

Ontario: State of emergency continues one week after blackout

Keith Jones
21 August 2003

Seven days after northeastern North America was hit by a cascading blackout, Canada's most populous and industrialised province—Ontario—remains under a state of emergency, with hundreds of thousands of workers off the job and authorities continuing to issue warnings of rolling blackouts.

Power was restored to most, if not all, of Ontario by the end of Sunday, August 17. But because of difficulties in bringing the province's nuclear generating units back on-line, Ontario's electricity output has continued to fall far below the norm, severely disrupting daily life.

To avert further power outages, Ontario Tory premier Ernie Eves has urged businesses to sharply curtail their operations throughout the current week and pleaded with major industrial power users to cut their daily electricity consumption in half. "This isn't just a one-day thing," Eves told a Monday press conference. "It's a week-long thing."

By way of an example, the federal, Ontario and municipal governments have ordered all but essential workers to stay home from work until next week. As Canada's national capital, Ottawa, lies in eastern Ontario, the operations of the federal government have been badly disrupted. More than 100,000 federal workers are currently off the job. Many provincial and municipal services, including libraries, museums, community recreation centres, and the employment standards bureau, as well as the issuing of driving licenses, public health insurance cards, and building permits, have been suspended for the week.

Industrial users have come up with various ways of trying to comply with the government demand that they reduce their normal electricity use by 50 percent. Only one of DaimlerChrysler's four Ontario plants, its Brampton assembly plant, is operating at full capacity.

DaimlerChrysler has closed its Ajax plant for the week and slashed production at its Etobicoke plant in half, and is operating only a midnight shift at its Windsor Assembly plant. General Motors has shut down plants in Oshawa, St. Catharines, Ingersoll and Windsor, affecting more than 11,500 workers. About 3,500 Ford workers have been laid off, while others have been ordered to report for shifts in the afternoon and late evening.

It is unclear whether workers ordered to remain home will be paid by their employers or compensated by government. Federal government spokespersons have said that Ottawa will pay its own employees, but otherwise dodged the issue. Under a state of emergency, employers are not obliged to compensate workers for lost wages.

Eves has also issued repeated calls for Ontarians to curtail their energy consumption, by turning off their air conditioners and not using heavy appliances during the day. However, high temperatures and a smog alert for southern Ontario caused the province's chief medical officer, Colin D'Cunha, to issue an advisory Tuesday urging persons with breathing difficulties or medical conditions that make them susceptible to heat to use their air conditioning: "For those who have a medical reason, not a comfort reason but a medical reason, to put on the air conditioner to keep cool, we would encourage you to do that because your health is of prime concern to all of us." To date, two deaths have been attributed to the blackout and its after-effects.

Initially, the government and media sought to downplay the economic fallout of the blackout, comparing its impact to that of a severe winter storm. But with production severely disrupted for at least a week—according to Ontario Power Generation, full generating capacity will only be restored August 28—it

is now conceded that the blackout is a significant blow to a provincial economy already reeling under the impact of the US economic slowdown and last spring's SARS crisis.

The after-effects in Ontario stand in sharp contrast to the situation that prevails in New York, Michigan and most of the northeastern US states affected by the August 14 blackout. Ontario officials have sought to explain away the fact that life in New York has essentially returned to normal by noting that Ontario is more reliant on nuclear power and New York has greater access to alternate electricity suppliers.

Nevertheless, most industry experts, much of the corporate media, and the Tories' parliamentary opponents all concede that the blackout was an accident waiting to happen. Despite burgeoning demand, the province's electricity system has been starved of investment for at least a decade as Ontario's government has pursued an agenda of slashing investment in public infrastructure, privatisation and deregulation.

The New Democratic Party (NDP) government of the early 1990s slashed spending by the crown-owned Ontario Hydro, as part of a massive round of budget-cutting. The Tories, who came to power in 1995, counted privatising the almost century-old public utility as one of their principal objectives. To this end, they broke Ontario Hydro up into five different companies, ordered the new generating company, Ontario Power Generation, not to build major new power facilities, and deregulated energy prices. The Tories and other "free market" ideologues have claimed privatisation would result in new investment and ultimately lower electricity prices for consumers. But, in fact, private capital has balked at making any investments until they extract iron-clad guarantees from the Tories' government that the industry will be almost completely unregulated, allowing companies to maximise returns through price-gouging and other manipulations.

In the aftermath of the blackout, much of the corporate media have endorsed these demands, beginning with the call for the immediate scrapping of a 4.3 cents kilowatt-hour price cap for homeowners and small businesses that the Eves government imposed late last year after deregulation led to a price spike and a public outcry.

The real lesson of the electricity crisis in Canada, as

in the US, is the socially destructive character of an economic system in which the basic necessities of life are subordinated to corporate profit and the accumulation of personal wealth.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact