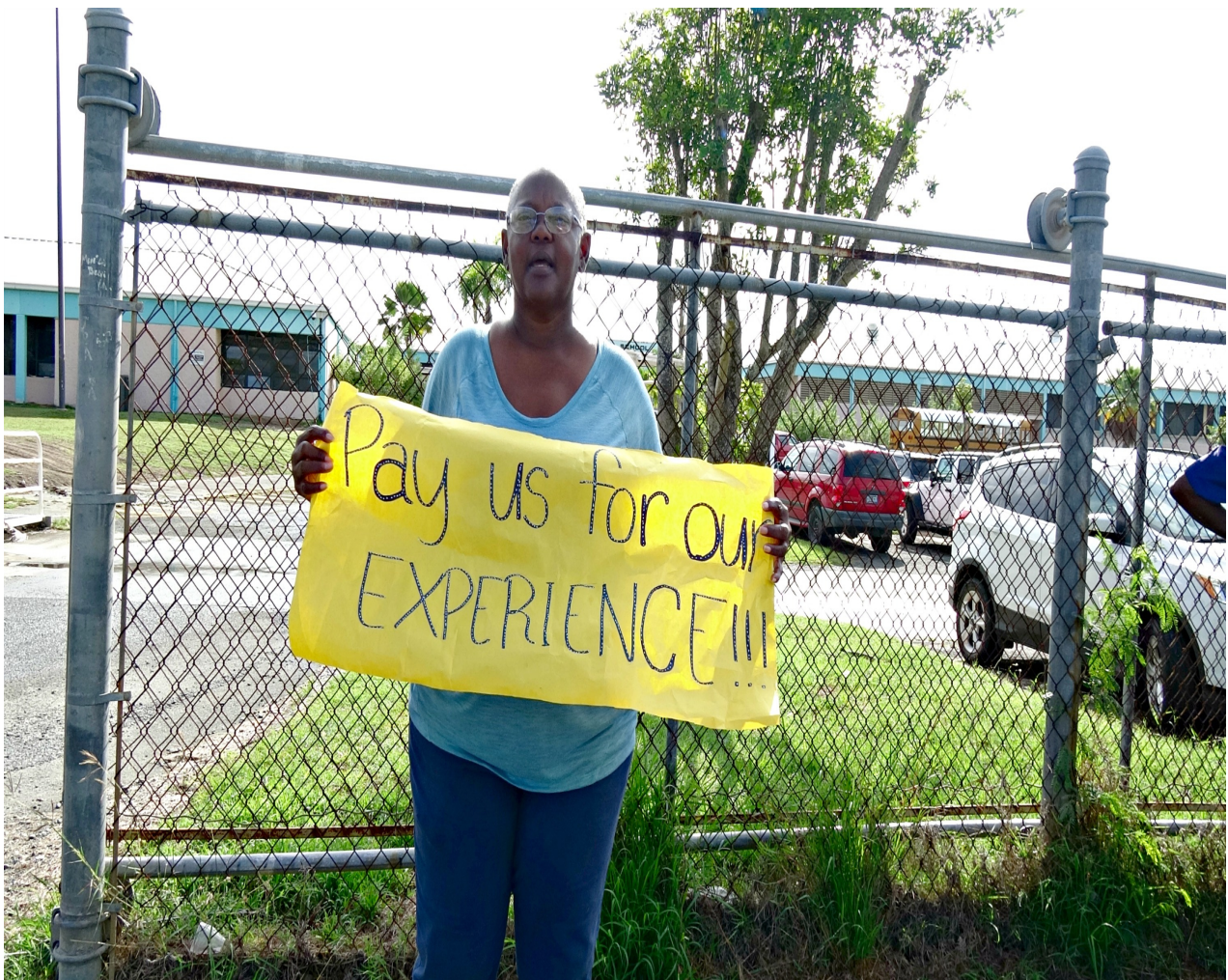


The Virgin Islands Consortium

John H. Woodson Teachers Take Job Action: 'Enough Is Enough', 'Change Pay Now', 'Pay Us For Our Experience'

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ST. CROIX -- Teachers from the John H. Woodson Junior High School stood outside the school's entrance on the sidewalk early Monday morning, holding up picket signs that demanded pay increases and better working conditions. The call for pay increases for educators has been ongoing for years in the territory, only this time it is much more pronounced, with the teachers spending the entire school day protesting what they described as unfair treatment, while stalling a full day of instruction in hopes of getting the attention of Governor Kenneth Mapp and the Department of Education (D.O.E.)

