

UK Labour and Tory politicians support herd immunity in Greater Manchester feud

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Greater Manchester, home to some 2.8 million people, has been placed under Tier 3 public health restrictions, requiring the closure of pubs and bars not serving substantial meals, betting shops, casinos, bingo halls and children's soft play areas, and banning household mixing, from this Friday.

Manchester joins Liverpool and Lancashire in this highest tier. The restrictions had to be forcibly imposed by Boris Johnson's Conservative government for the first time because no agreement could be reached with local leaders.

For 10 days, a bitter political conflict has been fought between government ministers and a cross-party alliance of mayors, councillors and MPs based in the North of England. This alliance has been fronted by Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham, who has advanced himself as a defender of local businesses and workers. In the end, this feud resolved itself into a game of brinkmanship between Burnham and Johnson over how big a compensation package should be offered to Greater Manchester businesses during the partial lockdown. Five million pounds separated the two when negotiations fell through yesterday afternoon, after Burnham moved from an original demand for £95 million to £65 million. Johnson would offer no more than £60 million.

In an effort to smooth over the conflict the government announced after a few hours of prevarication that the £60 million was still on the table, even though the talks had collapsed, and the Tier 3 restrictions had been imposed unilaterally.

Enormous political confusion has been sown by the Johnson government's imposition of public health measures that are simultaneously ineffective at preventing the spread of the virus and punitive on large sections of workers. Tier 3 measures provide just 67 percent of the wages of people whose workplaces are shut down by the restrictions. Workers in the affected sectors are some of the lowest paid in the country and will be forced into poverty—if they are not made unemployed anyway.

Burnham has been able to tap into popular outrage against this policy, saying that workers “can't choose to pay two-

thirds of their rent or two-thirds of their bills.” He originally called for a return of the furlough scheme used during the spring lockdown, guaranteeing 80 percent of wages paid by government. By the time he reached one-on-one talks with Johnson yesterday, however, this demand had been dropped.

What is animating Burnham's opposition to the government are tactical differences and conflicting interests between different groups of capitalists, rather than any consideration of principle. He and Johnson agree that there can be no serious effort to suppress the virus, for fear of damaging the economy. Burnham has made a few nods to the idea of a “circuit breaker” national lockdown—itsself a partial measure—but this has had no practical impact on his campaign against the government.

His real objective is to defend the interests of capital in the Manchester region, while catapulting himself into a national role as the proponent of an alternative strategy for big business in opposing measures to suppress COVID-19.

Johnson's government has embarked on a strategy of partial local lockdowns in regions where the virus is spreading most rapidly, mainly in the north of England, in order to avoid a national lockdown of whatever character, which would harm business interests in the rest of the country. The Tories are prepared to sacrifice smaller business interests in the north to safeguard national capital—in particular, the finance capital of the city of London, at the heart of British imperialism.

Burnham has accused Johnson of engaging in a “deliberate act of levelling-down” the Northern regions and cities, and of using them as “canaries in the coalmine.” This regionalist populism is employed to disguise the fact that there is no common cause between workers and their employers. Extra support for businesses will not prevent massive restructuring programmes, including thousands of layoffs and attacks on conditions. The full reactionary implications of Burnham's pro-capitalist position are made clear by the fact that he took part in a 10-day squabble over the spoils of government handouts to business during an increasingly catastrophic resurgence of the pandemic. The UK recorded 21,331 cases

yesterday, up more than 20 percent on the same day the week before and overtaking France as Europe's hotspot, and 241 deaths, compared to 143 a week ago. Manchester's hospitals are more than 80 percent full, ahead of the main winter season. The number of people in hospital with COVID-19 has roughly doubled over the last two weeks. Infection rates among over-60s are climbing rapidly.

As part of his haggling with Johnson, Burnham downplayed this escalating crisis. Disputing Johnson's cynical warning that the situation in Manchester is "grave," the Labour mayor said, "I think it was an exaggeration of the position that we're in ... the figures have been falling in Manchester itself in the last few days." Burnham and his Labour supporters have made clear during this sordid affair that they have in fact accepted the policy of "herd immunity." Their northern allies include several Tory MPs set on tearing up public health restrictions to allow big business to return to unimpeded profit-making. The leading figure in this group is Sir Graham Brady, chairman of the 1922 Committee of Tory backbenchers.

Sir Richard Leese, the Labour leader of Manchester City Council, spoke for them all this week when he stated, "Most people who test positive for the virus are not getting particularly ill. They are not the problem. If this is the evidence, wouldn't it be much better to have an effective shielding programme for those most at risk, rather than have a blanket business closure policy of dubious efficacy?" Yesterday, he repeated his previous argument that pubs, bars, and restaurants "are not major sources of transmission" and should stay open.

This is policy taken in its entirety from the Great Barrington Declaration—a pseudo-scientific justification for a "herd immunity" policy with targeted shielding of the most vulnerable, championed by the free market libertarian American Institute for Economic Research and embraced by President Donald Trump. The claims made in this short document have been blown apart by serious scientists, who point out that shielding the huge numbers of vulnerable people in society is impossible, that immunity is not even assured, and that such a policy would lead to countless additional deaths. Now a group of Labour politicians have united with Tories in advancing this murderous policy for the UK.

The *Daily Telegraph*, Johnson's former employer and the voice of the most reactionary elements of the British elite, is hailing Burnham and his associates as the saviours of British politics. In a comment titled, "Left-wing calls for a shielding strategy are a political breakthrough," Tom Harris congratulated Leese for his "public service" in adding to the "national debate" over coronavirus.

Patrick O'Flynn was beside himself in praising Burnham

and his fellow Labourites, correctly identifying that they were "merely paying lipservice to [Labour leader Sir Keir] Starmer's 'circuit-breaker' while in fact finding themselves following the path of logic towards the realisation that the time has come for an economy-saving pivot towards shielding the vulnerable." He continued, "To have senior Labour figures—people who cannot easily be caricatured as heartless materialists—making this case is political gold-dust for Tory MPs."

Leese and Burnham have "given political cover for ... ministers who privately doubt the merit of general lockdown measures."

There is no section of capitalist politics that can claim to speak in the interests of any section of workers without the words turning to ashes in their mouth. The only solution to the pandemic crisis which secures workers' lives and livelihoods is one which begins with a frontal assault on social inequality and the obscene wealth monopolised by the financial and corporate oligarchs—Britain's 151 billionaires, including several in Manchester, who are collectively worth some £770 billion, and whose fortunes neither Johnson nor Burnham will mention.

Only the independent action of the working class, under the leadership of the Socialist Equality Party, can secure democratic control of these resources to pour billions into the National Health Service, Test and Trace, the development and roll-out of a vaccine, and the provision of liveable wages and social, educational and medical support during a national lockdown of all but essential production.



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