficiency... If you do not have the money — and this is in the opinion — then do not negotiate," the governor said.

Mr. Mapp acknowledged the tireless work of public servants, but gave no reassurances. "I thank the teachers, and I thank public workers because they work hard and teachers today are working in horrible conditions, because we have in some instances three schools in a building — and the schools are not in the best condition," he said. But to give a timeline, the governor added, would be "self-serving politics, because you don't have control on that."

He added, "I do understand that it is competitive out there and people are going to make decisions in the best interest of their families. I'm going to work hard, and Lieutenant Governor Potter, we're going to work hard to get to a better day, but we just could not pull that off in three years with the financial condition of the government. And again, I can't say today what month and what year we'll be able to do that."