

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Crisis In Government As Teachers Continue To Protest; Mapp Administration Halts Negotiations

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ST. CROIX -- It was only Thursday afternoon that Governor Kenneth Mapp himself [stopped near the Gas City Service Station in La Grand Princesse](#), where Elena Christian Jr. High School educators were protesting wages and working conditions. Housed at Manor School, some teachers say they don't have classrooms to teach in, and others questioned why construction that had been ongoing to prepare the former small private school for instruction, had suddenly stopped.

"You have every right to advocate for your interests. You have no negatives in that from me at all," the governor said to the protesters.

Today, however, union negotiators were escorted off a premises where salary negotiations were ongoing, after the Mapp-appointed chief negotiator, Natalie Nelson Tang How, abruptly halted talks and refused to discuss counter proposals that the union bargaining team was prepared to submit. According to a release the American Federation Of Teachers (AFT) issued today, Mrs. Tang How simply declared there was nothing more to discuss and then directed her staff to escort the union negotiators out the back door.

The Mapp administration also requested that the unions cease and desist the protests, contending that they had violated their contracts, and Rosa Soto-Thomas, president of St. Croix AFT, said she has since directed AFT educators to follow the order -- as it pertains to wage increases -- until September 30, which is when the month-to-month AFT contract ends.

“Like our educators, I am fed up with the government’s lack of action to correct the unsafe and unhealthy conditions in our schools,” she said in a release. “However, neither our union nor any of our leaders have called for or encouraged recent picketing by some teachers. These actions are not sanctioned by our union. Indeed, we have urged all educators to report for work as scheduled.”



Complex protesters prepare banner during all-day job action. (Ernice Gilbert)

During a phone interview with The Consortium late Friday, Mrs. Soto-Thomas said, "I don't even know how to express how I feel. Maybe numb? The governor halted negotiations because of the actions taking place at the schools, and they're ordering us to cease and desist."

Teachers, paraprofessionals and school support staff are all working on month-to-month extensions of the old contract, the AFT release said.

"We came to the table ready to bargain. We remain ready to resume talks whenever the government comes to its senses and realizes this tactic serves no one—not our citizens, not educators and most of all not our students," said Carol Callwood, president of the St. Thomas-St. John AFT.

The job actions could not come at a worse time for Mr. Mapp, who is facing a tough reelection challenge in November. Teachers are a wide voting bloc, and there are suggestions that the governor should take drastic action to regain the confidence of educators.

Asked what would happen if teachers continued to protest, Mrs. Soto-Thomas said teachers were not only protesting wages, but also deplorable working conditions. "Some of them will [continue to protest] because the working conditions are horrible. They can't continue to stay in those buildings. McCollum needs to sit down with us and have some tough conversations," she said.

Educators across St. Croix continued protesting unfavorable working conditions along with wages that have not moved on step for over 8 years.



Complex High Sept. 21, 2018 protest. (Credit: Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

On Monday, [John H. Woodson teachers took an all-day job action](#). It was followed by launch-break protests organized by St. Croix Educational Complex teachers on Tuesday through Thursday. On Friday, Complex educators took the entire day to protest, forcing the early dismissal of school.

Standing on the side of the Centerline Road near the school, teachers for hours held signs up demanding better wages and working conditions, while motorists passing by were encouraged to hunk their horns.

One educator recalled her days as a student at the St. Croix Educational Complex. She said she remembered vividly how teachers used to protest for salary increases during her years as a child. Now, as an adult and teacher at Complex, she joined her colleagues on the front lines.

About 10:00 a.m. today, Arthur A. Richards teachers met at Woodson, where students are supposed to start school Monday, to discuss the condition of the rooms they are to utilize. The educators have been complaining about a number of issues, including mold, and while D.O.E. has been saying that the school was tested and is safe, as of Friday, it had yet to produce documents stating such.

"McCollum told me in a meeting with all the unions -- not only AFT -- she told us they were done," Mrs. Soto-Thomas said, speaking of D.O.E. Commissioner Sharon McCollum. "I asked for the copies but have not received them. I want to know for myself that these buildings have been cleared." The St. Croix AFT president said she visited the John H. Woodson library only to find it moldy. And quoting teachers, she said Eulalie Rivera, which is set to open Monday according to D.O.E., was not ready to receive students.

Both AFT union leaders said their legal counsel was preparing a formal response to the government's actions on Friday. According to the release, while the members await adequate salaries, Mr. Callwood and Mrs. Soto-Thomas are trying to address other pressing issues:

- After being shuttered for a year, some schools were opened prematurely without supplies, equipment or furniture.
- After being told repeatedly that the modular classroom units would be in place and keys would be turned over on August 28, almost one month later most of the modular units have not been completed.
- Classrooms in the standing buildings have received limited to no repairs; there are many structural deficiencies still not rectified.
- Without discussion with the two unions, the Education Commissioner has repeatedly delayed and publicized the delay of schools, with educators receiving no advance notice and finding out at the same time as the general public.
- Educational resources are not available for instruction in must schools.
- Air quality assessments have not been done or the reports have not been available to the unions to show that these buildings have been cleared for occupancy.

The government's walkout comes on the heels of the recent overwhelming vote by union members [to reject the wage and salary proposal](#) offered by the territory's chief negotiator.

It has been eight years since the union members have seen a new salary schedule. AFT said the government's proposal failed to compensate for the rising cost of living and several new deductions taken directly out of paychecks.

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.

The union leaders said they were awaiting notice from the government with their intent to resume negotiations to review the counter proposal that addresses the years of experience.