

The Public Sector Pension Strike

There was an interesting article in the London Evening Standard on the day of the public sector strike which I will paraphrase here. The strike, you will recall, was supported by all unions representing public sector workers, including UNITE.

The article begins by asking the questions, "Under what circumstances would a strike be acceptable to the Government?" and "What conditions must be met to earn the blessing of those in power?" Quite obviously these questions are completely rhetorical. The writer, Richard Godwin, continues by citing the peaceful and law-abiding camp at St Paul's Cathedral and quoting Boris Johnson's reaction where he dismisses the protesters as "an eruption of boils", "hemp smoking fornicating hippies" and "thoroughly maddening". Intemperate comments, to say the least. Godwin makes the point that Johnson would agree that protest is a democratic right, but it is one that the ruling classes would happily do away with.

Johnson's Government colleagues clearly felt the same way about the strike. Stop complaining about the Government asset-stripping the NHS, they said, try and see things from the private healthcare industry's point of view. When 26 million strikers refuse, the Government goes on the attack. Michael Gove and Francis Maude were highlighted as the prime sources of adverse comments.

Godwin goes on to accuse the Government of wilfully breaking a promise, with the result that by 2013 public sector workers are predicted to be 20% poorer than they were at the start of the recession, and if you are on a nurse's salary that hurts. But then, Godwin says, comes the most malicious tactic. As a young private sector worker with a tin-plated pension and concerns about fiscal mismanagement and generational inequality, he should by rights be against the strike. However, if anything convinces him to take the side of the strikers it's the arrogant way the politicians try to exploit his misgivings.

Divide and rule remains the tactic of the establishment bully, states Godwin. Remember, David Cameron hisses in our ear, public sector pensions are "far, far better" than those offered in the private sector. It's funny, Godwin continues, that anyone who suggests tax rises for the rich is accused of envy, yet here is the PM asking us to envy the "gold plated" £4,000.00 pensions of dinner ladies. So just because the private sector treats its employees like dung the state should do so too.

And so, says Godwin, contrary to their whinges, it is the Government that is trying to incite confrontation here. It is pitting hard-done-by private sector workers against hard-done-by public sector workers, old against young, striking teachers against put-upon parents.

Really, Godwin concludes, it's because they can't face a simple truth. People have heard their arguments and they don't buy them.

Bob Simpson (with apologies to Richard Godwin)

[I should point out that under normal circumstance the London Evening Standard supports the current Government all the way. And on a personal note, as a former employee of the NHS for some thirty years, I have found extremely insulting the way successive versions of the Conservative Party have continually expressed the view that the public sector is staffed by idiots whilst, in contrast, the glittering talents of the private sector are second to none. Having worked freelance in various areas of both the private and public sectors for the past 15 years I find this view risible to say the least. Ed]



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