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'Masks Are Disposable, Educators Are Not': Large Crowds Take Bryan Administration to Task on Education Deficiencies

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Educators, nurses and regular citizens protested working conditions outside Gov't House on St. Croix on Wed. April 20, 2022. By. REEMY-REEMZ PHOTOGRAPHY/VICONSORTIUM

Crowds gathered territory-wide to protest what local union leaders, educators, parents and regular citizens say are myriad deficiencies with the territory's school facilities, which they say hamper students' learning potential and educators teaching efforts.

In St. Thomas, the protest, led by St. Thomas-St. John district American Federation of Teachers union President Leontyne Jones, occurred at Emancipation Garden. On St. Croix, a large crowd

gathered at Government House in Christiansted and took the Bryan administration to task for what they deemed a failure to adequately address the problems.

"What do we want?" asked Rosa Soto-Thomas, head of the local AFT union on St. Croix and organizer of the protest. The crowd said "action!" "When do we want it?" Mrs. Soto-Thomas fired back. The gathering yelled "now!"

"No justice, no peace! Tell Governor Bryan he got to spend the money [before they take it away from the V.I.](#) Governor Bryan needs to spend the money on our schools, hospital facilities," Mrs. Soto-Thomas further stated, referring to funding provided to the U.S. Virgin Islands after Hurricanes Irma and Maria, and [\\$541 million as part of Covid-19 relief funding](#) which governments were given wide latitude to expend.

"We want a change in government. We know that you're getting federal dollars, and if you're getting federal dollars and you don't know how to spend it, and spend it so that the people can understand and see it, then what's the sense of you being in government," said one of many protesters on St. Croix.

Wednesday's action was a culmination of frustration that was building for some time. The boil-over started with teachers [at the Claude O. Markoe Elementary School on St. Croix in March](#), who protested what they said was the Dept. of Education's lack of attention to pressing issues at the school.

At the Claude O. Markoe action, one protester held up a sign showing a long list of areas that needed attention: "cafeteria, kitchen, nurse, gym, playground, more personnel, AC units, leaking roofs, new desks and chairs, drinking water."

During the protest in March, Mrs. Soto-Thomas — who has vast knowledge of the ills affecting the public schools on St. Croix — said the Claude O. Markoe School did not have a nurse, nor did it have drinking water. She also said that the Dept. of Education had been slow to respond.

The union president said students were eating late, including having their breakfast during the lunch period, and there were concerns about a rodent situation at Claude O. Markoe.

Governor Bryan, who is [quarantining after contracting Covid-19](#), responded to the protest in a statement and expressed his commitment to address the concerns.

"As a former Labor commissioner and lifelong advocate for the advancement of workers' rights, and now as Governor, I stand in support of the workers and their right to demonstrate on Wednesday," Mr. Bryan said.

He added, "It is out of this commitment to the labor force that the Bryan-Roach Administration has made it a priority to bring current outstanding labor agreements to repay the \$41 million in 8 percent pay cuts as the result of the 2011 VIESA and has made certain to bring solvent the Government Employees' Retirement System.

"While we understand that there are still many longstanding issues that require attention, it is this administration's focus and ultimate goal to continue to address those issues in the interest of our hard-working government and private-sector employees.

“I look forward to our continued efforts and discussions with labor leaders to help address all of these issues for the betterment of all workers.”

Deficiencies at the Juan F. Luis Hospital were also brought to the fore during Wednesday's protest. "We showed up when there was Covid, we showed up when people were dying, when we didn't know what it was, when people were scared," stated another protester on St. Croix. "We have a moldy hospital, the nurses are literally sick and they still come to work. The conditions at JFL are deplorable and we still show up. Our nursing contract is expired. It's been expired for years. When we try to get talks, they told us that other unions are more important. How are the nurses not the most important people right now? We are the ones who've been dealing with what the whole world is concentrated on for the past two years. We have low staffing at JFL. Our ICU right now only has three staff nurses — that means we have to bring outside nurses and pay those nurses five times what the JFL nurses make.

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