

The huge CEO-worker pay gap is the most popular fairness argument for strikes

What is the relationship between people’s views about the rights and wrongs of strikes and their views about the key principles of fairness, and the extent to which those are met in today’s Britain? How do those views vary across different groups in society and in relation to different groups of workers?

This report, based on polling carried out by Opinium for the Fairness Foundation in January 2023, finds that a large majority (80%) of the British public are concerned about the state of the nation, with even higher levels of concern about people meeting their basic needs (86%) and about the state of public services (83%).

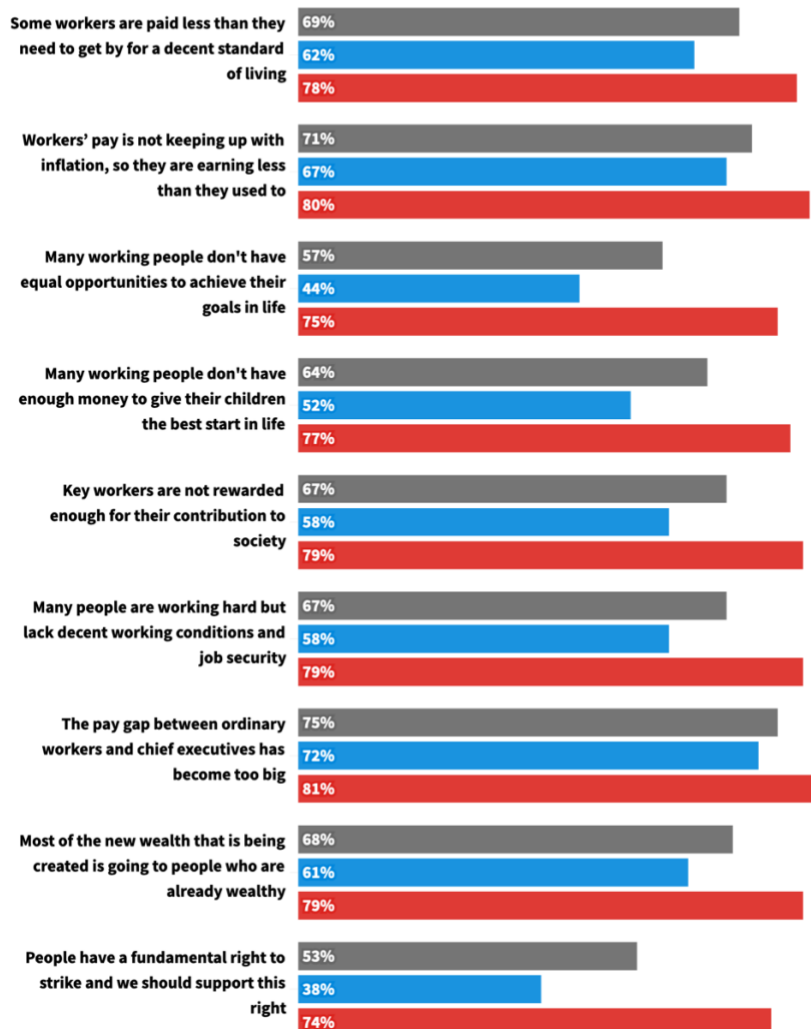
This explains why two in three people in Britain agree with the key fairness arguments in favour of the strikes (with still higher levels of agreement about falling real-terms pay and pay gap between ordinary workers and chief executives).

Almost three quarters of 2019 Conservative voters (and eight in ten Labour voters) agree that pay gaps are too large as an argument in favour of strikes, while large majorities also agree that some workers are paid less than they need to get by. Concern about public services is also the most agreed-with fairness argument *against* the strikes.

Thinking about the UK in 2023, how much do you agree or disagree with each of the following arguments IN FAVOUR of strikes?

Proportion of respondents who agree or strongly agree

■ All respondents ■ Conservative voters in 2019 ■ Labour voters in 2019



Support for different groups of striking workers varies, and it is beyond the scope of this research to disentangle all of the reasons for this. But the results provide additional evidence that the strikes themselves, and public attitudes to them, demonstrate the severity of the underlying problems caused by an absence of fairness in our society and economy. They also show that, while public support for strikes is quite divided (in line with the results of previous polling), the public is much more united when it comes to basic principles of fairness.

