

UK's local lockdown system in disarray as COVID-19 cases surge out of control

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16 October 2020

The Johnson government's ineffectual three-tier localised Covid-19 intervention plan is falling apart as coronavirus cases rocket in Britain and ICU wards are already beginning to be overwhelmed. On Thursday, Labour Party Major of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham said that he and the others leaders of the region would not agree to the area being placed in the "Very High Risk" category.

Johnson responded Friday at a Downing Street press conference that the situation in Manchester was "grave", with COVID-19 cases doubling in the last nine days and a high infection rate of 690 per 100,000 among 16–29 year olds. The number of COVID patients in Manchester ICU beds was already 40 percent over what it was at the height of the first wave. If Burnham and other leaders in Greater Manchester did not accept being moved into Tier 3, Johnson threatened that he would impose the measures, as "The national government must reserve the right to step in and do what is necessary." To put further pressure on Burnham, et al, Johnson announced that local leaders in Lancashire, also in the North West, had agreed to go under Tier 3 restrictions.

Earlier the government reported another 15,650 positive coronavirus infections across the UK and 136 deaths. But even this and the other high figures announced each day this week—with almost 20,000 cases on Wednesday—are far lower than reliable estimates.

Figures released by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) showed that daily coronavirus cases in England alone have increased to around 27,900 between October 2 and October 8. Overall cases had risen from an estimated 224,400 to 336,500 in a week. The ONS said that estimated daily positive tests in England were increasing at a rate of almost 10,000 each week.

Earlier this week the Cambridge University's Medical Research Council (MRC) biostatistics unit announced, "Our current estimate of the number of infections

occurring each day across England is 47,000." The number infected could be as high as 74,900 per day. The MRC concluded, "We predict that the number of deaths each day is likely to be between 240 and 690 on 26 October."

As the Tier legislation was passed in parliament Tuesday, the government made clear that the Greater Manchester region, with a population of 3 million, could expect to be placed into the "Very High" Tier level imminently, with the adjacent Liverpool city region already under the restrictions. Tier Three means that pubs and bars must close, and household mixing bans are imposed.

Greater Manchester is comprised of two cities (Manchester and Salford) and eight towns. Meetings with leaders from the region this week failed to break the impasse. Health Secretary Matt Hancock had been expected to announce that the north west was under Tier 3 status in a statement Thursday morning, but was forced instead to speak about London's probable move to Tier 2 after "productive talks" with London Mayor Sadiq Khan.

Council leaders in Greater Manchester and mayors of other northern areas are in alliance with a significant section of Conservative MPs—including those from the so-called "Red Wall" seats in the north, which Tories took from Labour in last December's general election.

Their main demand has nothing to do with securing public safety with the virus resurgent, but is based on calls for the government to cough up more money for business, via restoring the furlough scheme under which the government paid 80 percent of workers wage if they were unable to work. This is due to be wound up completely at the end of October. Chancellor Rishi Sunak's replacement Job Support Scheme will cover just 66 percent of wages for people working in companies forced to close.

Burnham's demands will ensure corporations continue

to have a flow of free money from the state to pay wages for the most essential workers, while they are free to lay off other workers and impose restructuring programmes to shore up profits. But the *Daily Telegraph* cited “Government sources” who said restoring the furlough scheme was “not happening”. One said, “They are using this as an opportunity to leverage some more cash out of us, but it won’t work. We are not going to move on this.”

Among the MPs opposing the lockdown measures in the north west is Sir Graham Brady, who is chair of the Tory backbench 1922 Committee, which recently forced Johnson to ensure that any national restrictions imposed regarding the pandemic had to be put to a parliamentary vote first. This week 41 Tory MPs voted against keeping the government curfew on pubs opening past 10pm.

According to the *Guardian*, “Saying no to a group of Labour leaders may not be difficult for the government, but Greater Manchester’s sole Tory leader, Bolton’s David Greenhalgh, was among them—and was one of ‘the most vocal’, said [Oldham council leader Sean Fielding] Fielding.”

In an October 14 statement, Burnham and the 10 council leaders declared, “We are prepared to upscale local test and trace, enforcement and community engagement, but we need national government to give us the powers and proper financial package to do this.” There should be a “full financial package” including a “furlough scheme of at least 80% of wages offered to all businesses forced to close or severely affected and suffering a serious loss of trade due to restrictions. Businesses should also be offered grant aid commensurate with actual losses incurred as a result of intervention.”

“If cases continue to rise as predicted, and the Government continues to refuse to provide the substantial economic support that Tier 3 areas will need, then a number of Leaders in Greater Manchester believe a national circuit break, with the required financial support would be a preferable option.”

On this issue, the Labourites played down the gravity of the pandemic in their statement. Further restriction were not required, as “The rate of Covid infection in Greater Manchester is much lower, at 357.6 cases per 100,000, compared to Liverpool City Region [LCR] which is in Tier 3 at 488.0 cases per 100,000... Plus our hospital admission rate is much lower than in LCR... Liverpool University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust 7-day rolling average Covid patients in beds is at around the 225 mark and in Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust it’s at the 100 mark.”

The row between the local Labour authorities and central government confirms that combating the spread of this deadly disease cannot be left in the hands of any faction of the ruling elite, and their political representatives. There can be no outcome to this dispute, in which the various factions are arguing over how best to facilitate the needs of big business, apart from a collapse of even the limited measures now in place to combat COVID-19.

Johnson took the opportunity again Friday to declare his opposition to a national lockdown he was forced to implement in March. He has the total backing of Labour. The previous day Labour issued a statement from Jonathan Ashworth declaring, “A full national lockdown stretching for weeks and weeks like we went through in April, May and June—would be disastrous for society. It is why we are urging him to adopt a short, time-limited 2–3 week circuit break.”

The claim by Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer that a limited circuit break lockdown will stop the spread of COVID-19 is a fraud. They are calling for this to be in place for only a few weeks and to coincide with the school half term to “avoid disruption”. This is solely to avoid the reversion to a full lockdown, with only essential production to take place, and the closure of schools, colleges, and universities. Had they not prematurely abandoned lockdown, and put in place proper containment measures, the disease would not be rampant once more.

The only means of combating the catastrophic spread of the virus and destruction of jobs, wages, and livelihoods, is through the independent political mobilisation of the working class. What is needed is the construction of rank-and-file safety and action committees, to organise a fightback, in opposition to all factions of the political establishment.



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