Britain: Labour seeks draconian congestion charge for Greater Manchester

Robert Stevens, Joe Newham
11 December 2008

Some 1.9 million people in the Greater Manchester region are being asked to accept a £5 a day congestion charge in tomorrow's referendum.

The proposal is being advanced as part of the Greater Manchester Transport Innovation Fund. This takes the form of a bid by the Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Authority (GMPTA) and Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) to secure government Transport Innovation Fund (TIF) funds of £1.5 billion for transport infrastructure improvements in Greater Manchester and another £1.2 billion as a loan to be paid back over a 30 year period.

The proposal is conditional on the introduction of the weekday peak time £5 a day congestion charge.

Greater Manchester is the third largest metropolitan area in the country and includes 10 Metropolitan Boroughs with a total population of 2.56 million people. The proposed congestion charge zone will be the largest in the world at 80 square miles. The zone has an outer ring encircling the main urban core of the Greater Manchester Area with an inner ring covering the Manchester City Centre area. The pioneering London scheme covered just eight square miles and now covers 15 square miles. Those in Rome and Singapore only cover two square miles.

The congestion charge would operate from 2013 at peak times. Up to 160,000 drivers a day would be initially affected. By 2015-2016, an estimated £174 million will be raised through the charge. This would amount to £1,200 annually for many drivers who have no choice but to enter and leave the zone for work.

Administering the scheme will cost £318 million. The congestion charge in London has already risen from £5 to £8. The "Yes" campaign has stressed that the privately owned Metrolink and bus services will initially have their fares capped, but there will be price increases in the immediate future.

The bid is being pushed by Labour-controlled bodies. Initially there was to be no referendum on the proposals. Sir Richard Leese, the Labour Party leader of Manchester City Council, claimed that the issue was "too complicated" for a "Yes or No" referendum. A referendum was made necessary when three of the 10 Greater Manchester local councils—Trafford, Stockport and Bury—rejected the proposals. Trafford and Bury are controlled by the Conservatives and Stockport by the Liberal Democrats.

From the outset the Department for Transport refused to reveal the detailed TIF submission that was made at the beginning of August 2007. It was not until nearly a year later, at the end of July 2008, that the Department of Transport finally released an edited edition of the submission. The former leader of Manchester City Council, Graham Stringer, attempted to obtain the documents under the Freedom of Information Act but was told they were "commercially sensitive".

A group of campaigners against the congestion charge have called for a public inquiry into how the Transport Innovation Fund plans were initially submitted and the way that the campaign to sell them to the public has been conducted.

John McGoldrick, a spokesman for the National Alliance Against Tolls, said, "Over the last 18 months the people of Greater Manchester have been subjected to a multi-million pound propaganda exercise dressed up as a ‘consultation'. The campaign that is taking place now has been conducted in a manner that would not have been permitted if this had been held under the strict law that applies to referendums. "The authorities have largely copied what was done in Edinburgh in February 2005 in an attempt to disguise a ballot on road tolls as if it were a question of whether people would like better transport."

The population of Edinburgh voted to reject the introduction of congestion charges. Other cities including

Birmingham, Norwich and Cambridge have also voted against congestion charge schemes.

Business groups take differing positions on the toll. United City, comprised over 160 businesses based in Manchester, supports the proposals, while the Greater Manchester Momentum Group representing over 279 businesses is opposed.

In October, the Stop the Charge Coalition was formed, comprising seven Labour, Tory and Liberal Democrat MPs and the leaders of the three councils opposed to the plans. In a letter to the *Manchester Evening News* on December 2, Graham Stringer noted the vested interests of the big multi-national bus operators like First Group, Arriva, and Stagecoach who already receive a £2.5 billion annual subsidy from taxpayers. In the 2008 annual reports of the two biggest transport companies, First Bus reported revenue of £4.7 billion nationally, up from £3.7 billion in 2007, with operating profits of £360 million—up 38.9 percent on the previous year. Stagecoach had revenue of £1.7 billion, up 17.2 percent on 2007 and operating profits of £205 million, up 27.3 percent.

The bus companies are supporting the congestion charge and also oppose any future regulation of their activities in terms of fares and routes. They stand to make a fortune out of the proposed scheme and have ensured that "VOTE YES" posters and advertisements have been plastered all over their vehicles in the run up to the vote count.

The "No campaign" is heavily supported by Peel Holdings, which owns huge Trafford Centre shopping mall on the outskirts of Manchester that lies just inside the outer M60 congestion charge zone and is dependent on car users for business. Also against the charge is the cereal manufacturer Kellogg's, which has a plant in Trafford, United Biscuits, Unilever and Harvey Nichols.

The "Yes" campaign and its supporters in the government have made no mention of the long term aim of the government, which is to privatise the roads. The Transport Innovation Fund, introduced by Labour in 2004, is an integral part of this.

In May last year Parliament passed the Local Transport Bill, which gives local authorities the power to charge drivers by the mile for driving on busy roads. Greater Manchester is one of 10 areas that have applied for the government's "road pricing trials".

An article published on the *World Socialist Web Site* on July, 24, 2004 entitled, "Britain: Labour's privatisation of roads", explained that a proposed new private road between Manchester and Birmingham, "forms part of the Labour government's broader strategy, set out in its White Paper *Meeting the Transport Challenge*, of introducing a market for roads and a system of charging drivers to use the roads, alongside similar plans for health and education. It goes far beyond the plans of the Conservative government that it replaced in 1997".

With the TIF, Labour has continued the strategy of the previous Conservative government by using private finance in transport infrastructure. By 1994 private finance had been used to construct the Channel Tunnel, the Dartford toll bridge over the Thames, the Second Severn Bridge, the Skye Bridge, the Birmingham North Relief Road, the Channel Tunnel Rail Link and the Croydon Tramlink. These roads are privately managed with user charges.

There are also plans to introduce satellite tracking systems, the use of number plate recognition systems such as those being planned in Manchester and already in use in London, and black box, tachograph-type devices which are used in heavy goods vehicles so as to charge motorists for every mile they drive.

Such projects are supported by big business interests in order to suck as much profit out of the public purse.

The Socialist Equality Party rejects the entire framework of the pro-charge campaign, which starts from the premise of big business and the Labour government that there can be no improvement in even the most basic transport infrastructure in one of the most highly populated areas of the country—unless a highly regressive tax is imposed. We call for the introduction of a cheap and efficient publicly owned and fully integrated national transport network utilising the latest technological advances. Such a transport system would cater for the needs of the population, rather than the profits of the privatised transport companies and big business.