

Strikes

The public sector has entered a period of rolling strikes from Network Rail and Border Force to nurses and the Ambulance service. Postal workers are also on strike in a service which still has a public sector service guarantee to meet, to deliver post to any address in the UK and preferably to keep down the cost of a second class stamp.

Most of these groups of employees negotiate their settlements with independent managements. The Health Service has an Independent Pay Board which makes recommendations which government usually as this year accepts. Whilst Ministers make the overall call on the NHS national pay scales in line with the recommendations, the senior managements of the Trusts and the national health quangos determine use of pay scales, promotions and other conditions of employment. The nurses are often raising matters about staffing levels and work organisation which are the preserve of the senior management to resolve. There are various issues over payment for parking, meal arrangements, shift patterns, use of Agency staff and the rest. Local managers should use more of the flexibilities to look after valued existing staff as the best Trusts are doing.

It is true in the case of the NHS most of the revenue to sustain the service comes as a Treasury grant, and Ministers are the decision takers over the budget totals for the NHS and over the national pay scale awards. There are too few medical staff with plenty of vacancies. It is the case that Ministers could ask the Pay review Board to think again, though this would be a new departure. They could also invent a one off payment not consolidated into pay rates going forward to deal with one off high inflation on family budgets. The Prime Minister has stated he does not think he should depart from the Pay review Body's conclusions, and the Secretary of State has been forceful in saying a 19% pay rise for nurses is unaffordable for taxpayers.

The railways are a series of disputes with different employers. Network Rail is a public sector company, and some franchises are now in state hands. The rest are under the control of competing private sector franchise holders. The railways are currently offering services which in many cases attract few passengers and in some other cases only have decent numbers by offering heavily discounted fares. The bulk of the money to pay the wages should come from the fares travellers pay to use the railway. The railway is short of passengers.

The state has been offering large sums of subsidy to the railways during covid lockdown, and is still providing substantial financial support. There must be limits to how much for how long, as the whole point of the railways should be to construct a timetable of popular services which largely pay for the costs of the industry from fares. That is why any further pay rises for the rail industry should be linked to improving working practices and improving services to attract more travellers willing to pay the costs of their journey. Working smarter could help bring down the costs of travel, boosting demand. The Secretary of State should not join in the negotiations

between Unions and employers. The answer should not be for the industry to conclude wages should go up without improved working and service provision, requiring a yet larger subsidy from the taxpayer.

I would be interested in your thoughts on how these strikes can be resolved and what role if any you think the government should play.