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Steelworkers Union Members Say Bryan Campaign Meeting Was Shutdown during Protest; Campaign Says No Meeting Was Taking Place

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Members of the United Steelworkers Union, St. Croix Chapter, representing a cross segment of government agencies, protested in front the Bryan campaign headquarters in La Reine on Friday, Sept. 30, 2022. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

A campaign meeting that was scheduled for Friday evening at the Bryan campaign headquarters on St. Croix was called off after protesters showed up at the headquarters in La Reine expressing what they contend is neglect by the administration in addressing long-overdue wage and other contract-related matters, members of the union told the Consortium. Campaign officials say a meeting was not planned and that events were being held in St. Thomas and St. John.

The United Steelworkers Union 9489 Local Chapter includes 911 Operators, all government supervisors, support staff along with the V.I. Waste Management Union and the V.I. Lottery Union. None of these groups have contracts, which expired at midnight Friday, according to union officials.

Lionel Farrington, president of USW 9489 Local Chapter, said that while attempts have been made to secure meetings with Governor Albert Bryan to begin negotiations, they've been unable to get an audience with the governor or an administration representative. "Just about every month a letter was sent to them asking them for a day to negotiate, and up to now we haven't received a day to negotiate," Mr. Farrington said Friday night standing in front of the Bryan-Roach campaign headquarters. He said protests will continue every Friday at the campaign headquarters until satisfactory results are realized.

Mr. Farrington said the union is seeking new contracts with not only raises, but also new language to govern the contracts. He also accused the governor of showing favoritism. "He has given AFT a contract, he has even promised them more money," Mr. Farrington said of the governor, referring to the American Federation of Teachers Union local chapters. Mr. Farrington highlighted all the unions that fall under USW and said, "Today, every union that's under Steelworkers have not had a contract renewed."

The union president reminded that it was USW that filed suit against the government of the Virgin Islands to recapture the 8 percent pay cut that was exacted upon government employees during the John P. de Jongh administration. Mr. Farrington is of the belief that Mr. Bryan took offense to the lawsuit, "and his response was if you want your contracts ratified take me back to court, and that's why the United Steelworkers contracts are not being negotiated," Mr. Farrington said.

Among those affected by the now-expired contracts are school monitors, whose beginning wage is \$31,000 annually. At least two monitors spoke to the Consortium and said aside from the need of pay raises, their occupation also needs to be classified as hazardous because of the dangerous conditions they work under.

Public schools in the USVI have seen a marked increase in violent brawls, leading the V.I. Dept. of Education [to announce plans](#) to address the problem. Monitors on St. Croix [didn't show up to work at some schools mid-September](#), an action taken to express their dissatisfaction with the heightened violence and inadequate wages. "I've been a police for almost 20 years and I'm going to tell you it's worse being a school monitor than it is being a police," one of the monitors protesting at the event Friday night told the Consortium. "Monitors need some special attention because without us the teachers can't teach, the schools can't open so we're critical."

Senator Kurt Vialet, who showed up as the protest was winding down, criticized the governor for failing to address the union and its members. "I just heard about this protest that occurred in front of the Bryan headquarters, and I've noticed that the headquarters is closed. When the individuals that were in opposition to the rum distillery came to the Vialet-Sarauw headquarters I invited them inside and had a meeting with them for an hour and a half, and then went to have [a town hall and heard their concerns](#). And despite the fact that they were in opposition, I listened to them because I want to do what's in the best interest of the Virgin Islands," Mr. Vialet said, referring to the controversy surrounding a measure he authored that sought to allow the building of rum distilleries on agricultural land. The measure's language has since been changed.

He added, "I faced it. You don't run from those individuals who are here demanding that negotiations that have not occurred for some ten years, and you're running from facing the truth."

These are individuals that are on the lowest pay scale in government."

Mr. Vialet said that as chair of the Senate Committee on Finance, his position has been to finance the raises because the funds are available. "But we need a negotiated contract and this governor has failed to negotiate a contract for these workers, and look at what they have to do: wear all black and come in front of the headquarters. Where are they stronger than ever? You can't be stronger than ever and you're shut down because of a protest," Mr. Vialet said, referring to the Bryan campaign slogan, "Together, Stronger Than Ever".

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