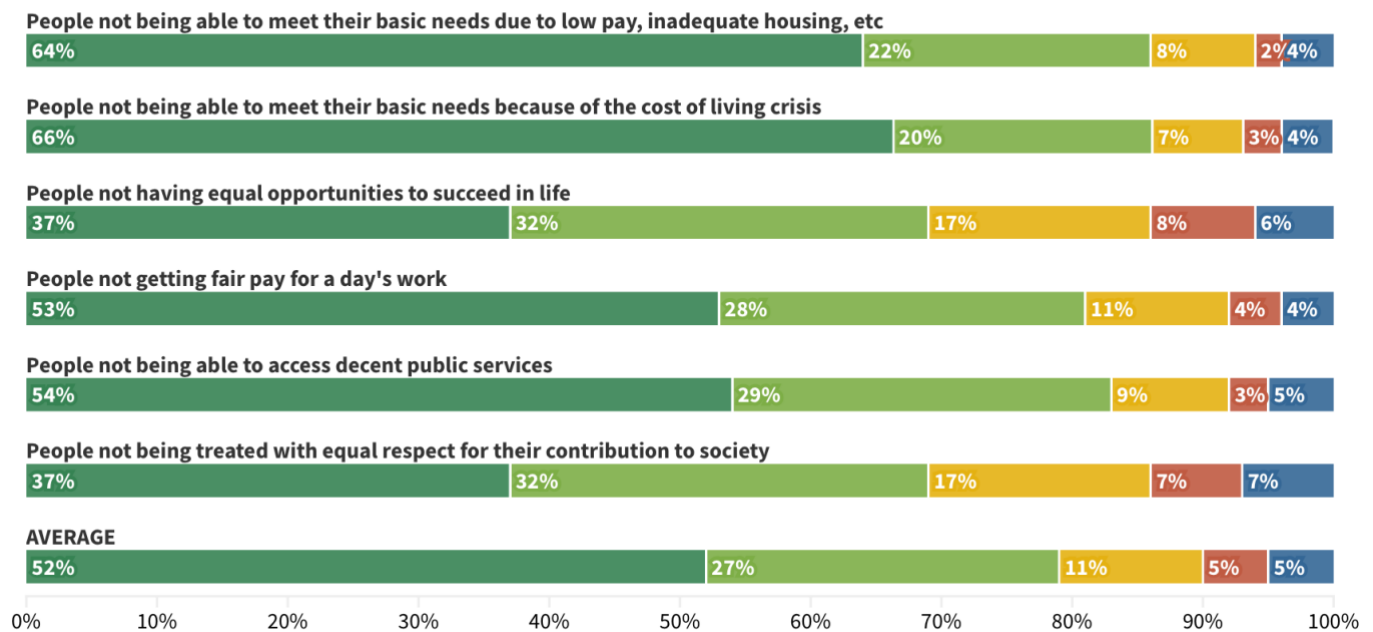
There is a high level of concern about a lack of fairness in Britain

It is clear that there is a huge amount of concern about a lack of fairness. When asked how much of an issue six fairness problems are in Britain today, an average of 79% of people agreed that they are major or moderate issues, with particularly high levels of concern about people meeting their basic needs (86%) and about the state of public services (83%). People were also concerned about fair pay (81%), and to a lesser extent about equal opportunities and equal respect (both 69%).

The six fairness problems map across to [The Fair Necessities](#), the five-point definition of fairness that we proposed in 2021 (with two problems mapped to ‘fair essentials’, i.e. basic needs). Our [April 2022 polling](#) on public attitudes to this definition broadly mirrored the findings of this latest survey, with 74% support for all five ‘fair necessities’. However, this time around, ‘fair opportunities’ comes out less strongly, perhaps because people make less of a connection between strikes and the concept of opportunity than, say, with ‘fair essentials’ or ‘fair rewards’.

In your view, do you feel that any of the following are issues in the UK today?

■ I think this is a major issue
 ■ I think this is a moderate issue
 ■ I think this is a minor issue
 ■ I don't think this is an issue
■ Don't know / not sure



People are more supportive of striking nurses than of other groups

When asked whether they support or oppose strikes by different groups of workers, our polling found broadly similar views to other recent surveys, with net support for strikes by nurses (35%), ambulance staff (30%), firefighters (28%), teachers (10%), postal workers (7%), bus workers (4%), highway workers (3%) and border force workers (3%), but net opposition to strikes by rail workers (-

2%), headteachers (-6%), university staff (-6%) and civil servants (-7%).

The variation in support for different workers is reflected in people’s answers as to why they support or oppose certain groups. Some oppose strikers because they feel that their impact is disruptive: “I oppose teachers as this will mean parents have to take time off work and potentially not get paid for this meaning the cost of living crisis

