

The Queens blackout: the brutal human costs of Con Ed's drive for profit

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25 July 2006

More than a week after Con Edison's aging infrastructure buckled under the impact of a heat wave, plunging residents of a large swathe of New York City's borough of Queens into darkness and sweltering heat, at least 10,000 people remained without electric power Monday.

At its peak, the blackout affected more than 100,000 people in the predominantly working class neighborhoods of Astoria, Woodside, Sunnyside, Long Island City and Hunters Point. Most of them were left without electricity for a full week. Families were forced to throw out their food and were left with no means to light or cool their homes. The aged and the sick were subjected to intense suffering. Small businesses, including many restaurants and food stores, suffered crippling losses.

And now, the first reports of deaths due to the blackout are coming in. The family of Woodside resident Andres Rodriguez, a 61-year-old painter, charged that the lack of power killed him, after he suffered a heart attack brought on by exhaustion from three nights without sleep. There is no doubt that more such deaths will be reported in the coming days.

The blame for this massive human suffering in a city that boasts one of the greatest concentrations of wealth in the world lies squarely with the socially irresponsible management of the biggest utility company in America, based on the pursuit of short-term profits and at the expense of maintaining a vital electrical system upon which millions depend.

As the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for Senate from New York, I call for a full and independent investigation into the handling of this disaster by both Con Ed and the city. Moreover, in answer to the profit-driven negligence and irresponsibility of the power company, my party advances the demand that Con Ed be taken out of private hands and run as a public utility, in the interests of the people of New York and under their democratic control.

Residents of the stricken Queens neighborhoods understandably have protested that they have been treated as "second-class citizens."

Con Ed's response to this latest blackout has not only

been woefully slow, but reeks of incompetence. For the first three days, it reported that only 1,200 to 2,100 "customers" were without power. It then emerged that in reality the crisis had blacked out more than 25,000 "customers," meaning family homes, businesses and, in some cases, entire apartment buildings. In addition to the 100,000 people left without any power, several hundred thousand more had power reduced, meaning in many cases that elevators, air conditioners and refrigerators did not work.

At the same time, the city's billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg initially ignored the crisis, refusing to even visit the area for the first three days of the power outage. Even afterwards, his main political concern has been not the suffering of the residents of Queens, but rather the defense of Con Ed from mounting demands for criminal investigations and that its CEO Kevin Burke resign. Bloomberg has outraged area residents by describing Con Ed's cover-up of the extent of the blackout as "annoying" and their own suffering as an "inconvenience."

Many have pointed out correctly that had the blackout affected Mayor Bloomberg's neighborhood on Manhattan's Upper East Side—millionaires row—or the financial institutions on Wall Street, there would have been a very different response. The power company has a long history of under-serving working class areas or, as in the case of the 1999 blackout in Washington Heights, deliberately cutting off power to them in order to keep the lights on in the city's wealthier districts.

Attempting to silence Con Ed's critics, Bloomberg declared, "Rather than point fingers at Con Ed and vilify all the people who work for them, I want all of their employees to just continue to work as hard as they can until we get everybody back up." The mayor, who is himself a former corporate CEO, added, "It's not our network—their company, their network—and they've got to go in and fix that, and going after the CEO just because somebody wants to have somebody to blame doesn't make a lot of sense."

This defense of corporate malfeasance is based on the lying attempt to equate Con Ed workers, who have been subjected to grueling day after day of forced overtime, with individuals who make millions from overseeing a policy that subordinates the public's need for power to their own profit interests and those of Con Ed's other major investors.

The reality is that the power company's workforce has been cut by over a third in the last 30 years, and those who remain on the job are subjected to relentless speedup.

Workers themselves have warned persistently that Con Ed is failing to carry out needed inspections and maintenance in order to cut costs and boost profits.

Investment in transmission system slashed

A 2000 study by the New York State Energy Planning Board, meanwhile, found that the company had slashed capital investments in its power transmission system by nearly \$200 million between 1988 and 1998. After the 1999 blackout, a panel of experts picked by Con Ed found that Con Ed needed to improve upkeep of its transmission equipment. While demand for electricity has only increased since, there is no indication that the company complied with the panel's findings.

Now, the city is leaving in Con Ed's hands once again the conduct of the investigation into its own catastrophic failure. Whether or not such a probe will disclose the immediate source of the blackout, which began after 10 of the 22 feeder cables serving the area melted in last week's heat, remains to be seen. What is certain is that any such in-house investigation will conceal the real underlying causes for this disaster, which is part of a nationwide crisis confronting a power infrastructure that has been subjected to more than a decade of deregulation and subordinated ever-more directly to profit interests.

Even as the blackout in Queens appeared to be finally winding down, hundreds of thousands of people in St. Louis, Missouri are now approaching a week without power, and hundreds of thousands more in California are facing electricity cutoffs.

The demand for immediate gains in short-term profits, exerted through the stock market, has been translated into the slashing of investment in equipment, maintenance and employee training as well as research and development into badly needed new and environmentally sustainable forms of energy.

As in virtually every other facet of social life in America, working people pay the price for this setup, while the financial elite exploit it to vastly expand their own personal wealth.

The breakdown of the power supply for hundreds of thousands of people in New York City as well as elsewhere

in the US stands as an indictment of this system and of the false claims of the corporations and their political spokesmen that the "free market" can meet the complex needs of modern society. Instead, in the energy sector in particular, it has produced gross incompetence and negligence, as seen in New York City, as well as outright criminality, as in the case of Enron.

In addition to a full and independent investigation into this crisis, I am calling for a rollback of all of the deregulation measures that have freed the power industry from social control and left the population at the mercy of a massive for-profit corporation.

Con Edison is a company with \$25 billion in assets and \$12 billion in revenues, upon which tens of millions of people depend for a service that can spell life or death. Such a vital social resource cannot be subordinated to the drive for profit and the whims of Wall Street. It must be taken out of private hands and transformed into a public utility, under the democratic control of working people, with full compensation to small investors. This alone can lay the basis for the rational development of the energy system and its operation on a socially responsible basis.

Of course not only Republicans like Bloomberg will oppose such a demand, but also the Democrats, some of whom have been making demagogic calls for the resignation of Con Ed's CEO and a criminal investigation into the company's practices. But these practices are hardly an aberration; rather, they are the rule for an energy industry that is run for profit. The same politicians who invoke "eminent domain" to help real estate developers like Bruce Ratner forcibly evict working class families from their homes and small businessmen from their premises will no doubt invoke the sacred right of "private property" in Con Ed's defense.

Against the policies of the two parties of big business, the Socialist Equality Party stands for the reorganization of economic life in the interests of the broad masses of working people, rather than the top 1 percent of multimillionaires and billionaires. Only on such a basis can the resources be found to solve the immense social problems—from substandard education to falling living standards, inadequate health care and the lack of affordable housing—confronting New Yorkers and people all over the country.

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