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# Bryan to Veto Minimum Wage Increase Bill For Gov't Employees, Pointing to Tight Budget and Tens of Millions Paid This Year

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Governor Albert Bryan on Wednesday told the Consortium that he intends to veto a bill sponsored by Senator Kurt Vialet that seeks to raise the minimum wage for government employees, pointing to a tight budget that Mr. Vialet as chair of the Finance Committee approved, and tens of millions already paid to make government employees past and current whole.

Mr. Vialet [last week](#) announced the measure which aims to raise the minimum wage of government employees from \$13 an hour to \$15 an hour, moving their annual total from \$27,040 to \$32,000.

The raise would cover 971 employees and cost the government \$4.5 million annually, according to Jose George, post auditor of the Legislature of the Virgin Islands. The current minimum wage for private sector employees in the USVI, which Mr. Violet's measure does not address, is \$10.50 per hour.

"With inflation and the cost of everything it's hard for a living wage," Mr. Violet said, referring to the current \$27,040 annual income of some government employees. "A lot of these employees, for them it's having the ability to survive when everything is on the rise — from commodities to other goods — everything around us."

But Governor Bryan on Wednesday countered that while he understands times are tough, he said there are constantly union negotiations ongoing and salaries are affected by negotiation outcomes. Mr. Bryan also spoke of the fiscal year 2023 budget — approved in the Committee on Finance — that he says offers no wiggle room to accommodate the \$4.5 million expense.

Mr. Bryan then expounded on his frustration. "I know times are hard and people are under pressure, but we negotiate with the unions to raise the salaries all the time, we should not be usurping the process by doing this because it's a domino effect," he said. "And for the chair of the Finance Committee to bring out this bill after he sent up and approved the budget is really disgraceful."

"All he is seeking to do is to put a spoke in our wheel for the next year because he knows we already have a tight budget coming up. This is a way of dismantling."

The governor spoke about the roughly [\\$40 million in payments](#) made to government employees last year as part of a repayment of the 8 percent pay cut passed by the Legislature during the former Governor John P. de Jongh administration.

Mr. Bryan also highlighted the Steelworkers Union whose members were protesting for wage increases as per their contractual agreement.

"The contract is signed," he said. "If we can't reduce the salaries [in a union contract] when times are bad, we shouldn't be able to increase them when times are good" and nullify a contract, he said. "Contractually when you do these things, you create ripples in the budget that we are not prepared to receive."

Regarding the coming year, the territory's leader expressed a level of uncertainty with the government's financial standing, pointing to an impending global recession in 2023 that may exacerbate financial headwinds already impacting the USVI.

"I'm nervous going into next year," he admitted. "The American economy is already slowing down and the feds raised the interest rate again and it's going to have an impact on us. There's going to be an impact," he warned.