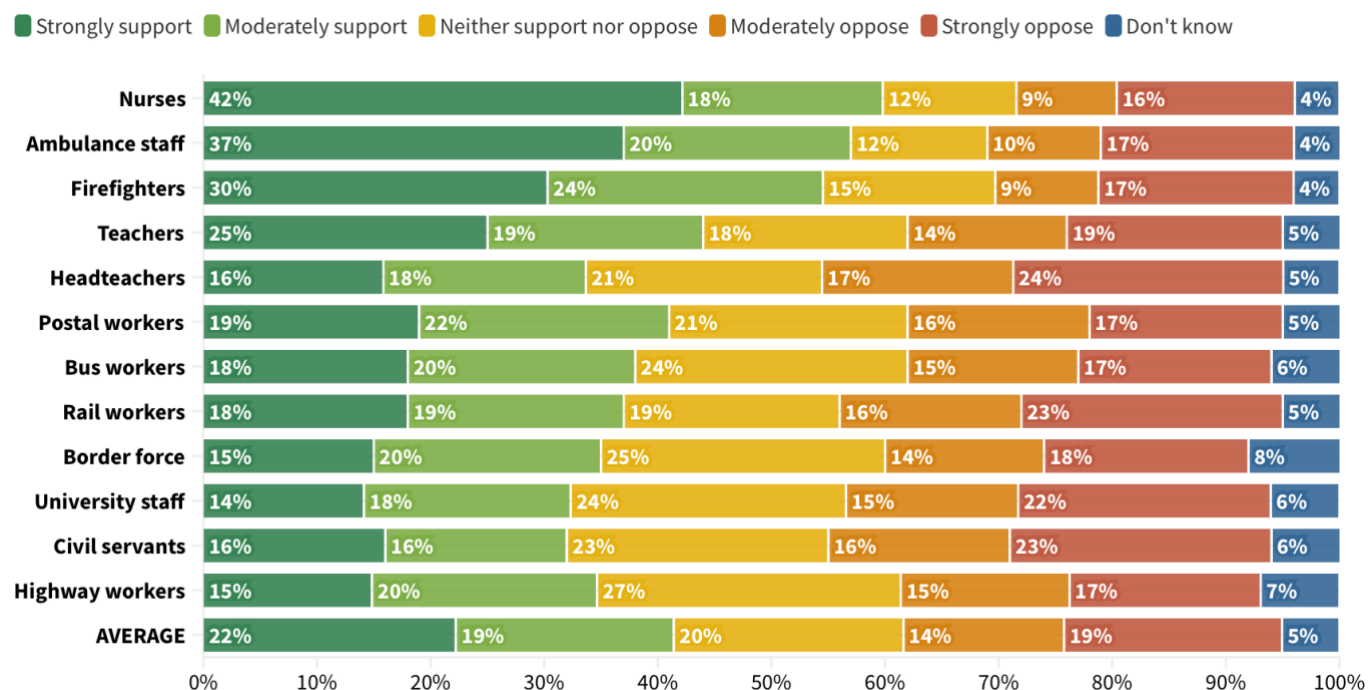
is worse!” Others say that their pay is already high enough: “I strongly oppose rail workers. They earn far higher than national average and should think themselves lucky.” Some people sympathise with workers who they feel work hard, are paid unfairly or have poor working conditions, especially NHS workers: “I support the nurses after what they did and do for us through covid.”

An online poll does not allow us to dig into the underlying values, beliefs, perceptions and assumptions that inform people’s attitudes in the way that qualitative research (like a focus group or a deliberative exercise) would. We asked the remaining questions in this survey to help to shed some light on these issues, but there are many potential drivers of attitudes to strikes by particular groups that we did not explore (such as their tactics, how they have been treated by the government, or their public rationale for striking), and so any comparative analysis of attitudes to different groups will be speculative.

However, answers to other questions in this survey do suggest that public concern about the state of public services has a strong bearing on attitudes, and this might be reflected in stronger levels of support for groups who have more convincingly argued that they are striking to protect crumbling public services (such as nurses and teachers). Asking about strikes by other groups alongside those more ‘popular’ groups might also artificially depress levels of support for other groups because they suffer by comparison.

There is also evidence that the extent of public support for strikes by particular groups of workers is influenced by pay levels. [Polling for the New Statesman by Redfield & Wilton Strategies](#) in January 2023 suggested that 63% of people would support strikes by workers earning between £10,000 and £25,000, falling to 41% for workers earning £25,000 to £50,000, and 17% for workers earning over £50,000. Public perceptions may not always align with reality in terms of average pay levels in particular industries.

Do you support or oppose current or potential strike action over pay or working conditions by the following groups of workers?



People support a broad range of fairness arguments in favour of strikes

We found strong agreement with almost all of the nine fairness arguments that we presented in favour of strikes, with an average of 66% agreement. The most popular argument was that the pay gap between ordinary workers and chief executives has become too big (75% agreement), followed by arguments about declining real-terms pay (71%), pay being less than needed for a decent standard of living (69%), most new wealth going to the already-wealthy (68%), and key workers not being rewarded enough for their contribution to society (67%) and lack of decent working conditions and job security (67%). Arguments about equal opportunities for working people and for their children, and for the right to strike, resonated less strongly but still commanded majority support.

The level of public anger about pay inequality is clear, despite the fact that people often underestimate the size of pay gaps; [polling that we conducted in August 2022](#) for the launch of the Fairness Index showed that people believe that large company CEOs are paid 15 times more than their average employees, whereas the [real ratio is 79 to one](#). Agreement with this argument holds up across party lines (with support from 72% of 2019 Conservative voters, as well as 81% of Labour voters). Of all the arguments presented, this one also attracted by far the highest proportion of people in *strong* support (55% overall, 46% of 2019 Conservative voters, and 68% of Labour voters).

It's also unsurprising that there are high levels of agreement with arguments about pay failing to keep up with inflation and to allow people to have a decent standard of living (attracting support from 67% and 62% of 2019 Conservative voters respectively, alongside higher proportions of Labour voters). In 2022, [34% of people in the UK were unable to maintain a decent standard of living, while 17% of employees were paid below the real living wage](#), and the severe and unevenly distributed impacts of the cost of living crisis since

then have been well documented. Pay growth has also been extremely uneven, and has been slower in the public sector than the private sector, as we discussed in [Fair Comment in July 2022](#) (and a TUC analysis in January showed that [bankers' pay has risen three times as fast as nurses' pay since the 2008 financial crisis](#)).

