

The Virgin Islands Consortium

As Education Crisis Grows, Mapp Calls Press Conference

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

ST. THOMAS -- In the face of a number of job actions organized by educators from various schools -- John H. Woodson, Elena Christian Junior High, and the St. Croix Educational Complex to name some -- Governor Kenneth Mapp, whose reelection bid comes in less than two months, has called a press conference for Monday, where Mr. Mapp will address the growing problem, according to a Government House release issued late Friday.

The press conference will be held at the West Indian Company in St. Thomas at 10:00 a.m.

Educators across the territory are seeking better pay and working conditions. Mr. 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.

Today, negotiations between the unions and the Mapp administration fell apart before starting, after the Mapp administration's chief negotiator halted discussions and had union members removed from the premises where negotiations were to take place.

The government also demanded that the unions cease and desist, insisting that they had violated contracts. AFT St. Croix President Rosa Soto-Thomas said the job actions were not sanctioned by the union, and she encouraged teachers to return to school at least until the month-to-month contracts expire on September 30.

“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.”

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.

