

Electricity shutdowns in Australia

26 February 1998

Electricity blackouts throughout the Australian state of Queensland confirm that the power failure in New Zealand is anything but an isolated case. A combination of hot weather and the failure of generators at four major power stations—Stanwell, Swanbank, Gladstone and Tarong—have stretched the state's electricity supply beyond its limit.

On February 23, loadshedding—a system of power shutdowns—was instituted. As the demand for electricity rose through the day, supply was cut for up to two hours to particular zones on a rotating basis. With little more than 15 minutes' warning, residents, schools, offices, and small businesses throughout the state had their electricity supplies suddenly cut off. Traffic lights stopped functioning, causing accidents and traffic jams.

In at least five suburbs of Brisbane, the state capital, raw sewage overflowed into creeks and drains as pumping stations and treatment plants were hit by multiple power blackouts. In the hot, dry conditions, raw sewage is likely to stagnate in waterways, posing serious health dangers.

Successive Labor and National Party governments are responsible for this disaster. They have run down the state's power supply, inflicting major cuts in staffing and maintenance. In some cases, staff have cited a lack of spare parts to undertake repairs.

This process was intensified after the 1985-86 South East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQEB) dispute. The then National Party government sacked 1,002 electricity workers and contracted out their work. A year-long lockout was sold out by the unions nationally, paving the way for further attacks.

The state Labor government of 1989-96 transformed the electricity authorities into a profit-making corporation. The current National Party government has since created three separate companies in preparation for privatisation and competition between private power companies nationally.

Even over the last three months, 140 skilled workers, mostly in maintenance areas, have been retrenched in Queensland power stations. At the Swanbank power station, staffing levels have been slashed from 250 down to 180.

As well as being poorly maintained, the state's power system now has only a tiny reserve to cope with surges in demands, even the predictable increases caused by seasonal hot weather. Plans to link the Queensland power grid to draw emergency supplies from neighbouring New South Wales have been delayed. Instead of putting money into expanding electricity generation, the government last year took \$850 million from the industry to shore up the state budget.

The international character of these developments has been highlighted by the fact that Wayne Gilbert, who headed SEQEB during the 1985-86 lockout, now runs Mercury Energy in blacked out Auckland.



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