

Nurses tell Health Secretary it's 'pay negotiations or nothing' to avert strikes

The Royal College of Nursing has told the [Health Secretary](#) it is negotiations on pay “or nothing” after he urged the union to return for talks about working conditions to avert strikes.


Steve Barclay on Saturday continued his refusal to discuss pay as nurses prepare to strike on December 15 and 20 unless they get a 19% rise.

He wrote to the [RCN](#) urging its representatives to “come back to the table” for talks, with a [Whitehall](#) source suggesting these could include subjects such as pension arrangements, holidays, rosters and the availability of free coffee.

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But the RCN's general secretary Pat Cullen swiftly responded with a letter saying she would only be returning for pay talks after members voted heavily in favour of industrial action.

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“I’m afraid the position of my members is ‘negotiations or nothing’,” she wrote.

“You cannot shut them out and then repeat that your door is open. If the negotiation table is empty, we can see you are not serious about progress.

“This dispute needs resolving and strike action is now little over a fortnight away.

“On behalf of every nurse, let’s negotiate.”

Since the result of the ballot was made public two weeks ago, the RCN said it has sought detailed and formal negotiations with the [Government](#) and has attended two meetings with the Health Secretary that it maintained did not focus on this year’s NHS pay dispute.

On the matter of strike exemptions and patient safety, the union will meet senior NHS officials in the coming days.

Mr Barclay wrote to Mrs Cullen to “express my deep regret that you have declined my offer of a meeting”.

“I want to reiterate what I have said previously: my door is open to discuss how to improve the working lives of nurses and other staff,” he added.

“I urge you to reconsider your position and come back to the table.

“I would once again like to make clear that I, my colleagues across Government, and indeed the public, value the care provided by nurses up and down this country and I am disappointed that you have taken this unprecedented step.”

The Health Secretary and Prime Minister [Rishi Sunak](#) have said the nursing union’s demand for a 19.2% pay rise costing an

estimated £10 billion a year is unaffordable.

But an RCN spokesperson said: "This is gross scaremongering and many multiples of the accurate costs."

The college says experienced nurses are worse off by 20% in real terms due to successive below-inflation awards since 2010, despite a pay rise of about £1,400 awarded in the summer.