



Week In Action Newsletter

June 26, 2020

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Pay Act Update



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Roller Coaster Week For Pay Act Ends With Year-One Funding

VSEA is thanking all the members, retirees and supporters who flooded Vermont lawmakers phones and mailboxes this week with messages to oppose a last-minute move by one legislator to defund the Pay Act entirely, and then a message to lawmakers to support another legislator's amendment to fund the negotiated contract's year-one wage and step increases.

First up was a House vote Wednesday on a harmful Pay Act amendment introduced early in the week by Rep. Cynthia Browning (D-Arlington). If passed, Browning's amendment would have stripped state employees of their negotiated wage increase in both years of the contract. **It also would have sent VSEA Bargaining Teams back to the table with the State, but, thanks to your calls and emails to lawmakers, the Browning amendment was soundly crushed by a vote of 129-16.**

Next up for debate by the full House on Wednesday was a Pay Act amendment introduced early this week by House Appropriations Committee Chair Rep. Mary Hooper (D-Montpelier) to fund year one of the Collective Bargaining Agreements for the Executive Branch, State's Attorneys and Judicial Units. **Thanks again to your calls and emails to lawmakers, Hooper's amendment passed overwhelmingly 133-6, and the House moved the debate to the Senate.**

Yesterday, the full Senate convened to discuss the House's full budget proposal that includes the Hooper amendment to fund year one of the negotiated contracts. **After brief debate on the amendment, the Senate voted 28-0 to include year-one funding for the negotiated contract.**

After a little housekeeping, the lawmakers' budget proposal moves to the Governor's desk for final sign off, which is expected before midnight, June 30.

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What About Year Two Of The Contract?

The Legislature's plan reads that it will take up the issue of funding year two of the Executive Branch, State's Attorneys, and Judicial Unit contracts at a later date. This could be in the fall, or it could be this coming winter when the new Legislature convenes in January 2021. Either way, VSEA and its members, retirees and supporters will continue to fight for full funding of the negotiated contract.

The 16 House Members Who Voted Against State Employees

Remember these names come election time. These are the 16 House of Representatives members who voted for the harmful Browning amendment on Tuesday. If passed, the amendment would have prevented state employees from receiving any negotiated wage and step increase in either the first or second year of the contract.

Rep. Bancroft – Westford
Rep. Browning – Arlington
Rep. Burditt – West Rutland
Rep. Dickinson – St. Albans Town
Rep. Donahue – Northfield
Rep. Feltus -Lyndon
Rep. Gamache – Swanton
Rep. Harrison – Chittenden
Rep. Higley – Lowell
Rep. LeClair – Barre Town
Rep. Lefebvre – Newark
Rep. Martel – Waterford
Rep. Quimby – Concord
Rep. Scheuermann – Stowe
Rep. Smith - Derby
Rep. Strong - Albany



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Important Deadlines Approaching!

A friendly reminder that deadlines are quickly approaching for the following:

- Contract ratification ballots are due **Monday, June 29** for VSEA members in the following Units:
 - Defender General; and
 - States Attorneys Office
- VSEA members' ballots due **Monday, August 3** in election for the following VSEA Board of Trustees' seats:
 - Supervisory;
 - Corrections;
 - VSHA/DG; and
 - District 4 – Franklin / Grand Isle / Chittenden / Addison

Important! If you have a question about any of these deadlines, please contact VSEA Organizing Director Amy Kinsell at akinsell@vsea.org, or by phone at (802) 233-5834.

New Inmates Spark New COVID Concerns For VSEA Members Working In Vermont Prisons

Just a few weeks after declaring the Vermont Corrections system essentially COVID-free, several new cases have been diagnosed just this week at three Vermont prisons, brought into the facility by newly arriving prisoners, according to Secretary of human Services Mike Smith.

Here are press stories about each of the new diagnosis:

- VT Digger* - New Inmate at Women's Prison Tests Positive – After Contacting Three Others;
- St. Albans Messenger* - New COVID Case at St. Albans Prison; and

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- VTDigger - New inmate at Marble Valley in Rutland Tests Positive for COVID-19

Northern Vermont University Group Announces Proposal For School's Future

The Morrisville News & Citizen reports this week on new suggestions from a 17-person group called the NVU Strong committee to cut costs and to build for the beleaguered Northern Vermont University's (NVU) future. They include eliminating some sports programs on its Johnson and Lyndon campuses, bringing businesses to campus, and having students study issues related to those industries.

From the story:

"We recognize that this is a really difficult time when we will need to make difficult choices," said Katherine Sims, a member of the NVU Strong committee. "But the alternative to not making those tough choices is no NVU."

"I believe that this work will lay an important foundation for future generations," NVU president Elaine Collins said last week, as the committee presented its findings. "We've done it for the past 100 years, and we're not going to give up now."

There is the question of money, and Collins said — despite those who accuse the Vermont State College System of "crying wolf" in the midst of a pandemic — the system needs \$30 million in state funding to stay afloat. Current "bridge funding" proposals to keep the system intact for a year are in the \$22 million range.

The NVU Strong Committee delivered its eight-page report last week to its parent Vermont State Colleges System, which will take the suggestions into consideration. Similar work is being done at other state colleges, Castleton University and Vermont Technical College, the latter of which was also on the chopping block this spring.