Meanwhile, the realisation that wealth is accruing more to those who are already wealthy than to those who work hard is becoming increasingly widespread. People realise that [wealth inequality is much larger than income inequality](#), and that [the best way to become wealthy is to be wealthy already](#), with most people finding themselves locked out of the opportunities to share both in the new wealth generated by the digital economy and in the old wealth that is growing thanks to asset price inflation. Social mobility is ossifying, and meritocracy is in retreat. This explains why 61% of 2019 Conservative voters and 79% of Labour voters agree that most of the new wealth being created goes to people who are already wealthy.

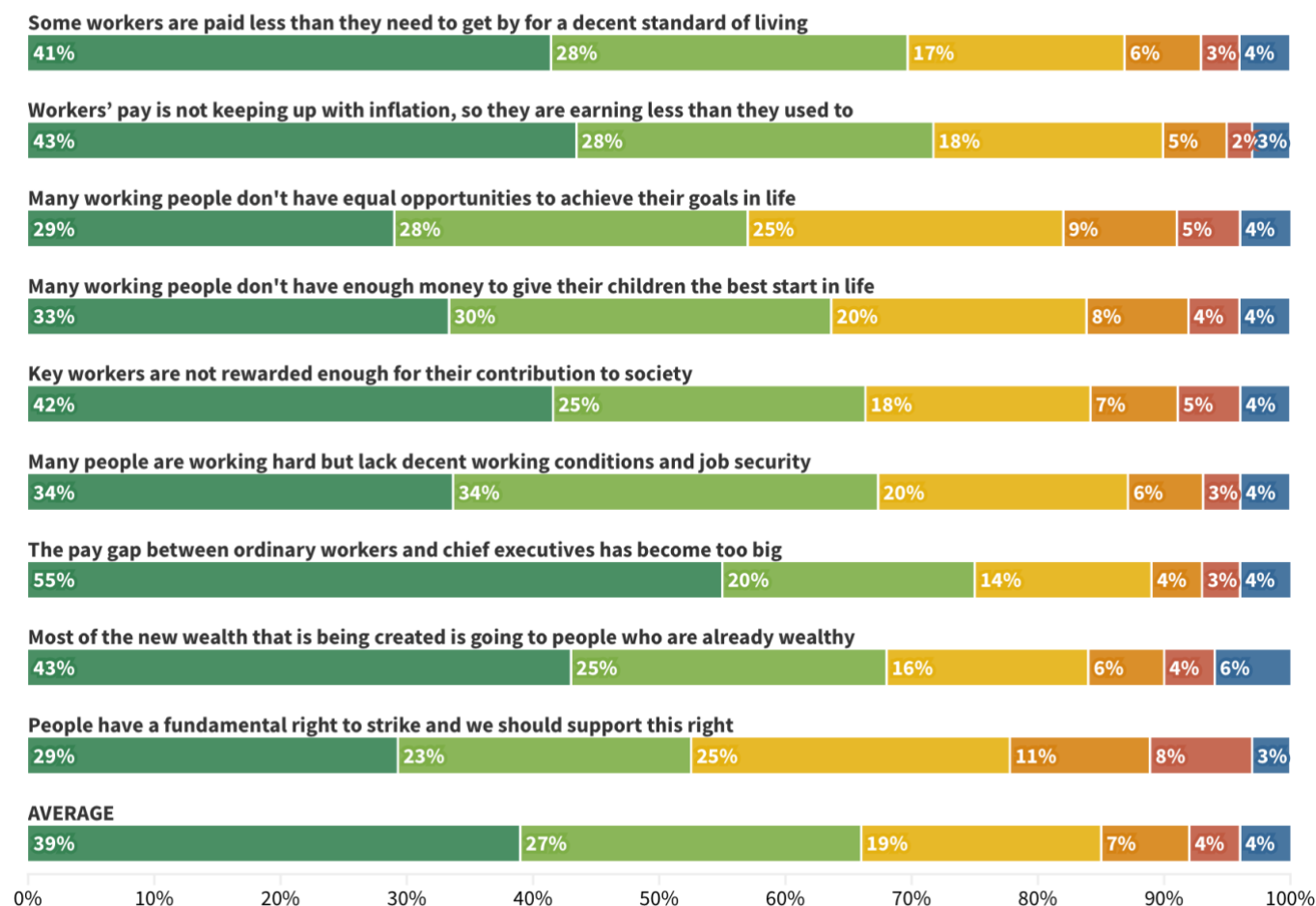
Of course, working conditions and job security are unsurprisingly resonant given that [20% of workers in 2021 experienced severe insecurity](#), while another 33% experienced lower forms of insecurity; [insecurity has increased in almost every sector and group](#).

Two in three Leave voters agree that key workers are not rewarded enough for their contribution to society, while seven in ten Remain voters feel the same. In many areas, there is a surprising amount of agreement between Remain and Leave voters: 77% of both groups think the pay gap between top and bottom is too high, while 69% of both groups think it's wrong that the rich are getting richer while ordinary people struggle.

