



Statement for the record

of

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for the

35TH Legislature of the Virgin Islands

November 16, 2023

Good afternoon, Madam Chairwoman, members of your committee, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for allowing us to come and speak with you today concerning issues that we believe are important to your constituents, our members, relating to their jobs with the Great Government of the Virgin Islands.

I would like to give a brief overview of the Organization to which the members of the USW in the Virgin Islands belong. From an International perspective, the USW represents some 850,000 workers across the United States and Canada in twelve (12) separate Districts. Our members work in every facet of our lives, including steel, rubber, paper, aluminum, packaging, communication, health care, and the public sector to name a few.

In District 9 specifically, our District covers the US Virgin Islands, including Saint Croix, Saint Thomas, and Saint John, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Tennessee, North Carolina, and South Carolina. We represent some 50,000 workers in District 9 who work in various industries and Public Service.

In the Virgin Islands, we are proud to represent government workers who support the public infrastructure of the Islands, communications, heavy materials, and the hospitality industry. Our members are extremely proud and honored to do the work they do each day to better the lives of the citizens of the Virgin Islands. They have a long history of joining together in a Labor Union to gain the security, respect, and dignity that a Collective Bargaining Agreement provides.

Our members simply want the security that a Collective Bargaining Agreement brings. They desire the ability to plan and to know that if their contract is for three (3) years, they will know what their wages and benefits will be for that time frame.

They rightfully expect that when they negotiate with the Government, reach a tentative agreement, and then ratify that Agreement, the Government will honor what they indicated would be done in the now ratified contract.

There are several examples in this regard. Our contract with Virgin Island Emergency Management expired in September 2022. In that contract, a wage reopener discussion was supposed to be negotiated. Although the USW, through its Representative Gerard Jackson, has requested to bargain both the wage reopener (which would now be retroed) and the contract itself, the Office of Collective Bargaining (OCB) has yet to accept or offer dates for these negotiations. Another delay is occurring with the Supervisors' Master Agreement for workers throughout the Virgin Islands. This Agreement also expired in September 2022; the Union offered dates to negotiate; however, OCB has neither accepted nor proposed alternative dates to meet and bargain. We understand that the OCB has indicated they are understaffed, and perhaps that is true. We know that there are times when schedules are challenging. However, we also know and understand that agreements are made with an expiration that requires diligence when it comes time to schedule and negotiate the successor agreement. Our members, the citizens of the Virgin Islands, and the Government deserve that attention to detail regarding timely negotiations and conclusion to the Collective Bargaining Process.

Regarding wages for our members, even when we negotiate and reach an agreement on wages and the wages are approved, our members must wait, not knowing when their wage increase will take effect or if retro wages will be paid. The October 2022 wage increase for the Departments of Tourism, Personnel, and Human Services has not been paid.

When the Union pushes these Departments about the increases, we are told that the payments are being processed. Does it take over a year to process wage increases for these workers? One would think not! Not only are the 2022 wage increases being delayed, but also the wage increases for 2023 for all Departments are delayed. Although the 2023 increases are only a month or so delayed when combined with the delay in 2022, it adds insult to injury.

Our members should be assured that when negotiations occur, the OCB has assurances from the Executive to offer and follow through with what is negotiated and agreed upon by the parties. The Supervisors' Agreement for Waste Management Authority (VIWMA) throughout the Virgin Islands expired in 2021, and after working through an extension, the parties reached an agreement on wages. After reaching this Agreement at the bargaining table, the VIWMA reduced its proposal for 2023, 2024, and 2025 from a 4% increase to zero for 2022 and 2023, 3% in 2024 and 2025. Our members expect its Union representatives to negotiate in good faith and have the same expectations for the Government. The Union, on behalf of its members nor the Government, can hit a moving target, nor should either be expected to!

As indicated earlier, the Union and our members deserve to know that when negotiating with the Government, the persons who represent the Government have the authority to agree to certain items and that what is agreed to be supported by their superiors, in this case, the Governor. In the Master Contract for Local 8248 and 8249 for the time period of 2022 through 2025, the Executive refused to sign the Agreement. However, at the bargaining table, there was Agreement of a ten percent (10%) hazardous pay for nurses and a \$4,000 pay differential for Crime Scene Technicians.

We have attempted to illustrate the issue with bargaining with the brief explanation thus far. But the lack of respect for the process goes much deeper. We have settlement agreements concerning several employees that have not been submitted for review or execution. We have grievances taken to the Arbitration step of the grievance procedure, and the Union and its members were upheld. The Arbitrator directed the Government to return the member to employment and pay lost wages.

In some cases, the members have been returned to work but have not received their lost wages. In yet another, in March of this year, the Arbitrator issued an award to return the member to work and pay lost wages, and neither has occurred. The integrity of the grievance and Arbitration procedure of any CBA depends upon prompt resolution following a settlement or Arbitration Award. There are also delays in having grievances heard in Arbitration due to the alleged lack of Staffing. We believe the

integrity of our agreed-upon procedure is being threatened by the lackadaisical manner in which the Government is addressing grievances.

Each of the issues illustrated here, we believe, goes to a lack of respect for the Union, its members, and the Collective Bargaining Process. We understand that as a Union, we will not win every disagreement or achieve everything we wish in bargaining. We understand there are restraints on funds available and what can or cannot be done. However, we do not believe it is too much to ask that our members and CBAs be provided the respect of timeliness, dignity, and response that a mutually respectful relationship demands.

Finally, although VIVA is not a Government entity, our Union has grave concerns relating to their desire and plan to move work from the Virgin Islands and subcontract our work to Guyana. We wish to state that we will do everything we can within our Collective Bargaining Agreement with VIVA to resist this and keep these important jobs on the Virgin Islands.

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you and attempt to address the concerns of our members.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Daniel Flippo", written over a horizontal line.

Daniel Flippo, Director
United Steelworks District 9