Following months of negotiations between Unite, Britain's biggest union and BAA, Unite claims it has been left with 'no choice' but to give the airport operator seven days notice from yesterday of its intention to hold a strike ballot.

BAA staff were apparently offered a bonus last year, but only on the condition that BAA – which is owned by a consortium headed up by Spain's Grupo Ferrovial – met its EBITDA target of £1.2bn ($1.85bn) which it failed to do.

The union says it will now ballot 6,185 staff, including security employees, engineers, firefighters and support staff at the BAA airports of Heathrow, Stansted, Southampton, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh.

Responding to the threatened strike action, a spokesman for BAA said: ‘We are disappointed that Unite is to ballot members across its UK airports for strike action.

‘During recent discussions with Unite, we proposed a conditional 1.5% pay increase. We believe this to be a reasonable offer at a time when BAA and its airline customers are seeing a decline in passengers due to the impacts of recession and volcanic ash.

‘We regret Unite's decision, which will cause unnecessary concern for millions of our passengers and damage Britain's reputation around the world.’

Unite's national officer for civil aviation, Brendan Gold, said: ‘Unite and BAA have been in talks for months and we are prepared to continue talking. A negotiated agreement can be reached if the company is prepared to be fairer and more realistic.

‘BAA staff have already accepted a pay freeze in 2009 to help the company, but they are not prepared to accept such a paltry offer this year. We will therefore go into this ballot with strong resolve and a determination to demonstrate to BAA that its staff deserve better treatment than they are currently getting.’