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Leaking Roofs, No Nurse, No Cafeteria, No Playground, Rodent Issues and More: Claude O. Markoe Staff Protest Working Conditions

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Faculty, staff and supporters of the Claude O. Markoe Elementary School protested working conditions on Tues. March 22, 2022. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

Faculty and staff of the Claude O. Markoe Elementary School on St. Croix sang uplifting songs, held up banners listing several issues at the school, and did so for hours Tuesday morning while vehicles honked their horns in a show of support.

Tuesday's action was a culmination of several weeks of complaints by staff of the beleaguered school which culminated with a back-and-forth between the Dept. of Education and popular St. Croix social media page West Gyul, which had shot a video on March 4 [showing all sorts of](#)

[equipment](#) littering the school's cafeteria.

Yesterday, well over two dozen staff members gathered outside the school near a shanty on the roadside to voice their complaints. One protester held up a sign showing a long list of areas that need attention: "cafeteria, kitchen, nurse, gym, playground, more personnel, AC units, leaking roofs, new desks and chairs, drinking water."

The school does not have a nurse, nor does it have drinking water, said Rosa Soto-Thomas, the St. Croix District president of the American Federation of Teachers Union who is well versed on matters affecting St. Croix public schools. She told the Consortium during an interview that while she wasn't aware of the job action beforehand and was informed by the school's assistant superintendent, she had vast knowledge of the ills affecting not only Claude O. Markoe but all the public schools on St. Croix. Mrs. Soto-Thomas also said that the Dept. of Education has been slow to respond to pressing issues, which resulted in the boil-over for the staff of Claude O. Markoe Tuesday.

In a statement provided to the Consortium at 10:37 a.m. Wednesday, Dept. of Education director of public relations and communications, Cynthia Graham, said, "The St. Croix District has met with the school's administration and union leaders to address the employees' concerns." The statement did not say when this meeting occurred, nor did it provide details on what was discussed or a plan of action.

The union president said students were eating late, including having their breakfast during the lunch period, and there are concerns about a rodent situation at Claude O. Markoe. "There's no nurse at Claude O. Markoe," Mrs. Soto-Thomas said, adding that a nurse was hired but her contract was breached after the Dept. of Education sought to extend her work to three schools. "She said no and she resigned," Mrs. Soto-Thomas said.

"The issue with the kitchen equipment has been outstanding, there's no excuse for this," Mrs. Soto-Thomas further stated. She explained that contractor AECOM was withholding equipment from the Dept. of Education because of millions of dollars owed. Nonetheless, AECOM released the equipment but the department had already purchased selfsame items because of the belief that [AECOM](#) would never release them, Mrs. Soto-Thomas said.

"This led to two sets of kitchen equipment sitting in all our schools, crowding all our cafeterias [and therefore] the students are not using the cafeterias to eat in some of the schools," Mrs. Soto-Thomas said. She said the items are at all the schools and revealed that at the St. Croix Central High School, the items are near the roadside. "All the schools are loaded; every cafeteria loaded with equipment. It's like a storage room in the cafeteria now," she said.

"Claude O. Markoe has no kitchen, Eulalie Rivera School has no kitchen, so they're making the rank and file, the kitchen workers and the food workers are carting coolers every single day to get the kids the food," she said. "There's no water in the schools and they won't bring water. There's a problem with the students accessing water on a regular basis and the employees as well."

Mrs. Soto-Thomas continued: "This administration is holding on to money too long. There's money but it's not getting to where it needs to go, and the contracts are not coming online in a timeline fashion. There's less than 40 days for school and they're not going to fix the Claude O. Markoe cafeteria, stop lying to the people."

Highlighting the issues facing Claude O. Markoe, Edward L. Browne, a guidance counselor at the school, honed in on the issue of health and the lack of a nurse. "At any moment anyone of us coming into the school can get sick, and we need a nurse to be there to make sure to stabilize," he said. "Yes, you could call the ambulance but the ambulance might take a long time and your life is gone."

He added, "Why don't we have a playground after nine years. A playground for little children. Come on. Cafeteria. Come on. And the government is sitting on hundreds of millions of dollars that some of it should be for the children."

Looking straight into a Consortium camera, Mr. Browne said, "Governor Bryan, [Dept. of] Interior, I don't care who. Get us a nurse, get us a playground, get us the things we need because our children in this territory have been suffering for hundreds of years and our children still suffering now. But we're not playing that game on St. Croix, get us the things we need."

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