Manchester Central: A picture of poverty and social deprivation

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The Socialist Equality Party is standing Robert Skelton in Manchester Central in the general election on May 6.

As well as the SEP, the Labour Party, which has held the seat with a large majority for decades, the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Greens are contesting the seat.

With a population of 89,000, the constituency covers seven of the poorest wards in Manchester: Moss Side, Hulme, Ancoats, Bradford, Clayton, Miles Platting, Moston and Newton Heath. It also includes Manchester City Centre, its commercial and business district where former textile warehouses and offices have been converted into city centre loft apartments for professional workers.

Manchester, an ethnically diverse city of 480,000 people in the north-west of England, is at the centre of one of the largest conurbations in Britain, made up of 10 towns with a 2.5 million population. It is the employment hub for an even wider catchment area.

The City of Manchester's marketing material paints a picture of success. *Manchester's State of the City Report 2008-09*'s opening paragraph says, "Manchester is a unique city. The city has experienced phenomenal growth in the last few decades. From groundbreaking urban regeneration programmes to phenomenal success in sporting events, Manchester has been transformed into a regional powerhouse of sustainable economic growth offering opportunity and a better quality of life for all."

The report points to the regeneration of the city centre after the IRA bomb that caused personal injuries and damage to 1,200 buildings in the city's shopping district. It boasts of the regeneration of Castlefield, Hulme and Moss Side, the expansion of the city's tram system and international airport, its university, the creation of new concert halls and entertainment complexes and sports facilities.

But this picture of "sustainable economic growth offering opportunity and a better quality of life for all" lasts no more than two short paragraphs. The report has to acknowledge the glaringly obvious: that Manchester is a city with little affluence and deeply entrenched poverty and widespread deprivation. According to the 2007 Index of Multiple Deprivation, it is the fourth most deprived local authority in England. The majority of its population live in the 10 percent most deprived wards nationally.

The report says, "There are too many people not working because they are unemployed or on benefits. Schools' results are improving, but fall behind the national average, making it less likely that Manchester's young people will be able to benefit from jobs on offer. Too many people suffer from ill health, causing men and women to die earlier than in other parts of the UK."

The number of jobs has grown in recent years after the catastrophic decline of its once famous textile and engineering industries and the closure of the pits—one third of its manufacturing jobs went between 1962 and 1975, and the recessions of the early 1980s and 1990s took most of the rest. But less than one third of these new jobs have gone to city residents. Most jobs are now in financial and business services, the retail, leisure, cultural and catering sectors, public services and contracted-out parastatal jobs, with scarcely any full-time jobs for Manchester's male former factory workers who have few formal qualifications.

Manchester may have the highest wage levels outside London, but the average wage of those who live in the city is far lower than the average of all those employed

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in the city. It is the lowest of all the major cities, as higher earners long ago decamped to the suburbs.

The number of people out of work is rising. The percentage of the population claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) rose to 5.1 percent in February 2009, which was higher than the sub-regional and national rates of 4.4 percent and 3.9 percent. It is much higher now as the recession takes its toll, with shops closing and offices laying-off staff. Long term unemployment, defined as claiming JSA for more than 12 months, stands at 8.4 percent, and youth unemployment (16- to 19-year-olds claiming JSA) at 9.5 percent.

Manchester has become the home of some of the poorest people in the country. Life on low pay or benefits is harsh, and this is reflected in the health of its citizens. The city has some of the worst healthcare indices in England. Its heavy burden of disease and health inequalities is rooted in its history as the first industrial city in the world, the rapid deindustrialisation in the post-war period as Britain's global economic position declined, and the appalling levels of deprivation and urban squalor.

Average life expectancy is now the second lowest in the country. A boy born to a mother in Manchester between 1999 and 2001 has a life expectancy 10 years shorter than that of a boy born in Dorset. The city has higher mortality rates than the national average on all the major diseases, particularly heart disease and cancer.

Children bear the brunt of these impoverished conditions. Not only is their attainment in school very poor, their attendance is the lowest in the country. The most recent data shows that 22 percent of primary school children in year 6 were obese, while 1.6 percent of the same age group are underweight. The rate of conception for under-18-year-old girls is well above the national average. Nine percent of all babies born in Manchester are of low birth weight.

Manchester's poverty rate is reflected in the lower than average number of people owning their own home and the high dependency on social housing whose quality and affordability varies enormously.

Even so, all these figures underestimate the scale of the economic deprivation and its social impact since these average rates mask huge social inequalities. Apart from the City Centre ward, the other seven wards, which are home to 79,000 of the constituency's 89,000 population, are the poorest in the city, with indices far lower than the city average.

A 2008 survey found that more families were on the breadline in the Manchester Central constituency than anywhere else. A staggering 52 percent of children in Ancoats and Clayton, Ardwick, Bradford, City Centre, Hulme, Moss Side, Miles Platting and Newton Heath were living in homes dependent on benefits. In Moss Side, 61 percent of families are officially on the breadline. Even these figures underestimate the problem, because it was based only on statistics for families dependent on benefits.

Vast swathes of Manchester Central consist of derelict factories and warehouses and bleak and run down housing estates, with boarded up shops and few if any social amenities.

The much vaunted regeneration of the city centre and establishment of vast supermarkets have bankrupted what remained of the independent small businesses, pubs and clubs, creating food deserts and social devastation. Those too poor or infirm to own a car are isolated, dependent upon an exorbitant and infrequent privatised bus service.

That these conditions exist at the end of the longest boom in post-war Britain is testimony to the failure of capitalism to meet the most basic needs and aspirations of working people. Equally, they are an indictment of Labour's control of the city. Manchester Central has been a safe Labour seat for decades, requiring a 19 percent swing for it to fall to the Liberal Democrats. However, the alienation of working people from Labour and all the official parties is reflected in one of the lowest electoral turnouts in the country: only 42 percent voted in 2005.

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