Perhaps much of this has to do with the argument, [made recently by Will Hutton in The Observer](#), that an attempt to cut the pay of public servants offends a basic British sense of fairness.

Thinking about the UK in 2023, how much do you agree or disagree with each of the following arguments IN FAVOUR of strikes?

■ Strongly agree
 ■ Somewhat agree
 ■ Neither agree nor disagree
 ■ Somewhat disagree
 ■ Strongly disagree
 ■ Don't know



But they also agree with some fairness arguments against strikes

Concern about public services is also the most agreed-with fairness argument *against* the strikes. The two most popular arguments were the 'fair essentials' argument for public services and the 'reciprocity' or 'fair exchange' argument for public services, with 79% and 71% support respectively. Other arguments against the strikes were more evenly split, with roughly half of respondents agreeing and the other half neutral or in disagreement.

Levels of agreement with anti-strikes arguments were higher among 2019 Conservative voters, and lower among Labour and Lib Dem voters. Recent research from the US and Canada suggested that lower levels of support for trades unions are strongly correlated with conservative political orientation, with less accurate knowledge of union

activities and with prejudiced feelings towards union members, whereas beliefs in meritocracy and social mobility have less of an impact on attitudes.

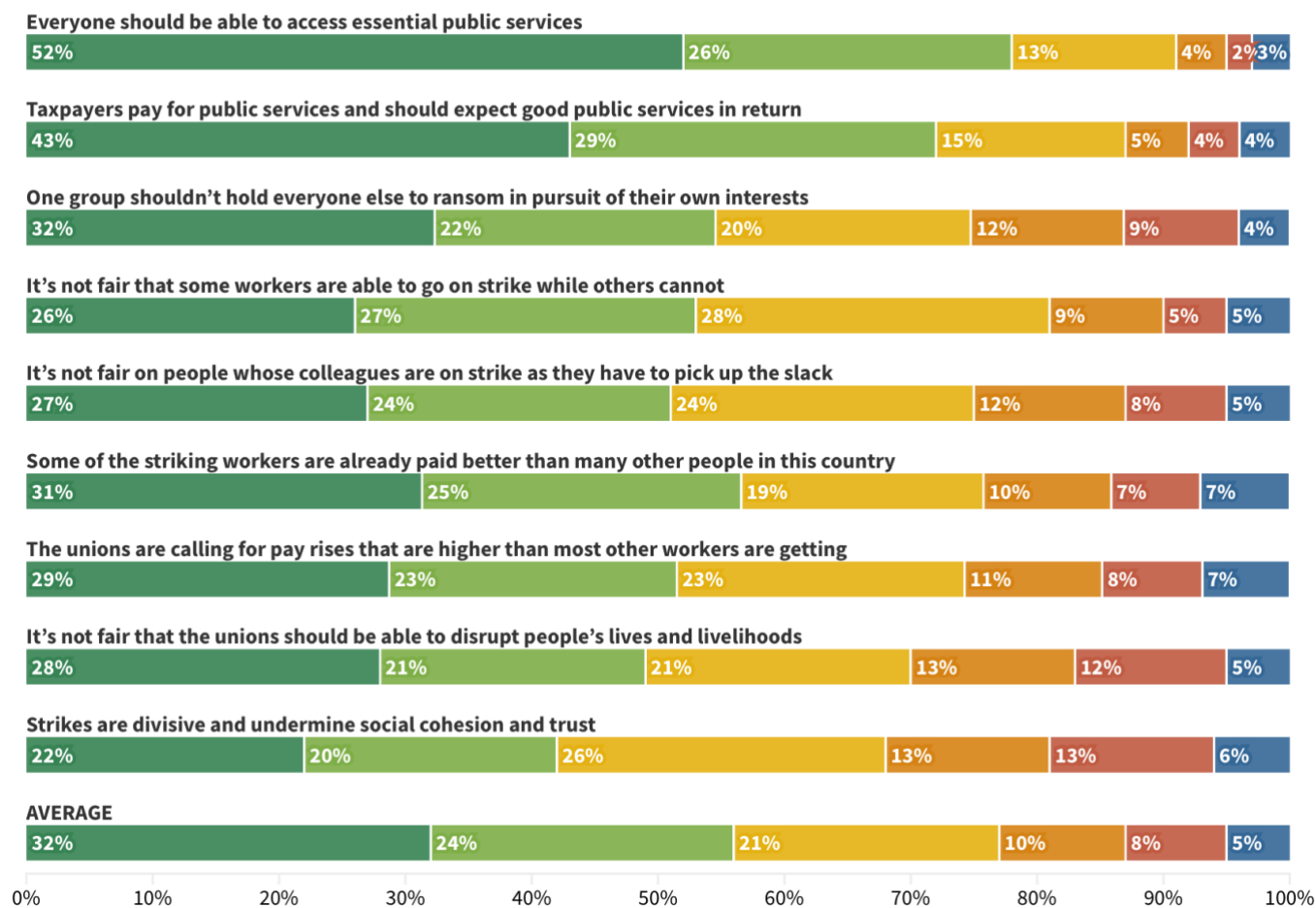
An analysis of the underlying demographic data did not reveal any significant patterns (for example, whether opposition to strikes was driven more by people who are better off and see them as an inconvenience, or by people who are struggling but are perhaps unable to go on strike themselves, or other groups, or a combination). Agreement with fairness arguments against strikes was slightly higher among people of C2DE social grade than among people with ABC1 social grade, but was lower among people on lower incomes than among people on higher incomes, suggesting that a complex set of factors are at play that do not neatly correlate to a single variable. It would be

