

2015.09.08

4.5 Deputy S.Y. Mézec of St. Helier of the Chief Minister regarding possible strike action by some public sector unions:

Following the announcements made by some public sector unions that they believe strike action is inevitable as a result of the Government's failure to engage with them seriously, what plans, if any, does the Chief Minister have to hold face-to-face meetings with the heads of these unions to avert any potential strike action?

Senator I.J. Gorst (The Chief Minister):

The Government has maintained a dialogue with public sector unions since an initial briefing on public finances in February 2015. The States Employment Board has explained why pay restraint is necessary, both through a direct meeting with unions and through regular meetings between officers and union representatives. Employee relations staff will continue to meet public sector unions as part of the collective bargaining system and therefore I think it is inappropriate for me to interrupt that process.

4.5.1 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Does the Chief Minister accept that up until now the unions have been acting in good faith and have made it clear their support for the principles of modernisation, which the Government has been going ahead with, and does he believe that there is any legitimacy behind their resentment that they feel they are not being listened to?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

The States Employment Board is listening to the unions and considering their representations. I have said in this Assembly before, the Government believes that pay restraint is an important part of reorganising the public service and I hope that the unions will continue to engage in that process albeit we recognise that for some it is difficult.

4.5.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

In the second round of the voluntary release programme, if it were to come ... push come to shove - and we were talking about compulsory redundancies - would the Chief Minister himself then meet with representatives of the union to announce that he is in charge of compulsory redundancies in the system?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

The Deputy knows that the way that the system works is that the States Employment Board in these instances, in conjunction with the Council of Ministers, sets policy and direction and then asks officers to undertake the necessary application of those policies. I believe that that is the correct approach and it is the approach that will continue. When the States Employment Board last met face to face with the union representatives we said then that it would probably be useful for us to have a 6-monthly update. I suspect it will not be very many more weeks before we are due to have such an update in a further face-to-face meeting anyway.

4.5.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Supplementary, if I may. Does that not preclude because the officers have no remit to offer anything other than the straightforward refusal for any paid pay rise, does not the absence of the Chief Minister who might have flexibility and has the power to decide one way or the other, does his presence not add something to any negotiations taking place?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I do not believe that it does because it is the States Employment Board, as I said, in conjunction with the Council of Ministers. We did, as I said, when we last met face to face as a States

Employment Board with union representatives, that we thought it would be useful to do so on a 6-monthly basis and that ... I suspect those 6 months will soon be reoccurring and we will discuss issues that the unions wish us to at that point in time. I think that is the correct process. That they should be more exceptional, but the day-to-day business policy set by politicians and implemented by officers.

4.5.4 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Does the Chief Minister accept that should strike action take place it will cost the public purse vast sums of money and severely disrupt the Government's programme to try and reduce costs and spending? On that basis would he, as a gesture of goodwill, accept the invitation that has been requested by the heads of various unions, including the head of Unite Union, to meet face to face so that they feel that they can be treated seriously and that there is no need for this resentment which could end up costing us far more than his actions are intended to save us?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Of course the first thing to say, on behalf of the States Employment Board, is that I hope industrial action will not take place and will not be necessary. There are ongoing conversations with the unions, ongoing correspondence. Of course, when the time is right, if it is thought necessary to meet directly with the individual union representatives then of course the States Employment Board will do so, as I have just outlined the process that we have previously gone through.