

Detroit blackout reveals crumbling infrastructure in US cities

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Electrical service in Detroit was restored Thursday after the worst blackout in the city's history knocked out power to hundreds of municipal and county-owned facilities, including schools, hospitals and public housing units, as well as street lights and traffic signals. The blackout had a limited effect on businesses and residential homes, which, for the most part, receive electricity from the private utility company, Detroit Edison.

The two-day outage resulted, not from a storm or sudden heat wave, but an equipment failure in the city's decaying public lighting system, one of the nation's oldest. The Detroit Public Lighting Department (PLD), built in the 1920s, has faced years of budget cuts and manning reductions, and has repeatedly been targeted for privatization.

Mayor Dennis Archer said one of the three tie-lines that connect the PLD power stations to Detroit Edison failed Monday. As repairs were under way Tuesday, a second tie-line failed. According to the mayor, when the remaining line could not handle the load, the city's entire generating system shut down about 12:45 p.m. Tuesday.

Detroit Edison officials claimed they warned the city to scale back power usage Monday after the first tie-line failed. The authorities were in the process of scaling back, "but it was not quick enough, and when it warmed up outside the second cable failed," Lew Layton, a spokesman for the utility told the *Detroit News*. City officials denied they had been warned.

City officials said power would be restored by Wednesday morning, but the blackout continued. After that Mayor Archer could not say when electrical service would be resumed. Archer also declared that the outage "was not man-made, but just something that happened." His spokesman Greg Bowens added, "It's

pretty old equipment and the equipment failed. There's really not much more we can say about that. This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

The blackout trapped commuters on the downtown People Mover train and scores of people in elevators at public buildings. Some 4,500 buildings, including 263 schools, lost power. Air conditioning stopped in high-rise public housing apartments and senior citizen centers, while the outside temperature reached the mid-80s. The heat was particularly oppressive for the 200 residents of the Harriet Tubman senior citizen high-rise, who depend on air conditioning or electric fans to survive the summer. "I'm miserable. My room is like an oven," said Elouise Williams, 55.

Intersections became increasingly dangerous as traffic lights went dark. At least one school bus, loaded with children, was struck by another vehicle Tuesday, though no major injuries were reported. City officials provided only a limited number of police to safely route traffic at busy intersections, claiming the city lacked the resources. This was in sharp contrast to the \$5 million spent by Mayor Archer to dispatch hundreds of policemen the week before, to use against the handful of protesters demonstrating against the Organization of American States meeting across the river in Windsor, Canada.

Detroit Receiving Hospital was forced to operate with emergency power, as were fire stations and police precincts throughout the city. The city's jails were put on lockdown. The Detroit City Airport and the heart of city government, the Coleman Young Municipal Center, were without power.

The Detroit Public Schools canceled classes for the district's 170,000 students on Wednesday and Thursday, forcing thousands of parents to scramble for emergency day care. Classes were also canceled at the

Detroit campuses of Wayne State University and Wayne County Community College. In addition, researchers at Wayne State University estimated that the outage destroyed at least \$150,000 of DNA samples used in the Human Genome Project, an international effort to map the human genetic code.

By Wednesday power to the city's four public housing complexes was restored, but schools, libraries, most of the recreation centers and other buildings remained closed. Storms that swept through Metro Detroit late Wednesday afternoon knocked out street lights and hampered efforts to restore power.

Department of Public Lighting crews worked 16-hour shifts to restore power. By Thursday Mayor Archer declared that “we are at 100 percent capacity.” Long before the power was restored, however, spokesmen for Detroit's business and political establishment were citing the blackout as proof that the city should sell the lighting system to Detroit Edison or some other interested utility.

The interim CEO at the Detroit Public Schools, David Adamany, a political ally of Governor John Engler and proponent of pro-business “school reform,” said, “I do not see why the city taxpayers should have a power system that jeopardizes street lighting and that costs more to operate than is necessary. And I certainly don't think the public schools, which face very significant budget challenges, should be paying a premium price for unreliable power.”

Both local newspapers published lead editorials calling for the privatization of the system. “City power outage lights up privatization's benefits,” the *Detroit Free Press* declared, with the *Detroit News* stating that the blackout should lead to a decision to “turn out the lights on the Public Lighting Department.”

In all likelihood the moves already taken by the city towards privatization have contributed to and exacerbated the crisis of the aging municipal lighting system. In 1997-98, in an effort to cut millions of dollars in costs, the city transferred a large portion of the public lighting system to Detroit Edison. Outside contractors, who were hired to replace city workers, were paid a \$1.3 million bonus to finish work early.

In November 1998 the city asked utility companies to submit cost-cutting and efficiency ideas—including buying or leasing the city's lighting system. At the time, David Littman, chief economist for Comerica Bank,

encouraged the selling of Detroit's lighting system as a form of privatization called “load shedding” or disposing of assets for a quick revenue boost. “They should definitely sell as quickly as possible to people who know the business,” Littman said. That would allow the city to “focus on the essential city government functions,” he added.

City authorities have not fully embraced the privatization scheme, and the lighting department remains a source of revenue and, undoubtedly, patronage. Lighting Department officials are currently under investigation for corruption by the FBI and police department and tens of millions of dollars raised in public bonds routinely go unspent.

Detroit is the tenth largest city in the US, with nearly one million residents, and remains a major industrial center. But this week's blackout left Detroit looking more like a city in a third world country. The power outage no doubt was the product of the continued diversion of resources and lack of investment in basic infrastructure.

Over the last quarter century half of the city's jobs, including 100,000 manufacturing jobs, were eliminated. The Big Three automakers extorted hundreds of millions of dollars in tax breaks and other “incentives” from the city treasury, under the threat of moving out and ending auto production in Detroit forever. At the same time, subsequent Democratic mayors slashed hundreds of millions of dollars from public services and eliminated 10,000 city workers' jobs. By the early 1990s, Detroit—once known as the Motor City for building nearly half of the world's cars—was widely being considered America's first “ex-city.”



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