interesting to explore in more detail, for example, whether some opposition to strike action comes from groups such as care workers or gig economy workers who have historically found it harder to strike, or the extent to which increasing economic and relational inequality and social segregation

coupled with inter-firm inequality, functional specialisation and outsourcing has reduced levels of solidarity and empathy among workers with different backgrounds who might, in previous decades, have felt more mutual connection and shared interests than they do today.

Thinking about the UK in 2023, how much do you agree or disagree with each of the following arguments AGAINST strikes?

Strongly agree Somewhat agree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat disagree Strongly disagree Don't know



Thinking about these arguments increases support for some groups but decreases support for others

We asked respondents whether thinking about the fairness arguments for and against strikes made them more or less supportive of strike action by each of the groups of workers that they had thought about previously. A split sample approach was used so that half of respondents saw the question about arguments in favour of strikes before the question about arguments against strikes, while the other half

saw them the other way around, to guard against 'recency bias'. We found that thinking about the fairness arguments did not have a large impact on attitudes, but that it slightly increased support for groups that already enjoyed more support (such as nurses and teachers), while slightly reducing support for groups that were already less supported (such as civil servants and university staff). For example,

one in ten people who had opposed nurses going on strike earlier in the survey became more supportive after considering the fairness arguments.

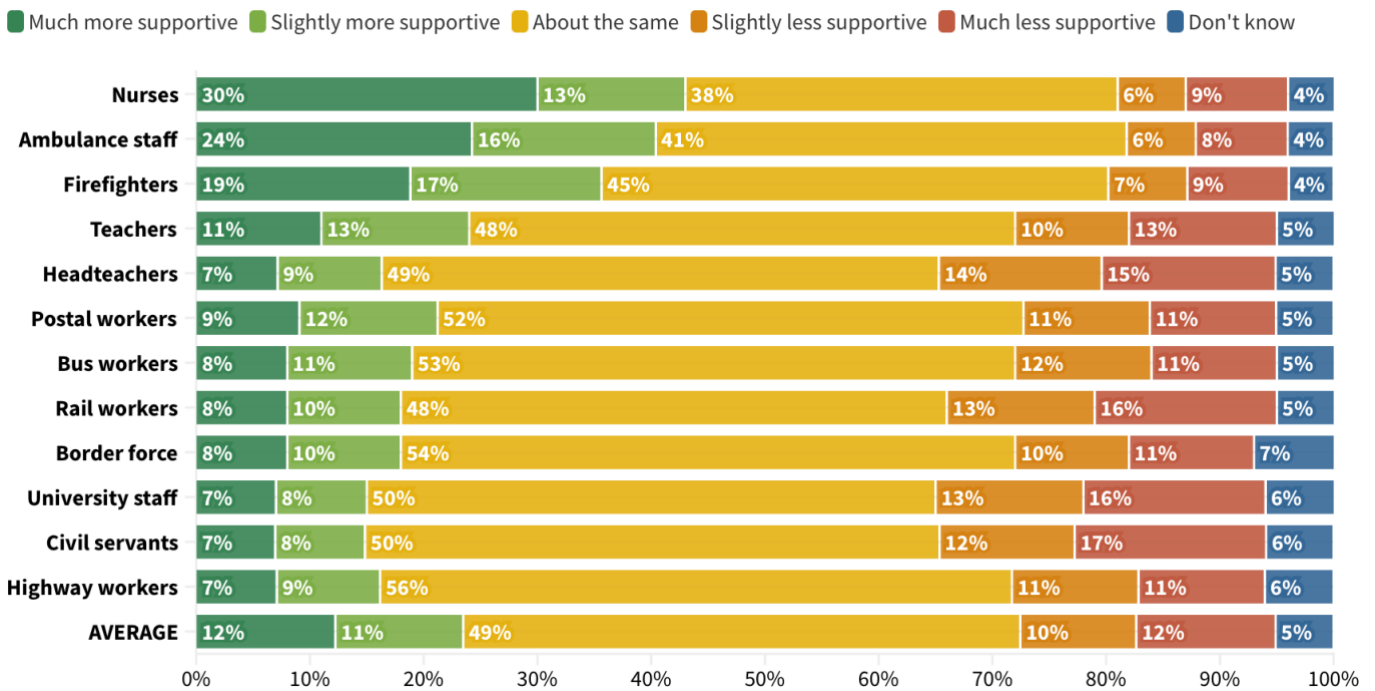
These findings are consistent with findings from an Ipsos poll in December 2022, which found that giving public more information about why the strikes are happening had little impact on opinions, increasing support by three percentage points. However, an earlier Ipsos poll in June 2022 found that explaining the reasons for the rail strikes increased public support from 35% to 41%.

