

Scores die in US heat wave

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The death toll in the searing three-day heat wave which struck the Northeast and mid-Atlantic states of the US in early July reached nearly 75, as various cities reported casualties in its aftermath. Apparently worst hit was Philadelphia, where 40 people died. The city's aging brick row houses were blamed, since brick retains heat. Many homes were turned into virtual ovens, and some elderly residents in impoverished neighborhoods kept their windows closed because of the fear of crime. The death toll in New York City reached 27, primarily in the boroughs of Brooklyn and Manhattan.

As in similar emergencies, such as the heat wave which killed hundreds in Chicago in 1995, the latest health disaster fell overwhelmingly on the shoulders of the poorest sections of the working class. These are the families who are unable to afford air conditioners in their homes, or in some cases are unable to pay for the electricity to keep air conditioners operating.

According to studies, many older buildings absorb and store heat and can bake for several days after a heat wave breaks. The temperatures in rooms on high floors in old buildings without ceiling insulation often exceed the temperature outside, one scientist at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in Berkeley California reported. These conditions are characteristic of older, brick and stone buildings without insulation in poor urban neighborhoods.

The latest heat wave also led to a major blackout in New York City which revealed the growing problems in providing sufficient electricity in the financial center of the US. Scattered power outages began hitting the city on Monday, July 5, when the temperature hit 101 degrees. A blackout hit six 13-story apartment buildings in the Rockaway Park section of Queens that evening.

The following day, when the thermometer reached 101 once again, all of Manhattan north of 155th Street

was blacked out beginning at 10:20 p.m.. Two hundred thousand people in the largely working class and immigrant neighborhoods of Washington Heights and Inwood were affected. Thousands abandoned their apartments, many sleeping either on the roofs of their buildings or even on the sidewalks. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, fearing a repetition of the massive looting which had occurred in the citywide blackout of 1977, deployed hundreds of police officers in the 250-block area. Power was not restored until about 5 p.m. the following day.

The Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, the only major hospital in upper Manhattan, was seriously affected. Its backup generators failed until late Wednesday, when they began to provide only minimal power. Countless experiments at this major research institution were set back months or even longer as laboratory specimens were destroyed by rising temperatures. Despite frantic efforts to use dry ice in order to maintain temperatures of 80 degrees below zero centigrade, many refrigerators apparently warmed up to 20 degrees below zero. Research involving Alzheimer's disease and prostate cancer was among the work damaged.

There was widespread anger over the blackout, as many workers voiced the suspicion that Consolidated Edison had chosen to sacrifice electricity in this poor section of the city in order to avoid problems in the business districts and wealthy neighborhoods further downtown. The distrust was also fueled by contradictory statements from the utility, which first claimed that the company had absolutely no control over the power shutoff, and then acknowledged that a decision had been made to cut power to prevent the problem from spreading to other parts of the city.

Whatever the exact details, the suspicion is an expression of the growing resentment felt by broad sections of workers at the huge gulf between their own

daily struggles and the well-advertised lives of luxury of the super-rich, who in some cases live only a short distance away.

Another issue raised by the blackout is the impact of the deregulation of the utility industry on the ability to provide sufficient electricity for New York City's population. Con Edison is selling off about two-thirds of its electricity-generating capacity, turning itself into a company that primarily transmits and distributes electricity. This is a direct consequence of a 1997 agreement with the New York State Public Service Commission which introduces competition into the utility industry as of 2001. This deregulation threatens to unleash chaos in the provision of sufficient energy for New York. Con Edison has reportedly already cut back drastically on maintaining its infrastructure, and the construction of new power plants has not kept pace with the growing demand for electricity. On July 6 Con Ed generated 11,850 megawatts, very close to its maximum capacity of 12,700 megawatts on any given day. Experts warn that New York City and Long Island are perilously close to an energy breakdown which could strike in just a few years.

The Republican mayor, with his eye on a campaign for the US Senate seat from New York in next year's election, lost no time in issuing demagogic denunciations of Con Edison, threatening a lawsuit against the utility and posing as a defender of the working class and the poor.

A day after Giuliani's attack on the company, however, it was revealed that the NYC Housing Authority, responsible for the housing projects which are home to hundreds of thousands of the working poor, had shut down its boilers, cutting hot water to its tenants in order to conserve power! While the exact role of Con Edison in the blackout remained somewhat murky, there could be absolutely no doubt about the Giuliani administration's policy. By its action it had demonstrated that it considers the working class population expendable, especially the one-third who live near or below the poverty level.

The story about the city's housing projects was given attention by the mass media for one day, then quickly buried. The authorities apparently calculated that it was preferable to direct the popular anger against the utility company rather than the government which represents big business as a whole.

At any rate, two things are fairly clear: as the new millennium approaches, the wealthiest city in the wealthiest country of the world is unable to plan for the adequate supply of power to meet society's needs; and it is unwilling to take the steps to save the poor and elderly from the fatal consequences of natural disasters such as the recent heat wave.



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