

# Teaching staff at Bacup secondary school in north-west England strike against virtual teaching introduced by Star Academies Trust

“It’s a massive risk to the profession and to jobs—and it’s not good enough for the kids.”

**Our reporters**  
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Teaching staff at a secondary school in Bacup, Lancashire north-west England, took their first day of strike action on Wednesday to protest pupils being taught by a virtual teacher (VT). The walkout takes place amid a deepening recruitment and retention crisis as public education faces an existential breakdown after decades of underfunding by successive Conservative and Labour governments.

Members of the National Education Union (NEU) voted by an 82 percent majority on a 75 percent turnout to strike, expressing the deep opposition among staff. Further strike action is planned for December 10 and 11, and next term from January 6 to 8.

In July, management at the Star Academies Trust imposed distance learning for top-set pupils in Years 9–11 at The Valley Leadership Academy, citing a chronic shortage of maths teachers which it could not recruit locally. A well-attended picket of around 25 staff gathered outside the school with NEU placards reading “No virtual teachers—our children deserve better”, alongside a mock-up cardboard dummy labelled “What next-Robot Teachers?”. Passing cars beeped in their support of the strikers. The teachers’ opposition has broader community support: the BBC reported that a confidential union petition opposing the new arrangement received 500 signatures in August.

A reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) spoke with teaching staff about their concerns and why they have decided that strike action was necessary.

**Tommy**, a history teacher said: “I think remote teaching in the top set for Years 9, 10 and 11 is wrong for two reasons. Firstly, kids need a teacher in the room. Half the battle of teaching is getting kids to engage, and if you have someone on a virtual stream, kids cannot watch a full TikTok nowadays—so how will they engage with an hour’s lesson?

“Secondly, if this rolls out on a wider scale you don’t need as many teachers, so we could be put out of jobs. AI is advancing rapidly; in five years’ time we could imagine it could put all teachers out of a job.

“We’re told virtual teaching ‘gets results’, based on what’s happening at Laisterdyke [school] in Bradford, but only top sets receive it. Would the same results happen with lower-ability sets? We don’t know. It’s also inefficient—they have both a virtual teacher and another adult in the room. If the virtual model is so effective, why pay for both?

“I understand where the Academy is coming from, there is a shortage of teachers, it is a bit of a stopgap. In the long run, the trends of the academy, running three different schools on virtual learning models, towards different subjects, leads the Academies orientating towards businesses.”

A maths teacher and NEU rep said: “We have a virtual teacher that is teaching our top sets, 9,10, and 11 maths, staff members are fighting for our children and young people to get the education that they deserve.

“Star Academies is claiming that this is because of the recruitment and retention crisis, which is a very real thing across this nation. We managed to secure a qualified maths teacher over the summer to be physically present in the room, as well as the virtual teacher being beamed in on the screen on a Teams call, which is an amazing win for our children and young people to have that teacher physically present. However, it does pose the question of, why the heck do we need a virtual teacher?

“We know of three Star Academies which are currently employing three virtual teachers, two Maths and one English. That has spread in just over the last academic year. We’ve also seen that Dixon Academy trust has started advertising for online teachers and the genuine fear is, that if

we do not stop this now, it will spread, and the face of education will look very different in 20 years' time.

"I feel like I want to be on the right side of history when it comes to this and my fear is that if we do not stop it now, it will spread. I think if Virtual Teaching spreads, it will have a negative impact upon our children. I live in this catchment area. I've got two primary school age children, and they should be coming to this high school in a few years, and I am not happy with my children sitting on screens for their education. It is impossible to form a relationship with a teacher when they're on a screen and over the internet and that's what we're fighting against.

"Teaching is an incredibly hard job but it's the best job in the world. The Star Academies model is to have a virtual teacher on the screen and an appropriate adult in the classroom. Now that can be a TA [teaching assistant], a cover supervisor, a trainee. As teachers, we are paid and trained to be able to deal with 30 children in a classroom and everything that comes with that, it is unfair and inappropriate to ask a TA to do that.

"One of the fears is that there is currently no law against virtual teachers and no law about having one virtual teacher beamed into multiple classes at once. I'm not saying that is currently happening, but the fear is that the possibilities of this are terrifying, and this is the thin end of the wedge. As parents and as educators are we okay with that? I'm not, and that's why I'm here today."

Another history teacher explained: "You're not going to upskill anybody this way. They're essentially outsourcing education to people that don't know the community, don't live in the local area, it makes zero sense. If you have one teacher for one class and you can have one teacher online for two or three classes at least, and then to divide those two who are a skilled worker and essentially an unskilled teacher, that can lead to the risk of differences in pay and so on. This is a massive risk to the profession and a massive risk to jobs and not good enough for the kids.

"I know they're talking about a recruitment crisis, but if you go online, this trust has £40 million pounds in reserves, which are sitting there doing nothing. It's about paying people a proper wage, making this an attractive place to work. You're not going to attract a skilled teacher this way by not offering a good pay package."

The WSWs reporting team also distributed the article "Teachers in secondary school in Bacup. England to strike demanding face to face qualified teacher in the classroom" which was widely taken up on the picket line. It outlined the broader context of the dispute and the need for a wider fightback to defend public education.

The introduction of VTs at The Valley follows two "very limited" pilots at Highfield Leadership Academy in

Blackpool (English) and Laisterdyke Leadership Academy in Bradford (Maths), and parallels developments in the United States where private firms profit from virtual staffing due to the shortage of qualified teachers.

Government data shows widespread secondary teacher vacancies in the UK, especially in maths, physics, computing and languages. The Labour government has pledged to recruit 6,500 teachers by 2029, but National Foundation for Educational Research data shows little progress. Special Educational Needs and Development (SEND) funding faces a £6 billion shortfall, and the government is preparing a white paper to "bring costs down".

Virtualisation is not educational innovation but an austerity measure benefiting business-oriented academy trusts. The groundbreaking developments with technology, the internet, AI and digital tools could support learning, but only under the control of trained, qualified teachers—not as a substitute for them or to mask the recruitment crisis engineered by government policy.

The NEU which along with the education unions helped the Starmer government to get elected, has reigned in struggles including enforcing the sub-inflation pay award this year of 4 percent as "positive step towards pay restoration". Teacher pay has fallen 20 percent in real terms since 2010, and the education sector unions have repeatedly accepted below-inflation deals. Labour's latest offer—6.5 percent over three years, only partially funded—means another real-terms cut. Even now, the NUT warns that strikes "may be inevitable in 2026", delaying action as conditions continue to deteriorate. The danger is that the NEU will isolate the Bacup strike while Star Academies expands virtualisation as a test bed for its roll out nationally.

To defend high-quality, fully funded education, educators must build independent rank-and-file committees, linking their fight with workers across public services. This is a political struggle against a Labour government committed to austerity and defending corporate interests—including academy trusts reshaping schools for profit.

*Contact the Educators Rank-and-File Committee to discuss how to take this fight forward.*



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