

23.09.12

2 Deputy R.J. Ward of the Chair of the States Employment Board regarding action to prevent teaching strikes (OQ.173/2023)

Will the chair detail what action has been taken in the preceding week, if any, to prevent strike action by teaching unions and the subsequent closure of schools?

Deputy K.L. Moore (Chair, States Employment Board):

Once again, I would simply wish to say how very much I regret that action is being taken again today. The States Employment Board has authorised its officers to continue in discussions for resolution of the pay dispute with teachers and school leaders. Throughout the dispute period, we have offered conciliation talks facilitated by J.A.C.S. (Jersey Advisory & Conciliation Service) and we continue to offer arbitration with an independent third party. That offer was made some time ago. Our representatives met with the N.A.S.U.W.T. (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers) and the N.E.U. (National Education Union) on Friday afternoon, resulting in the N.A.S.U.W.T. withdrawing their strike action; an outcome which I very much welcome. The N.E.U., however, did not agree to the terms of withdrawing from strike action and were offered arbitration. They again said no, referring to the recent case in Guernsey where the dispute was settled by a tribunal. We also met with the N.A.H.T. (National Association of Head Teachers) on Friday and provided a revised offer. This was amended but rejected yesterday afternoon at a meeting that half of their membership attended.

5.2.1 Deputy R.J. Ward:

The chair mentioned authorised officers met with unions. Can I ask the chair whether the chair or any member of the S.E.B. met directly with unions so that they were in a position where they could offer a different offer during those negotiations? Or was it a set offer given to officers, which is therefore not negotiation?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

It would not have been appropriate, and that is not the advice, that we enter into those negotiations directly. But what this States Employment Board has done in the past year is to meet regularly with all unions. We do that on a quarterly basis. We find those conversations to be extremely constructive and helpful, and through meeting and through dialogue we are able to identify areas where we can improve and deal with issues as they arise. We will, of course, continue to do that throughout the term of this Government.

5.2.2 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Will the chair of the States Employment Board explain what actions she personally took and not what actions were undertaken by others to avert the strike action, which she says she regrets so much?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

Members of the States Employment Board have been consulted at various points to consider how best to approach the negotiations. We did that over the weekend over emails. We have been following the situation closely and we met, I think, twice yesterday.

5.2.3 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Just to be absolutely clear then, what has been offered to the unions, which has resulted in many of them maintaining their strike action, was something that was specifically decided by this Chief Minister and not from officers acting on anyone else's behalf?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

This is a negotiation and we have a financial envelope within which we have to find a way forward. We have to, of course, balance the books for the public purse alongside meeting the requirements and looking after our staff. We greatly respect the work of teachers and, as part of our relentless focus on recruitment and retention, a great deal of work has been done in the past year to improve the support for teachers. We have taken on an additional 113 people into that group, covering teachers, teaching assistants, headteachers and school leaders over the past year. There are currently no teaching vacancies in primary schools as a result of that excellent work. There are a small number of vacancies, 13, in secondary schools at the beginning of term. I think that we have made really good progress. We have also agreed with the unions, through our regular conversations with them, to address their terms and conditions, and we look forward to doing so.

Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

With respect, as nice as that was, it was not even close to a direct answer to a very specific question that I asked, which was: was the Chief Minister, the chair of the States Employment Board, herself, responsible specifically for the decisions that were made in the preceding days that have led to strike action not being averted? Or was that a decision taken by somebody with delegated authority?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

The negotiations take place with guidance from the States Employment Board. It is ultimately my responsibility, yes, but I have to also balance the public purse. We are mindful of the fact that many quarters of our community actually criticised our pay offer to all public service workers this year of 7.9 per cent - average earnings this year are 7.7 per cent - and we have to strike the right balance. As I say, we respect greatly the work of teachers and we are working with them to look at terms and conditions, and that we have relentlessly focused on recruitment and retention to ensure that there is greater level of support for teachers, as they requested, in the classrooms.

