

UK teachers in Bacup secondary school continue strike to oppose online virtual teachers replacing teachers in the classroom

Our reporters
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Teaching staff at The Valley Leadership Academy secondary school in Bacup, England are continuing strike action to protest pupils being taught by a virtual teacher (VT). After first walking out December 3, they took to the picket lines again on December 10 and 11.

Teachers were joined by supporters, including parents and pupils, making up a 40-strong picket. After picketing the school, they moved on to picket the headquarters of the Star Academies Trust in Blackburn, which runs the school.

The Star Academies Trust runs 36 schools across England in Lancashire, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, the Midlands, and London, including primary, secondary and grammar school.

Further stoppages are planned for January 6-8. The 15 National Education Union (NEU) members, half the teaching staff, balloted 82 percent in a 75 percent turnout to strike.

The action underlines the ongoing crisis in teacher recruitment and retention--bound up with decades of funding cuts, curriculum reforms and attacks on conditions by successive Conservative and Labour governments.

In July, the Star Academies Trust decided to incorporate distance learning for top-set pupils for years 9-11 (13-16-year-olds), as they were unable to recruit a maths teacher. There is a chronic shortage of specialist teachers in the UK, particularly in maths, computing, science and languages.

In September, a teacher 300 miles away in Devon was appointed to teach maths. Faced with opposition from staff, management agreed to employ a qualified teacher alongside the VT to give face-to-face support in the classroom. This post is not guaranteed.

The employment of VT staff sets a dangerous

precedent. With ongoing spending cuts in education, VTs will be used to shore up the shortage of teachers, threatening jobs while blighting the learning experience of pupils which depends on face-to-face interaction with a teacher.

SchoolsWeek reported an increase to 1,200 schools expecting to face a budget deficit for 2024-25. It is not beyond the imagination that schools could contract one virtual teacher to be beamed simultaneously into many classrooms nationwide to save money.

A reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) spoke with parents and teaching staff, distributing the article "Teaching staff at Bacup secondary school in north-west England strike against virtual teaching introduced by Star Academies Trust."

One teacher took some into the school, saying she would put them in the staffroom and pin them onto the noticeboard.

Maths teacher Emily, who is the National Education Union representative, said, "The top five CEOs of Star Academy are paid £1.2 million pounds. They pay themselves that from taxpayers' money which is meant to be going to our children's education.

"There is a qualified maths teacher in the VT lesson. However, the only reason that there is a qualified maths teacher physically present in the classroom, as well as the VT on the teams call, is because the union fought before summer, and Star [Academies Trust] have put in an email that it is a gesture of goodwill.

"Their policy is to have an appropriate adult in the classroom, which, according to them, could be a trainee, a cover supervisor or a TA [teaching assistant]. It is inappropriate and unfair to ask a TA to be in charge of 32 teenagers in a classroom, because that is a tough job that, as teachers, we are paid and trained for.

“We need to have solidarity across all unions to make sure that our children get what they deserve, which is qualified subject specialists physically present in the classroom.”

Kelly, whose child is in year 11, said, “My daughter was meant to be in the top set when I found out about this way back in July. I had to drop her down a set because she didn't want a virtual teacher... She said she didn't want to be part of the experiment, and she didn't know if the experiment would work or not. She said, ‘This is my final year. It's important. I don't want to be a part of it because I don't know if it'll work or not.’ She wants it in person and not online.”

On Wednesday, Daniel Kabede, NEU General Secretary attended the school picket line. Addressing the pickets he declared, “If we allow this stuff to slide here, this will happen across schools around the country.

“We'll see the roll out of virtual teachers... that completely undermine the learning children expect and deserve. Teaching is a relational experience—it's built on the relationship between teacher and student – and that just quite simply cannot happen through a screen”.

Posting on X, with the hashtag #NoVirtualTeachers, he commented, “This strike is about safeguarding quality education.”

There is a glaring disconnect between Kebede's rhetoric and the role of the education unions, which have not safeguarded education but allowed the attacks on the pay, conditions, funding and creeping privatisation by successive Labour and Tory governments. Whatever limited strike action the unions call—with struggles confined mainly to single schools—is aimed at dissipating teachers' anger and ends with sellout deals.

Underpaid teaching staff work in crumbling, ill-maintained buildings. They suffer stress and burnout due to prescriptive planning and Ofsted driven targets and tests making for unmanageable workloads—compounded by staff leaving the profession.

The NEU and other trade unions backed the election of the pro-business, pro-war Labour government led by Keir Starmer. Labour have recommended another below inflation, partially funded 6.5 percent average pay rise for teachers in England to the School Teachers' Review Body for 2026-29. Teachers' pay has fallen 20 percent in real terms since 2010. As well as teachers taking early retirement, a quarter of newly qualified teachers leave the profession within three years, while a third leave within five years.

A report commissioned by the Department for

Education and issued last month, “Working lives of teachers and leaders: wave 4”, confirmed that overwhelming workload is a major contributor to teachers leaving the profession. Full-time teachers work over 50 hours per week, while school leaders put in 56 hours. Eight out of 10 teachers reported work-related stress, while two thirds said work leaves no time for a personal life. 29 percent said they are contemplating leaving within a year.

The revolutionary developments in technology bound up with the use of the Internet and AI has the potential to greatly enhance teaching and learning. It must be employed to assist qualified teachers in the classroom, not replace them or shore up a crisis in teacher shortages.

The danger is that the NEU bureaucracy is isolating the Bacup strike while Star Academies rolls out virtualisation nationally. NEU Regional Officer Martin Ogilvie told WSWS reporters that “we think Star is looking to expand VTs out to other academies...” A spokesperson for Star Academies told the BBC The Valley remained open during the strikes; also, that there are already three VTs employed across the Trust.

The union, however, is only planning limited action, with Ogilvie pointing to upcoming “member meetings in Bradford, Blackpool and Birmingham... We're looking to get at least one school in each region and then ballot in the new year to escalate.” He added that at some time in the future “when we escalate out more nationally, we'll be contacting [the NASUWT education union] to see if they want to get involved but also the support staff unions.”

To achieve high-quality, fully staffed and funded education, educators must take the fight out of the hands of the trade union bureaucracy and build independent rank-and-file committees. Educators must link their fight with workers across public services who face similar attacks. This is a political struggle against a Labour government committed to austerity, war spending and the profits of the big corporations.

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



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