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Union warning on health reforms

Unions representing doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers and other workers are to campaign against "breakneck" speed of "relentless changes".

And Unison has said the country may be heading for a "summer of discontent".

There will also be rallies across the UK, and at this autumn's TUC Congress and Labour party conference.

A lobby of Parliament is also being planned for October.

Members balloted

"It looks as though we are heading for a summer of discontent, with sadly more job losses on the way," said Unison head of health Karen Jennings.

Unison has been warning throughout the summer that the government intends to increase private sector input in the operation of the NHS.

In recent weeks the government has accelerated its progress towards a more market-based NHS.

Ministers have placed an advertisement in a leading European journal asking firms to put forward offers to take on the commissioning responsibility from local health bosses.

The move will mean almost the entire responsibility for buying and distributing everything from medical equipment to food to hospitals and family doctors will be handed over to the private sector.

Ministers say the move will save the NHS money which can be reinvested into patient care.

Critics believe it will create a potential conflict of interest with private firms in charge of buying care from private hospitals and GP services.

Unison has said it will ballot its members over the transfer of supply agency, NHS Logistics, and part of the buying organisation, the NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency to a US- German consortium of Novation and DHL.

'Big improvements'

TUC general secretary Brendan Barber said the pace and direction of reform in the NHS was not backed by staff.

He said many current changes appeared to be "driven by an ideological preference for the private sector and will not benefit patients".

"There can be no doubt that there have been big improvements in the NHS under this government.

"But the government's relentless changes and preference for privatisation is causing growing frustration among staff who want the NHS to succeed, but think their views have not been taken into account."

Savings axe

Meanwhile, Unison said it was "shocked" at the scale of recent job cuts.

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City Hospitals Sunderland Foundation Trust has recently said it will cut 10% of its 5,000 workforce to clear a debt of

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