

Teachers in secondary school in Bacup, England to strike demanding face to face qualified teacher in the classroom

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Teaching staff at a secondary school in Bacup, England are set to strike on December 3 to protest pupils being taught by a virtual teacher (VT). The action underlines the ongoing crisis in teacher recruitment and retention and funding in UK state schools.

In July, management at the Star Academies Trust took the decision to incorporate distance learning for top-set pupils at The Valley Leadership Academy in years 9-11 (13-16-year-olds)—prompted by the chronic shortage of maths teachers which meant they could not recruit in the locality.

In September as the autumn term began, a teacher based 300 miles away in Devon was taken on to teach maths. In the face of opposition from staff, management agreed to employ a qualified teacher—though not a maths teacher—to give face-to-face support in the classroom. The role of the other adult, who is in the classroom, is therefore limited to behaviour control and to ensure the children stay on task.

According to the National Education Union (NEU), this support is not “guaranteed”, so staff at The Valley decided to walk out. Further stoppages are planned for December 10 and 11, and January 6 to the 8 at the beginning of the next school term. NEU members balloted 82 percent in a 75 percent turnout to strike.

The BBC reported that in August the union set up a “confidential online petition in opposition to the new arrangement” which was signed by 500 people.

SchoolsWeek reported that comments from parents and teaching staff “touched on a range of concerns including the lack of in-person interaction, how well the model will work for children with SEND [Special Educational Needs and Disabilities] and the impact on teachers’ career progression.”

Before introducing the scheme to The Valley, Star Academies trailed two “very limited” VT pilots, teaching

English at Highfield Leadership Academy in Blackpool and maths at Laisterdyke Leadership Academy in Bradford.

The revolutionary developments in technology bound up with the use of the internet and AI creates limitless opportunities for enhancing teaching and learning. The schoolchildren will use electronic pens and touch screens to interact with the VT.

But to achieve the best standard of education, it must be employed as an aid to qualified teachers in the classroom, not to replace them or shore up a crisis in teacher shortages.

According to the *Lancashire Telegraph*, other schools in Britain are employing virtual teachers—along with a support worker in the classroom, not a qualified teacher. There is no official record of how many schools are resorting to virtual teaching.

Similar arrangements have been in place in US schools, in many counties, for several years. The *Guardian* noted that it was in operation at Memphis-Shelby schools in Tennessee, and the Little Rock School District in Arkansas. According to NBC Chicago, in August, Gary Community School District in Indiana introduced 13 VTs into some of its schools due to a shortage of qualified teachers. It is a burgeoning business for private companies like Elevate K-12 and Proximity.

UK government data from 2023-24 found that 46 percent of secondary schools in England reported at least one vacant teaching post, and the percentage is even higher in Further Education Colleges. Staff shortages in maths, physics, computing and languages are particularly acute.

The Labour government pledged to recruit 6,500 new teachers by the end of the parliament in 2029. But according to the NFER (National Foundation for

Educational Research) little progress is being made to reverse the recruitment and retention crisis, which is leading to larger class sizes and increased workloads for remaining staff.

Key findings of the NFER's Teacher Labour Market in England Annual Report 2025 reported that 90 percent of teachers considered leaving the profession in 2023/24 due to heavy workload. In most subjects, targets for recruitment to address the teacher shortages have not been met. Teacher shortages and reliance on unqualified staff is also growing and is more acute in areas of greater deprivation.

According to a July report from Parliament's Committee of Public Accounts, the education system will require an additional 1,600 secondary school teachers by 2027-28, and between 8,400 and 12,400 further education teachers by 2028-29 "to meet demographic pressures and deliver skills needed across the economy".

NEU General Secretary Daniel Kebede declared, "Teacher shortages will not be resolved until teacher pay and workload are significantly improved. All teachers have seen the real value of their pay cut by a fifth since 2010."

The education unions bureaucracy which has overseen years of pay erosion and cuts to education spending, have contributed to the teacher shortage. The NEU and other education unions accepted this year's partially funded below inflation 4 percent pay award as a "positive step towards pay restoration", with cash-strapped schools having to contribute towards from their own budgets.

The pro-business, pro-war Labour government—elected with the support of the trade unions—has recommended another below inflation, partially funded 6.5 percent average pay rise for teachers in England to the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) for 2026-29. The STRB will make its pay recommendation to the education secretary in February of 2026.

Under-paid teaching staff are expected to work in crumbling, ill-maintained buildings, which are a danger to life and limb. Teachers are overburdened with proscriptive planning and Ofsted driven targets and tests, teaching increasingly impoverished children—leading to high stress levels and burnout. By the end of 2024, 4.5 million children (31 percent of all children—about 9 in a classroom of 30) were classed as in poverty.

The Labour government's budget announced by Chancellor Rachel Reeves November 26 contained no extra funding for schools, despite many anticipating having to make cuts next year. A 4 percent drop in per

pupil spending is anticipated. Government funding pledges for school libraries and playgrounds are merely window dressing.

With a predicted a £6 billion shortfall in SEND spending for 2028/29, the budget included plans for central government to take financial responsibility for SEND provision away from cash-strapped local councils from 2028. SEND provision is so patchy and sparse that many children are lacking a school place.

According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, it is unclear whether the extra anticipated SEND costs would come out of the Department for Education's (DfE) £69 billion core schools budget in 2028-29. If the £6 billion is taken out of the DfE's core budget, this would translate to a huge 4.9 percent fall in school spending for each pupil.

A white paper due to be published early next year restructuring the SEND system will, reported the *Guardian*, "substantially bring down the growth of the Send budget," according to senior government sources. Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson said changes will "bring costs down"—much to the consternation of parents and teachers.

Kebede's response to Reeves' budget speech was that it "did nothing to fix" the "full-blown funding crisis" facing schools. He told *PoliticsHome*, "Without a change in direction from the government, and real investment in education, strikes to save education will be inevitable in 2026."

If the NEU leadership, under pressure from teachers struggling under intolerable conditions, eventually sanctions some strikes, it will be only to diffuse anger. Establishing a fully-funded and high quality education system is bound up with education workers building their own organisations, rank-and-file committees and unify their fight with all workers across the public sector who face the destruction of jobs and services.

This fight demands the expropriation of the wealth of the billionaires and big corporations, which the Starmer government defends.

Contact and join the Educators Rank-and-File Committee today.



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