

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Wage Agreement For AFT Teachers Proposed By Mapp Administration Rejected

Education / **Published On September 18, 2018 09:55 AM /**

Staff **September 18, 2018**



Educators of the St.Croix and St. Thomas/St. John Federation of Teachers local 1826 and 1825 voted overwhelmingly to reject a tentative wage agreement sending a strong message to the government of the U.S. Virgin Islands, the AFT has announced.

According to the AFT release, the vote was the latest development in contract negotiations that have been ongoing on sporadically since 2016. In February 2017, an executive order issued by the Governor suspended all salary negotiations. The government resumed bargaining in May after that was rescinded.

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 move designed to divide and conquer the union membership to secure a contract during this election cycle, the AFT said.

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

She and Carol Callwood, President of the St. Thomas - St. John Federation of Teachers 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.

The current salary schedule has 30 steps for professional classifications, according to the release. The intention of the system was that professional staff members would advance a step each year-but over the years that intention has not been implemented by the Government. Union Leaders said the failure of the Government to abide by prior compensation promises led members to reject the proposed agreement.

The vote speaks volumes about educators' frustration and disappointment with the offer currently on the table, both district presidents said. They said that educators with decade of experience, felt insulted by the government's salary terms.

AFT union members said terms of the government's proposal demonstrated a lack of respect for the value of educators work preparing V.I. children for the future, according to the release. "I deserve a lot better," said a union member who voted against the government's proposal.

According to AFT, 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. The union added that 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.

Paraprofessionals and school support staff are also in the same situation, both presidents said, and those members also rejected the proposed salary adjustment.