We have often argued that fairness is instinctive. As a result, it is perhaps unsurprising that thinking about fairness arguments, which many people will have rehearsed (consciously or otherwise) when thinking about their support for strikes, does not

lead to a dramatic shift in attitudes. It is also unsurprising that thinking about the arguments tends to reinforce pre-existing attitudes, with Conservative voters becoming less supportive of strike action and Labour voters more supportive.

Of course, attitudes to strike action by particular groups of workers may shift over time, but this is more likely to be due to a changing context (for example, the negotiating tactics of the government or the unions, or the impact of ongoing strikes on public services) than on changes to people’s underlying values or beliefs. However, the results from our polling do suggest that people’s underlying values have a significant impact on their attitudes to strikes, as well as on their views on a much wider range of issues, and that values related to fairness are very much centre stage.

After thinking about these arguments for and against strikes, are you more or less supportive of each of the following groups striking?



There were mixed views about whether the strikes are justified

We asked respondents whether the strikes currently taking place in Britain are justified (e.g. because the status quo is unfair to workers) or unjustified (e.g. because the strikes are unfair to the public). Responses were mixed, with almost half (46%) saying they were justified,

compared to 37% saying they weren’t. Opinions generally followed political lines: only one in four 2019 Conservative voters agree that strikes are justified, while fewer than one in four Labour voters believe that they are not.

These findings are consistent with an Ipsos [poll in January 2023](#), which found that 34% of people believe that trade unions have too much power in Britain today (compared to 33% who think that they have the right amount of power, and 19% who think that they do not have enough power). Ipsos polling over time has also found consistently high support for the argument that it is important to have trade unions to protect workers' interests (79% agreed in January 2023, compared to 13% who disagree). And an Ipsos [poll in December 2022](#) found that 61% of Britons agree that it is acceptable for healthcare workers to go on strike for better pay.

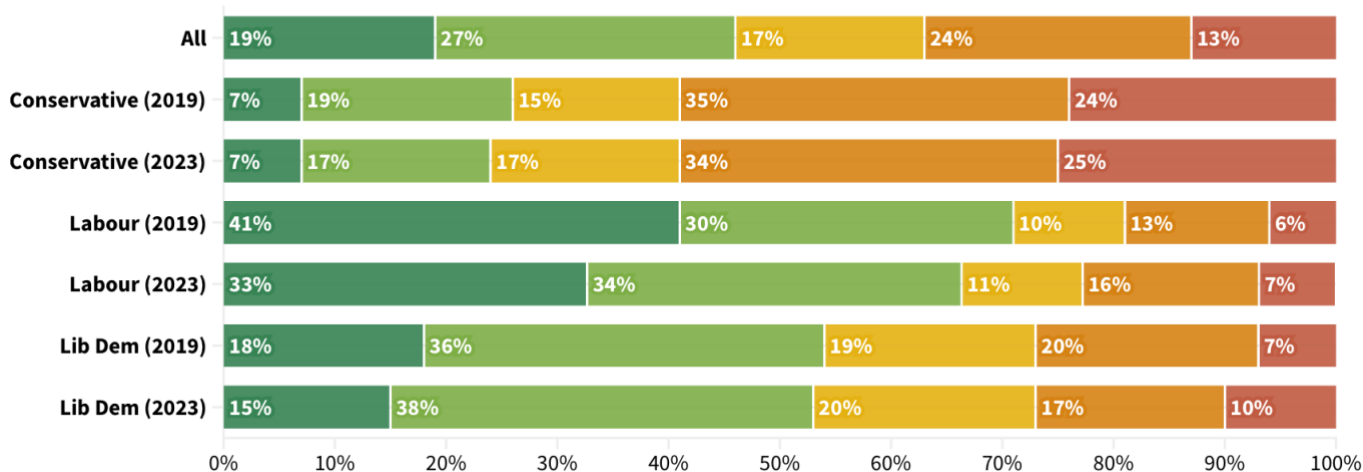
Among those that said the strikes are justified, one reason cited was everyone having the right to be paid fairly and with enough to live on: "everyone deserves to be paid justly and to be able to have a decent way of living", "wages, especially in the

public sector, have been stagnating for over a decade... it's also unfair that wealth inequality is so high". Another justification was that in some cases (such as with today's cost of living crisis), striking is the only option: "if the government won't listen, how else are they supposed to get their point across that current working conditions are what's causing a danger to our lives?"

Among those that said the strikes are unjustified, one reason cited was that striking workers are already paid well: "all of these workers already have decent incomes", "people striking get more than normal workers, they don't have a harder job, so should get back to work". Another argument was that strikes have a large impact on everyone else: "because it affects everybody, lost hospital appointments, because you don't get the letter or no transport to get there".

Overall, do you think that the strikes currently taking place in the UK are justified (e.g. because the status quo is unfair to workers) or unjustified (e.g. because strikes are unfair to the public)?

■ I think they are completely justified
 ■ I think they are justified
 ■ I don't have an opinion on this
 ■ I don't think they are justified
 ■ I don't think they are justified at all



Methodology and data sources

Fieldwork was carried out by Opinium between 18 and 20 January, with a nationally representative sample of 2,003 adults across Great Britain, weighted to nationally representative criteria and various political criteria. The order of options presented in each question was randomised.

