

Rising public support for unions despite widespread strikes, Sky News poll suggests

Support for trade unions is rising even though strike action is bringing public services to a standstill, Sky News polling shows.

Industrial relations are at their most fractious since the 1980s, with the country having lost more than a million working days to strikes last year.

Despite this, sympathy for [striking](#) public sector workers has risen over the past couple of months.

Exclusive polling commissioned by Sky News shows that the public increasingly think that trade unions play a positive role in society.

A survey of more than 2,000 adults found that 37% support unions, up from 35% in November.

A smaller proportion – 28% – said unions play a negative role in society, down from 34% in November.

The findings suggest that the government, which is refusing to deliver inflation-matched pay rises, may not be able to rely on waning support for strike action.

Support for unions has increased as the wave of strike action has spread from the transport and communication sectors to the NHS.

Ambulance workers, nurses and doctors have all either voted for or announced intentions to ballot for strike action since

the last polling.

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YouGov data shows that NHS workers elicit the strongest support from the public.

As many as 43% of respondents to the survey said they strongly support strike action by nurses, while another 22% said they somewhat support it.

Only 31% said they strongly or somewhat oppose industrial action from nurses.

Like many public sector workers, nurses have experienced a decade of real-term pay cuts.

When inflation is taken into account, nurses' pay fell by 7.76% between 2011 and 2020. The most recent pay deal, announced last summer, also lagged behind inflation.

It is a similar story across the public sector, with the pay gap between the public and private sector widening.

In the three months to October, average private sector pay growth, excluding bonuses, was running at 6.9%.

The figure for the public sector was just 2.7%. Meanwhile inflation was running at close to 11%.

The Sky News poll indicates robust support for industrial action but the public is uneasy about how readily unions can go on strike.

At a time when the government is pushing through legislation that will make it harder for unions to call strikes, 33% of respondents said that they were able to take action too easily and that more restrictions should be placed upon them.

This was down slightly from 34% in November.

By comparison, 22% of respondents said that unions should be

given more freedom, up from 20% in November.

The YouGov/Sky News poll was carried out from 27-30 January, with 2,041 adults polled. The data is weighted to reflect the UK's population.