

The battle of the railways

The strikes that swirl around the railways are damaging a business in trouble. The railway main problem is it lacks fare paying passengers. The mainstay of the passenger railway prior to 2020 was the five day a week commuter into city centres. They were made to pay large sums for season tickets as they had no real choice over how and when to get to work. Covid lockdowns and the move to hybrid working has demolished the railways main pool of passengers. People now may only go in twice a week to the office . They may go in at other times of day that qualify as off peak.

The passenger market railway managers say they wish to expand is the leisure market. This has often been a discount market where people choose to visit places when they are offered cheap tickets. The railway often declines to run special trains to serve popular events which might offer some better fare opportunities.

Going on strike puts more people off relying on trains as well as losing most revenue on strike days. It gets occasional commuters doing more from home or finding road based alternatives.

The employees say they want a pay rise close to inflation along with job guarantees. All the time the railways are so short of business they cannot afford large pay rises. The pay increases the industry would be willing to pay depend on reaching agreement on working smarter. All employees need to buy into boosting fares and curbing costs to give them the best chance of keeping their jobs.

The government needs to stress that paying more and more subsidy to run more and more near empty trains is not a good use of taxpayers money. It also needs to allow more competition over using the tracks to run services and over putting in new links to get the railway to where the potential customers are. The Hull train services are a good example of how competitive challenge can create better service and new demand.