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# Prison officers go sick in protest at assault claims

BY RICHARD FORD AND HELEN RUMBELOW

MORE than half the prison officers at Wormwood Scrubs went "sick" yesterday, causing serious disruption to the country's biggest jail.

The protest by members of the Prison Officers' Association follows the suspension of eight officers and a manager at the jail over allegations that inmates were assaulted and abused by staff. Seventy staff from other jails in London and the South East were drafted into the West London prison as the scale of the protest emerged.

Richard Tilt, the Director-General of the Prison Service, said that the large numbers going sick had to be seen as protest action. He added: "Staff must return to work. We have a duty to see to the security of the prisoners and the safety of people working there. We recognise that the current investigation has unsettled many staff, but the way

forward is to have the allegations properly and externally investigated."

The mass sickness began affecting prison officers within hours of the announcement that the Metropolitan Police was to hold a criminal investigation into the allegations.

Twelve of 21 officers did not turn up for the night shift on Tuesday, and more than 100 failed to turn up for shifts yesterday. Some did not return after meal breaks. Prison officers, who are banned from taking industrial action, do not have to produce a sick note for an absence of less than seven days.

Their action meant that prisoners were unlocked late, and meals and visits were delayed. Remand prisoners were 90 minutes late for court and inmates had to spend most of the morning in their cells.

Last night the POA said that

it had reached agreement with the prison management, and hoped some of its members would be able to return to work in the next few days. A spokesman said that the deal involved greater supervision in particularly sensitive areas of the prison, so that members felt protected from malicious allegations. Ron Adams, vice-president of the POA, claimed that members had been under severe stress at the jail. "We saw our members breaking down in tears. There is a genuine level of illness."

The nine suspended staff members at the jail will remain on full pay pending the outcome of the police investigation. The allegations date back as far as October 1996 and include accusations of racism, beatings and intimidation of prisoners, one of whom claims he was assaulted by staff almost every day for a month.



Rebecca Hossack, one of the judges of the Prison Butterfly Competition, with some of the entries yesterday. Inmates can win £250 for the best picture of a butterfly