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8 Deputy J.H. Perchard of St. Saviour of the Chairman of the States Employment Board regarding the status of negotiations with unions over public sector pay: (OQ.122/2019)

Will the Chairman update the Assembly on the negotiations with unions over public sector pay?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré (Chairman, States Employment Board):

I thank the Deputy for her question. Pay review negotiations remain at a very delicate stage in certain areas and in a public environment there are constraints as to what can be said about our negotiating strategy, in order to avoid potential prejudice to those talks. The employer has always sought to ensure confidentiality and not conduct negotiations in public. That said, we remain in negotiations with the civil service and prison officers and we are going to binding arbitration with the Fire Service Association, in accordance with our agreement with them. I will come to teachers shortly. But it is helpful to remind the Assembly that the Board have reached successful settlements with nurses, manual workers, police and, very recently, head teachers. If Members are not aware, head teachers - we were informed on Friday and I believe it is being announced either today or yesterday – agreed, by 69 per cent, to accept the deal that we have offered them. It is worth using that as an example, because it is not always all about pay. In relation to head teachers, it has been about their spine; it has been about the career progression that they face. So, for example, up to now it has been possible that a deputy head teacher is promoted, but takes a pay cut when they become a head teacher. So, one of the things we have done in addressing this package is we have addressed that issue. We have been seeking that approach all the way down the line, in a whole range of areas. As we know, to get to the teachers' side - and I appreciate I am taking slightly longer - there have been a series of strikes by N.E.U. (National Education Union) members, which have led to school closures, either wholly, or in part. If people want me to elaborate on that, they will have to ask me a supplementary. I know neither party wants to disrupt the education of our children. The Board's 3-year pay offer for teachers is worth 8.6 per cent consolidated. That is pensionable pay rises, plus 2.1 per cent in one-off cash payments. In 2020 the offer, which is included in those figures, is worth R.P.I. (Retail Price Index) plus 1.3 per cent, which is guaranteed and the R.P.I. is currently expected to be around 3.1; so that would be about 4.4 in my maths. Overall, that package for the grade with the most number of teachers in it is worth about £5,500. I would hope Members would think that is not an unreasonable answer. But where we are is that there have been active negotiations under the direction of the S.E.B., under the auspices, as well, of J.A.C.S. (Jersey Advisory and Conciliatory Service) and that has been going all of last week; that was 3 full days. I believe progress is being made; in fact, there is a small announcement going out today, in order to resolve and make progress on resolving that dispute. Where we are is that we are establishing the foundations, but we have not yet built the house.

4.8.1 Deputy J.H. Perchard:

The Chief Minister stated that negotiations are not also about pay - I appreciate the need to be vague - but can he confirm whether, with unions still in dispute, negotiations are focused solely on pay for those unions, or if they are including working conditions, as well?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

I think I can safely say that it is also around conditions as part of those discussions.

4.8.2 Deputy K.F. Morel:

As with regard to all the pay disputes and the strikes, the attendance strikes, but particularly with regard to the teachers' strike, has the States Employment Board attempted to understand how much these strikes are costing Islanders and the Island as a whole?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The States Employment Board is fully aware of the disruption that is being caused by the strikes on parents. It would be fair to say, as being personally impacted, there are other Members in this Assembly, as well, who are directly affected by the impact of this. What I will say is that - I think it is useful to illustrate - there is a change in the impact on parents over the past 4 weeks. In week one, there were 10 schools open, 12 partially and 13 closed; in week 2, 18 partially open and 7 closed; this week we are expecting 11 open, 24 partially open and none fully closed. So, the impact is changing on parents but, as I said, we continue to negotiate. I am hoping that we are establishing a foundation. We are getting there. We have not yet built the house; there is still work to be done.

4.8.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can the Chairman explain why the Board was prepared to see strike action before getting around the table with anything like a meaningful offer?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

As I tried to illustrate in my slightly full answer, the question has always been, in our experience so far, in all the pay groups, it has not just been around pay. One has to remember there are 2 unions involved. One union has been in discussions pretty well all the way through, the other union chose to go into strike action, but we have been having constructive talks with them during the course of last week. So, S.E.B. have always been willing to talk, it has been very much a case of how the unions have decided to implement those talks and enforce their arguments. But, what I will say is at the moment: matters seem to be going through quite productively.

4.8.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Nonetheless, historically, always, when public sector bodies have threatened to strike, particularly teachers, in the past, the relevant authorities have got together around the table and sorted it out. Why, this time, have we seen such a marked change in policy that we are prepared to see striking teachers on this Island? What responsibility will he take for that lamentable position?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

We have always negotiated on this; it is a matter for the unions how they chose to do matters. I will just say that people do not always respond well to threats; it sometimes is better just to talk. One of the unions has been talking all the way through; another union has chosen a different tack, but they are all talking productively now and that is very important. What is also very useful is to understand the issues and that is what we have been finding in the other pay groups and when we get to that understanding, usually, we can, therefore, come to a meaningful accommodation. I will also point out that, in certain instances, sometimes, it is a result of all the unions, as the unions vary in negotiators, so some are using a mix of U.K. (United Kingdom) and local and others are using pure U.K. and that, sometimes, has an impact on how things are managed.

4.8.5 Deputy J.H. Perchard:

Will the Chief Minister tell the Assembly and the public when he expects to resolve these issues, a date would be ideal?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The next full set of meetings is on Friday, in terms of teachers. There are other meetings, with other pay groups, occurring earlier this week. I am trying to remember if it is today, or tomorrow. But the other point is - that is face-to-face meetings - there are continuous discussions happening, usually by phone, which will be happening today and tomorrow, as well. So, the discussions continue all the time. I do know, obviously, we have the strike today and, in theory, on Wednesday and Thursday, as well. If there is any change in that, obviously, we will all be very delighted. But, as we said, although we are getting meaningful and productive talks, we are not quite there yet.

[10:30]