5.2.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Could the Minister outline for Members what exactly are the actions she has taken in order to improve recruitment and retention in the teaching workforce?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

This piece of work has been led by the Delivery Unit, which was set up at the beginning of our term of office. They have led a piece of work, looking at the recruitment measures within the C.Y.P.E.S. (Children, Young People, Education and Skills) Department and given support and guidance to improve the recruitment measures, to ensure that there is a sustained approach to ensure that we decrease vacancies and bring in permanent recruits to fill the very important roles within our society.

5.2.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The question was about specific actions taking place or not and the answer that came was generalised again, if I may.

The Bailiff:

I think, Chief Minister, you were being asked if you took specific actions in connection with this, and that was the nature of the question, was it not?

Deputy G.P. Southern:

With the emphasis on specific actions.

The Bailiff:

Are you able to assist us further?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

One will appreciate that although I work extremely long hours, I cannot be at ... sorry, I cannot physically do every single piece of work. That is why we have a public service on whom we rely. As the leader of this Government, I have worked with officers to ensure that the appropriate focus is put on recruitment and retention, which is one of our 3 areas of relentless focus.

[10:00]

I am really pleased with the results of that work. It has been an excellent piece of work from the Delivery Unit, which has seen an additional 113 members of teaching staff taken on in this government, and I am really pleased with that. That means that the vacancies that were so complained of last year are not there, as children go back to school this year. It helps to support teachers in their role so that they can deliver the very best. That is what they were asking for. I believe that we are delivering just that under this leadership.

The Bailiff:

Do you have a supplemental question, Deputy?

Deputy G.P. Southern:

I am special with another one.

The Bailiff:

Very well, that is fine, if you had considered that a supplemental. We are running a little bit out of time in any event for this question.

5.2.6 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

Given that the Chief Minister and her Deputy Chief Minister both stood in solidarity with their striking teachers during very similar circumstances in 2019, and her criticism of the actions of the previous Chief Minister, what has she done differently in this past week to what the previous Chief Minister did in 2019?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

Since gaining office we have done things very differently. As I have already outlined this morning, we have taken it upon ourselves to meet regularly with all unions. We do this on a quarterly basis as a States Employment Board. The previous Government met more with their Corporate Services ... unions previously met more regularly with the Corporate Services Scrutiny Panel than they did with members of the States Employment Board, and we are dedicated to continuing that dialogue. We find it extremely constructive and helpful, and we will continue it throughout this term of office. In relation to the strike action that we are taking today, what is different is that through our relentless focus on recruitment and retention we have been able to drive down vacancies. We have offered to

look at terms and conditions with teachers so that we can better support them in their roles, as well as looking at their pay as a standalone item. Let me just remind everybody once again that average earnings this year sit at 7.7 per cent, and our pay award to all of the public service is 7.9 per cent.

5.2.7 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

I would like to remind the Chief Minister that it is not just the teaching union that is on strike today. It is also the National Association of Head Teachers. That suggests to me that the headteachers themselves, the school leaders, do not have confidence in the States Employment Board. Would the Chief Minister concede that the strikes today show that teachers and headteachers do not have confidence in the States Employment Board?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

I would certainly hope that that is not the case. As I have said previously today, we greatly respect the work of teachers. We value their work. We have offered to go to arbitration but we have to take a balanced approach in this. Our pay award exceeds average earnings this year, but we also have an inflation issue. It is part of our duty as the Government to take a view on inflation and to drive down inflation so that we can support Islanders through the cost of living with all of the levers that we have available to us, which are of course rather limited. So it would be unwise of us to unleash that part of our responsibilities simply to placate one group of our greatly valued public service. We have to consider how we continue to balance everything so that we move forward, keep everything working as best we can.

5.2.8 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Does the chair accept the concerns of teachers and headteachers over recruitment and retention that seem to be at odds with her statements today? Or does she not accept those and see those as something that does not require her relentless focus?

Deputy K.L. Moore:

A relentless focus is a relentless focus, and it continues to be an area of relentless focus, as it stretches across all areas of the public service. I acknowledge that some of the figures are disputed, but we have looked and looked again at the figures that we are provided by officials, and we are assured that the figures that we have, and I shared with Members of the Assembly here today, are correct and factually accurate.