

Unite plans more strikes by health workers

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Unison, the largest public sector union, yesterday announced further strikes by ambulance workers and other NHS staff after being cut out of pay talks between ministers and the Royal College of Nursing.

The RCN, which had been planning to escalate industrial action next week with a 48-hour walkout, put the action on hold on Tuesday and agreed to talks with ministers over pay and terms and conditions in England.

But the government has infuriated other health unions by not inviting them to the talks, which involved health secretary Steve Barclay and the RCN yesterday.

Unison said up to 32,000 of its members in the NHS would strike on March 8 as a “direct result of the government’s failure to hold proper pay talks with health unions”.

The industrial action will involve staff at all but one of England’s ambulance services and at other NHS trusts where strikes have been voted through recently, including Great Ormond Street hospital and the NHS Blood and Transplant service.

The GMB union, which represents more than 10,000 ambulance workers, also plans to press ahead with strikes scheduled for March 6 and 20.

Unison and the GMB are concerned the government could be planning to cut a pay deal with the RCN at the expense of other NHS staff usually covered by the same wage framework.

Ministers arranged talks with the RCN only after it proposed action affecting “life-preserving” areas of hospital care, and other health unions could now potentially adopt similar tactics.

“Choosing to speak to one union and not others . . . could make a bad situation much worse,” said Christina McAnea, general secretary of Unison. “A deal just for nurses cannot possibly work . . . Health workers will want assurances from ministers that they have no intention of ripping up pay agreements in the NHS.”

The British Medical Association, whose junior doctor members are due to walk out for 72 hours next month, said it was “very disappointed” that Barclay had not attended its meeting with health department officials yesterday.

“There was no [pay] offer on the table and the department made it clear they are not ready to enter negotiations,” the BMA added.

Separately, Andrew Haines, chief executive of infrastructure operator Network Rail, said there was “no indication” that ministers were seeking to end strikes on the railways by putting forward more money to increase pay.

Relations between the RMT union and the rail industry have deteriorated after it rejected improved pay offers from Network Rail and train operators and called a new round of strikes.

Train drivers union Aslef announced a strike on the London Underground on March 15, the day of the Budget. The walkout will coincide with industrial action already planned by the PCS union involving 100,000 civil servants.