The job action comes on the heels of an overwhelming defeat for the Office of Collective Bargaining last week, after St. Croix and St. Thomas-St. John Federation of Teachers educators voted overwhelmingly to reject a tentative wage agreement -- a move the federation believes sent a strong message to the government.

"Enough is enough already!" read one sign. Another demanded that teachers be paid for their experience. "Just put us on step," read yet another sign, as the educators braved the scorching sun to let their collective voices be heard.

Governor Kenneth Mapp's [July executive order](#) that raised the base salary of teachers to \$44,000 -- while a welcome relief to new educators -- negatively affected experienced teachers who make above the \$44,000, but have yet to see step increases that match their years of experience and accompanying degrees.

Educators in both locals have rejected that unilateral move, adamantly insisting that the government's action is a union-busting effort designed to divide and conquer the union membership to secure a contract during this election cycle, according to a release the AFT issued recently.

"This is totally unjust. There must be parity among members of our bargaining units," said Rosa Soto-Thomas, president of St. Croix AFT.

She and Carol Callwood, president of the St. Thomas - St. John District AFT, said any new agreement must address issues that go far beyond starting salaries. "The Government should not only focus on recruitment, but also on the retention of teachers as well," Mrs. Soto-Thomas said. "Teaching is a labor of love, our members remain on board for their students because they are passionate about their profession. They are demanding to be treated fairly."

Union members and their leaders said ratification of the proposed agreement failed because many VI educators have years of experience with the department and are still not receiving the salary that their experience entitles them to under previous contracts.

Educators who participated in today's job action were aggrieved that monitors were making \$50,000 annually -- some of whom only have a high school diploma -- while teachers with years of experiences, multiple degrees and student loans, were making less.

The current salary schedule has 30 steps for professional classifications. The intention of the system was that professional staff members would advance a step each year. However, it has been eight years since the St. Croix Federation of Teachers and the St. Thomas-St. John Federation of Teachers have seen new salary schedules, Mrs. Soto-Thomas said.

Meanwhile, the rising cost of living in the Virgin Islands, coupled with a slew of increased deduction, makes it extremely challenging for educators to stay afloat, forcing many to take second jobs to support their families, Mrs. Soto-Thomas said. Paraprofessionals and school support staff are also in the same situation, both presidents said, and those members also rejected the proposed salary adjustment as well.

Aside from the demand for salary increases, the teachers also shared a number of complaints. They said the John H. Woodson Junior High School was not ready to house students for instruction, as some classes were without power, no internet, no fans, and some parts of the roof continue to leak.

Educators also complained about what they described as disregard and disrespect by the Department of Education, after D.O.E, without proper notification and no discussion with the John H. Woodson staff, decided to move Arthur Richards Junior High School to the upper rooms of John H. Woodson, where teachers had already prepared their classes for instruction.

"They're moving our teachers downstairs," said one Woodson educator. This educator said that John H. Woodson teachers had "already fixed their classrooms, they're already setup, students have already been settled in school, and then they want to move the teachers from upstairs to downstairs."

"It almost seems like someone woke up one morning and said, 'hey, let's do this.' There is no organization," this educator said.

Meanwhile, Arthur Richards educators were to appear at the John H. Woodson school today to begin the setup process of the transition. But the teachers were sent home as mold and other unfavorable conditions prevented them from functioning. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) was scheduled to visit the facility today, but it remains unknown as to whether the visit occurred.

So Arthur A. Richards educators will once more visit the John H. Woodson school on Tuesday to see if conditions changed, and if not, return home.