

2015.10.20

3.6 Deputy S.Y. Mézec of the Chief Minister regarding negotiations with Jersey's trade unions following the adoption of the 'Medium Term Financial Plan 2016-2019':

What negotiations, if any, are currently taking place with Jersey's trade unions so as to avoid the possibility of strike action following the decision of the States to adopt the Medium Term Financial Plan 2015–2019?

Senator A.K.F. Green (Deputy Chief Minister - rapporteur):

Negotiations on the 2015 public sector pay review are continuing. A number of unions have formally notified us of a failure to agree and officers have held a collective disputes meeting with Headteachers on 6th October and a number of other meetings with unions on 15th October. The States Employment Board meets regularly to discuss developments and continue to do so. As I understand it, we are still negotiating, or at least our officers on our behalf, are still negotiating with the staff and we are not in formal dispute.

3.6.1 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

I think the Deputy Chief Minister pointed out that it is not the Ministers themselves who are involved in those negotiations. Does he accept that that is a real sticking point here and that representatives of the Jersey Trade Unions are very frustrated at speaking purely to members of the S.E.B. (States Employment Board) and not the people who have political responsibility themselves, and so will he give an undertaking, regardless of what the actual Chief Minister decides to do, because I have asked him this and made no progress. Will he personally volunteer to start attending these meetings and get personally involved so that we can avoid any potential disruption that strikes would cause in the future, which all of us want to see avoided?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

We all want to avoid industrial action but the fact is that the States Employment Board is the board that sets the policy and that the officers are the experts in negotiation. I am the Minister for Health and Social Services but I do not go and take an appendix out. The fact is we are always happy as a board to listen to and have listened to what trade union representatives want to say. But we are not going to start negotiations. That was the old days when you had amateurs trying to do the negotiations. We now have professionals. The trade union side have professionals. We have professionals representing us. We set the policy and they sit down and discuss it. At the moment negotiations are ongoing.

[10:30]

3.6.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is that not the case that negotiations are absolutely not ongoing because there is a failure to agree, being declared at this very moment, between a number of unions and their employer, the States Employment Board; that the state we have is a failure to agree and the next thing is a ballot, either indicative or otherwise, for action?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

The officers met last night with a number of the unions and I have to say at the moment we are still in negotiation.

3.6.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Negotiation, as I understand it, in my training, involves some give and take on each side. Where is the give in the position that the Chief Minister and his States Employment Board have taken or are to?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

I am not going to try and carry out a wage negotiation in public. We have officers who are doing that with our staff, with the trade union representatives and negotiations are still ongoing. I am not going to get drawn into trying to debate this in public.

3.6.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

Does the Deputy Chief Minister accept that it is a false and I think a slightly insulting dichotomy when we say we do not do things like this anymore; we do not negotiate as amateurs, we have professionals that will do that? In fact sometimes the unions, the civil servants, whatever jobs they are doing, would find it helpful to sit down with the political representatives that they may have elected, I am sure some of them did at some point in the recent past, so that they can have conversations civilly, amicably, to see what can be achieved rather than necessarily always setting up these professionals who do not have, necessarily, knowledge of on their behalf. Does the Minister accept in some ways the old way of doing things, where you have a face-to-face conversation with frank talk is probably the best way to do that?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

The Deputy is distorting my words again. I said that we do meet with trade unions and their representatives and we listen to what they have to say and we look at their presentations and we discuss it and then we advise our officers on the next course of action. We listen. The negotiations are done on our behalf by professionals.

3.6.5 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Is the Minister aware of the great worry and distress being encountered by the workforce at the moment with possible impending redundancies and outsourcing?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

Yes, and the quicker we conclude this and get a satisfactory solution the better for all concerned.

3.6.6 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

The Deputy Chief Minister says that they listen but the representatives of Jersey's trade unions say the precise opposite. So I would like to ask the Deputy Chief Minister, at what point does it have to reach before they will finally get around the table, face to face, and speak with these people directly rather than sending people to essentially do their dirty work for them? So what point does it have to reach? Does it have to be a ballot for strike action? Does it have to be an indicative ballot for strike action? At what point will the situation change so they will get round a table and start treating these people seriously?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

We always treat our staff seriously. Our door is open. We will listen to staff when they want to make a point but the negotiations on pay has to be done properly and professionally and I will not be bullied into that. Threaten me with strikes. Threaten me with what you like. The fact is there is a professional way of doing this. The trade union has professional negotiators. The States Employment Board has professional negotiators. Negotiations are ongoing and we have to, hopefully, hope that we will soon come to a suitable outcome.

