John Christopher Burton, socialist candidate for California governor, demands full investigation into eastern US blackout

16 August 2003

The following statement was issued Friday, August 15 by John Christopher Burton, a civil rights lawyer and socialist who is running as an independent candidate in the California recall election set for October 7. Burton is calling for a "no" vote on the recall of the sitting governor, Gray Davis, while calling on Californians to vote for him as the socialist alternative to the candidates associated with the two big business parties, in the event that the recall succeeds and Davis is removed from office. The Socialist Equality Party is supporting Burton's candidacy. This statement is available in a PDF leaflet format *to download and distribute.*

The failure of the electrical system that has left 50 million people throughout the Northeast and Midwest without power or adequate water supplies demands a full, open and public investigation. One crucial fact has already been demonstrated by the events of the past two days: the economic and social crisis in California is not simply a California question. Rather, it is an expression of a crisis whose scope is national and international. The breakdown of the social infrastructure, with all of its calamitous implications for ordinary people, is an indictment of the existing economic and political system.

It is too early to determine the full extent of the damage—in terms of lost jobs, crippled small businesses, the health and well being of millions of people—that will result from the latest collapse of the energy system in the US. There can, however, be no doubt that many lives will be shattered and others will be lost.

Whatever the immediate cause of the blackout, it is bound up with the systematic deregulation of the energy industry and removal of any form of serious public control over the corporate giants that dominate it. The same conditions that enabled Enron and other companies to drive up their profits by socially destructive and criminal means, plunging California into a nightmare of rolling blackouts and brownouts and depleting the state treasury, remain in place. Plant and equipment have been left to age and decay, and any form of rational and socially responsible organization has been sacrificed to the anarchic workings of the market and the drive of individual corporations and big investors to enlarge their personal fortunes.

America's biggest-ever power failure must be added to the destabilization of California's economy as an object lesson of the insanity of a system that subordinates the needs of modern society—with all of its vast and complex requirements—to the amassing of private wealth and corporate profit.

Since the last great blackouts—the East Coast power failure of 1965 and the New York blackout of 1977—colossal changes in technology and demographics have occurred that have rendered daily life even more dependent on a safe and secure supply of energy. Intercourse between people and entire nations has become far more intricate, complex and immediate. One need only consider the role in everyday life of such phenomena as computers, the Internet and satellite communications—things that hardly touched the lives of working people 25 years ago.

Yet in the intervening period, the already limited and inadequate social control over the production and distribution of energy has been eliminated, leaving the population at large at the mercy of the big money interests who "play," i.e., manipulate, the energy market for their own narrow self interest. This is parasitism in its purest form.

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The anti-social and irrational workings of the capitalist market are compounded by outright criminality. The depredations of Enron's Kenneth Lay in California are by now well known. But similar practices contributed to this week's blackout.

On Friday, the *Wall Street Journal*, hardly an opponent of capitalist market policies, reported the following: "Earlier this year, the head of the North American Electric Reliability Council, set up after the 1965 blackout, warned Congress that 'as economic and political pressures on electricity suppliers increase' and electricity companies are splitting their functions 'NERC is seeing an increase in the number and severity of rules violations.'"

The people of California, the US and, increasingly, the entire world are paying the price for the dismantling of previously existing forms of public oversight and regulation of big business. The collapse of the capitalist system in the 1930s convinced the more far-sighted representatives of American capital that some degree of control over the operations of the industrial monopolies and banks had to be imposed, if only to save the profit system from its own destructive impulses and the looming threat of social revolution. Hence the establishment of government agencies regulating the railroads, air transport, trucking, banking, the stock market and the airwaves.

Over the past quarter century, however, in tandem with a protracted crisis of profitability in basic industry, the most powerful sections of the American ruling elite have thrown the lessons of the past aside, and pushed for the removal of all such oversight on big business. Both major parties—the Democrats as well as the Republicans—have implemented this agenda. The US media, itself owned and controlled by corporate behemoths, has worked to confuse and manipulate public opinion, doing its best to eradicate from mass consciousness the traumatic lessons learned by previous generations about the supposed "magic" of the capitalist market.

The Bush administration is already preparing its coverup of this week's blackout. No legitimate investigation can be expected from a government that protected Kenneth Lay and Enron, blocked any serious probe of September 11 and the anthrax attacks, and has justified all of its policies—from repression at home to war abroad—on the basis of lies. Nor can anything be expected from the Democrats other than a continuation of prostration and complicity.

I am running as a socialist candidate in the California recall election because only a program that rejects the underlying premise of the existing economic and social system—the primacy of individual wealth and corporate profit over human needs—can provide the basis for addressing in a progressive and democratic manner the crisis gripping not only California, but the entire country.

I am calling for a full and public investigation into the blackout. Which corporations were responsible for the conditions that led to the disaster? To which financial institutions are they tied? What are their political ties to the Bush administration and the Republican and Democratic parties? How has the drive to deregulate and disaggregate the energy industry contributed to the breakdown in its infrastructure?

I am further calling for a complete rollback of all of the measures that have been enacted to deregulate big business. The tyranny of the market over the people must be ended.

To ensure the provision of affordable, plentiful and stable energy supplies, I further advocate the transformation of the big energy companies into public utilities, subject to the democratic control of the working people. Only on this basis can the production and distribution of electrical power be organized on a rational and socially beneficial basis.

None of the parties or politicians beholden to big business will sanction such a policy, or any other measure that seriously addresses the problems confronting working people—joblessness, inadequate health care, decaying schools, poor housing, poverty. The working people must build their own independent party to fight for their interests. That party is the Socialist Equality Party, whose policies I support. It alone advances a program that places the defense of democratic rights and the fight for social equality at its center.

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