Collins said the state college system will explore options through August, then make final recommendations.

VSEA Brattleboro Chapter Pickets With Brattleboro Retreat Workers!

Next Picket Is Monday, June 29

Monday afternoon, VSEA Board of Trustees' member Robin Rieske (pictured here with VSEA sign in hand) joined a picket line with United Nurses and Allied Professionals (UNAP) Local 5086 members working at the Brattleboro Retreat. In addition to raising awareness about workers' multiple complaints against Retreat management, the picket was also to highlight the recent, unjust firing of UNAP leader Sy Creamer.

Statements of solidarity were shared by VSEA, AFT VT, UFCW Local 1459. The VT Workers Center also joined in solidarity.

The next picket is scheduled for Monday, June 29, beginning at 2:00 p.m. If you want to join the picket and need signs, hats or t-shirts, contact Robin by email: robin.rieske@vermont.gov.

Background:

United Nurses and Allied Professionals (UNAP) Local 5086 represents workers at the Brattleboro Retreat. There has been a toxic work environment there for several years, with more than 300 staff leaving in the last 17 months; some quitting to take jobs at lower pay so they can work in a healthier environment. They have also fired union leaders, tried to discipline them for exercising legal rights, botched the Retreat's response to COVID and PPE procurement, and engaged in numerous contract violations leading to protracted grievances.

At this point the Retreat using mandated overtime and contract workers ("travelers") in place of core staff. These practices are unsafe for patients and staff alike.

UNAP is calling for the termination of chief nursing officer Meghan Baston as a first step in turning things around.

TALKING POINTS:

QUOTE OF THE WEEK!

"[State Employees] deserve our commitment and investment in the coming year. They had our backs. Now we must have theirs."

Vermont Rep. Marybeth Redmond, D-Essex, quoted in *VT Digger*, following a House vote to reject a harmful amendment that would have prevented wage and step increases for state employees in both years of their recently negotiated contract.

U.S. Ranked Worst for Workers' Rights Among Major Economies

Bloomberg News reports this week on the terrible reality that the United States "has the worst record among major developed countries when it comes to workers' rights, according to a survey of labor unions."

Europe dominates the top-ranked countries for workers, with the list including Sweden, Italy, Netherlands, Ireland and Germany. Uruguay is the only non-European nation in the group.



Now on Instagram!
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Group Gives States Failing Grades For Corrections' Systems' COVID Response

The Prison Policy Initiative (PPI) issued a bleak assessment this week of how the nation's corrections systems have coped with COVID-19, saying the overwhelming majority of states have failed to take basic steps that might have saved the lives of hundreds of incarcerated individuals and staff.

"Despite all of the information, voices calling for action, and the obvious need, state responses ranged from disorganized or ineffective, at best, to callously nonexistent at worst," the PPI said in a report released Thursday.

Using publicly available information from state corrections department websites, the report found no state earned a grade higher than "D" —while the majority were given failing grades of "F" or at most "F+".

Note: Vermont received a D- grade.

Hundreds Of Frontline Food Service Workers Dying From COVID

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) held a press conference this week to express the union's great concerns about the thousands of frontline food service workers contracting COVID-19 at work, and, worse, the hundreds dying later as a result.

From a UFCW press release:

Today, the UFCW, which represents 1.3 million workers, is highlighting the impact and growing danger of COVID-19 on our nation's frontline workers. Over the last 100 days, 238 UFCW frontline workers have died from COVID-19 and nearly 29,000 workers have been infected or exposed to this killer virus.

UFCW International President Marc Perrone also announced three new initiatives in response to the growing increase of COVID-19 cases in states across the country. The initiatives to address the impact on frontline workers include: (1) Reinstating hazard pay

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and establishing a \$15 per hour wage for all frontline workers, (2) Establishing a public mask mandate in all 50 states, and (3) Creating a new national public registry to track COVID-19 infections in frontline workers which would require companies with more than 1,000 employees to submit monthly reports on their worker deaths, infections, and exposure.

Getting Ready To Retire? Retired Already? Join The VSEA Retired Members' Chapter!

Long-time VSEA activist and leader Terry Lefebvre is asking VSEA members getting ready to retire to join the VSEA Retirees' Chapter to continue to be an active and engaged union member, even in retirement. Lefebvre also appeals to VSEA members to talk up the co-workers they know who might be preparing to retire. If you already belong to the Retired Members' Chapter, a big thanks to you. Learn more about the VSEA Retired Members' Chapter by calling 802-223-5247 or emailing VSEARetirees@gmail.com. You can also log onto www.vsea.org/retirees

VSEA Calendar:

July 3

July 4 Holiday (Observed)
VSEA HQ Closed

July 7

VSEA Board of Trustees' Meeting via Zoom

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, all other VSEA meetings are canceled until further notice.

Please note: VSEA HQ (155 State Street, Montpelier) is closed due to COVID-19 concerns. VSEA staff is working remotely. If you have questions, please call 802-223-5247 or email vsea@vsea.org.



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Vermont State Employees' Association
155 State Street, Montpelier, VT 05602
(802) 223-5247
vsea@vsea.org

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