Demographic breakdowns are available for every answer to every question, covering voting intention, 2019 general election vote, 2016 referendum vote, gender, age, region, ethnicity, level of education, social grade, household income, employment status and neighbourhood (city/town/suburb/village). [The full data tables can be downloaded here.](#)

Expert commentary

Martin O'Neill, Professor of Political Philosophy, University of York

The data presented in these polling results gives us a striking, and strikingly bleak, snapshot of a country that is now systematically failing to deliver for its citizens on even the most basic standards of fairness and social justice. 86% of those surveyed think that the UK has a problem with people being unable to meet their most basic needs due to low pay and bad housing, with the proportion holding this view being almost 80% even for those who are Conservative voters (among Labour voters the proportion is over 90%). 81% of those surveyed believe that the UK faces a problem with people not being able to get a fair day's pay for a day's work, in which opinion they are joined by over 70% of those voting Conservative (90% for Labour voters). And concern for the manifestly poor standard of the UK's public services is at over 80% for the population in general.

This is a picture of a society in which the social contract between individuals and the state has effectively broken down. The failures of government – and the perceptions of those failures – are not marginal but fundamental. The sense here is that the conditions of *reciprocity* between the individual and the broader economic and political system have been worn away: people no longer sense that they are getting a fair reward for their social contribution, either in terms of pay or in terms of the public services that they can access. What is perhaps even more remarkable here is that these immensely bleak survey responses are those that are captured 'cold' in polling with an audience who have not been primed with further data about the levels of inequality in the United Kingdom today. One can only imagine that responses would have been even angrier and more despairing if those polled had first been told about the increases in billionaire wealth in the UK since the beginning of the Covid pandemic. Research from the [Equality Trust](#) shows that the number of UK billionaires has increased by around 20% since the pandemic, with their combined wealth rising by around £150bn between 2020 and 2022. The clear evidence that we are certainly *not* 'all in this together' could only intensify these perceptions of the fundamental unfairness of British society.

When we think about issues relating to the fairness of strike action, we have to bear in mind this appalling background vista of underlying injustice and unfairness. The survey data suggests that, as one would expect, people *do* generally keep these background facts in mind when they think about the justification of strikes, as we see with the remarkably high levels of support for the arguments that strikes are justified when workers can't otherwise manage to support a decent standard of living, alongside the level of support for arguments that stress growing inequality, and the pay gaps between ordinary workers and those, such as chief executives, at the top of the income distribution. In a society where the rewards generated by workers' social and economic contribution were already shared reasonably fairly, where a decent social minimum was guaranteed for all, where inequality was kept in check, and where opportunities were broadly distributed, questions about the justification of industrial action might be rather more complicated, and people's responses and reactions to strikes might be very different. But that is not our world. In the UK in 2023, the high prevalence of strikes is best understood as an understandable surface symptom of a deeper social malaise caused by a society that has continued to devolve towards higher levels of inequality and unfairness.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of these survey results, though, are what is shown about perceptions of the strongest reasons *against* strikes. Many of the considerations that seem most compelling to people here are interestingly double-edged. For example, one could agree that "it is not fair that some workers are able to go on strike while others cannot", but that could just as easily be read as a call for robust protections of rights of union membership as it could be read as a consideration straightforwardly *against* current industrial action. Similarly the point that some striking workers are already paid more than many others in the economy: one could just as easily think that this could develop into a train of thought that takes seriously the idea that some workers are able to defend their relative position *precisely because* they are organised and unionised, and that one way of

resolving this apparent unfairness would be for others to follow their lead in exercising their democratic rights to unionise and to take collective action.

This double-edged character of people's thinking is perhaps especially poignant when one looks at the high level of support for the claim that "everyone should be able to access essential public services". *Of course* this claim is one to which most people would and should assent, as it captures a core idea in how we think about social justice, that very idea of reciprocity and the sense that the provision of high-quality public services is something that all citizens should be able to expect in a successful and well-functioning society. But again this is hardly the basis for a coherent argument against strike action taken by those whose jobs is to provide those services, because the systematic

failures in the provision of essential public services pre-dates this strike action, and has other causes. It is *precisely because* essential public services have been run down through underfunding that those working within the NHS (to take the most prominent example) have been forced into strike action. As the slogan heard on many of the picket lines of the Royal College of Nursing in recent weeks rightly has it, "people aren't dying because nurses are striking; nurses are striking because people are dying". When striking workers are taking action not only to try to improve their own unfairly bad pay and conditions, but also to address the underlying injustices that sit behind and explain those forms of unfairness, then they certainly merit the solidarity and support of all of those who are troubled by our unjust and unfair society, and retain the hope for something better.

Read more online

Visit fairnessfoundation.com/striking-a-nerve to read this report online. The online version includes:

- **Visualised breakdowns by 2019 general election vote and current voting intention for every question**
- **Videos of respondents' views about the strikes and word cloud analyses of their free text answers**
- **Analysis of polling by other organisations on levels of support for different groups of striking workers**
- **Links to related statistics from the Fairness Index and relevant third-party reports and books**

