

# Thousands face electricity cutoffs in Ontario

Mary Beadnell  
16 April 2003

In a heartless attempt to recoup over \$150 million in overdue electricity bills, Ontario electricity companies threatened more than 50,000 of their 4.4 million residential consumers with disconnection on April 1, if accounts were not paid in full.

With increasing levels of poverty across Canada's most populous province, the numbers unable to pay their electricity accounts have more than doubled since last year. The Ontario Electricity Distribution Association (EDA) has confirmed that many more than 50,000 accounts are overdue—those facing disconnection are only those deemed “delinquent” by electricity distributors.

March 31 was the last day of a winter-long ban on cutoffs introduced by the Ontario Tory government in November, seeking to assuage public outrage over the doubling and trebling of electricity bills since the power market was opened to competition. The Eves government was also forced to subsidize the residential electricity rate, capping household bills while handing millions of dollars to profiteering companies.

A Department of Energy spokesperson defended the disconnection drive, declaring that householders had to “assume their full responsibility”. This is the same government that has slashed welfare rates, stopped public housing construction and frozen the minimum wage at \$6.95 per hour.

Despite the increased number of people in arrears, an EDA spokesperson declared it would be “business as usual ” with disconnections starting in April, commencing with those whose accounts were more than four months in arrears. Collection agents arrived at the doors of 100 customers in the industrial city of Hamilton, ready to cut off power unless bills were paid on the spot.

Charity and welfare agencies have been scrambling to meet the needs of low-income householders who, with April temperatures often dipping below the freezing

mark, face the loss of electricity to stay warm, light their homes, cook and refrigerate food.

Even before April 1, calls to welfare agencies for help with electricity costs, had increased by over 50 percent from last year, with a sharp rise in the number of working poor seeking assistance. Last week, after the expiry date, households with overdue bills swamped social agencies. Welfare groups said phone lines to the electricity distributors had been overwhelmed, with many people unable to reach anyone to make an arrangement to pay.

Those disconnected must make payment in full and pay a security deposit several times the average monthly bill and a reconnection fee before power will be restored. Some utilities have been using load limiters, which cut the power going into a home to “enough to run a furnace, a fridge and a light” since February.

The *Toronto Star* cited a single father with six-month-old twins who had his power disconnected. “I just want a fair deal. I need a little compassion or a little more time,” he said. Electricity for his two-bedroom apartment cost around \$300 a month this winter and he last made a payment a month ago. He had tried to contact local distributor, Veridian Connections, but was unable to get through.

In another case, a single mother with a severely handicapped daughter only averted disconnection by promising Hydro One to hand over a \$550 cheque on May 1—one of two annual payments she gets from a welfare society in a program that helps parents of incontinent children. She owed more than \$1,000 on the electricity bill, on top of \$700, about three months' worth of heating, to the propane company. Hydro One told her she would still be cut off on June 1, unless she had paid up in full.

A recent study showed that despite official proclamations of economic boom, 390,000 children

live in poverty in Ontario, an increase of 41 percent since 1989. Younger children are more likely to experience poverty; the poverty rate among children aged 0 to 2 is 16 percent, compared with 13.9 percent for children aged 6 to 17.

Lone parent, low income families remain, on average, \$8,600 below the poverty line and low-income two-parent families, are almost \$10,500 below the poverty line.

The electricity cutoffs reveal that growing numbers of people are being driven into destitution, unable to meet even the most basic of human needs, due to the relentless drive for corporate profit. The Ontario Tories have been aided and abetted by the trade union and New Democratic Party leadership, which have stifled working class opposition to these attacks since the Tories took office in 1995.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**