Ontario: Blackout highlights crisis in infrastructure

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The cause of the blackout that paralyzed northeastern North America and deprived 50 million people of electricity is still under investigation. But there is little doubt the deregulation and privatization policies pursued by Ontario's Tory government were a contributing factor.

The Ontario Tories have long spoken of the need for major new investment in the province's electricity infrastructure, but only as justification for the break-up and privatization of the almost century-old, provincially-owned hydro utility—the now defunct Ontario Hydro—and the deregulation of electricity prices.

Up to ten million of Ontario's eleven million residents lost power during the blackout that began mid-afternoon, Thursday. By early Friday morning, power was restored to about half of Toronto, Canada's largest metropolis. Further progress was reported in many localities during the remainder of Friday, but millions of Ontarians nevertheless had to endure a second night without power and in the midst of a heat wave.

Ontario Premier Ernie Eves told a noon Friday press conference that the government aimed to restore power to two-thirds of the province by the end of the day. He said it would probably be at least three days before power was fully restored and warned that in the meantime there would likely be recurring blackouts as technicians struggle to restabilize the electricity grid. Eves appealed for both individuals and businesses to severely limit their electricity consumption so as to permit a gradual restoration of full capacity, adding that there was a strong likelihood of blackouts for weeks to come. Instability in power supply, said Eves, "is going to be a fact of life… There may be times when the power goes down for 30 minutes to an hour, I am told."

The previous evening, Eves had declared a state of emergency, then appealed for all but essential workers to stay home Friday. While hospitals did continue to function using emergency generators, almost all of Ontario's auto plants, steel mills and mines were closed Friday. Toronto International Airport was also largely shut down and Toronto's subway system is not likely to be fully operational till Monday. Among the biggest challenges facing repair crews is bringing the nuclear generating stations at Darlington and Pickering back on line.

There has been considerable media criticism of Eves' failure to meet with reporters in the first hours of the blackout, much of it motivated by concern that Ontario and Canadian government officials did not quickly rebut the claims of some US politicians that the blackout had originated in Canada. In fact, Canadian authorities were as brazen as their US counterparts in spreading unsubstantiated claims and seeking to shift responsibility for the blackout to the other side of the border.

While a blackout on the scale of Thursday's breakdown had not been widely anticipated, there have been repeated warnings from opposition politicians, industry observers and the media that Ontario faces the danger of blackouts due to increasing demand, the failure to upgrade the power grid and expand generating facilities, and increasing reliance on the volatile US electricity market. In June the Liberals, the official opposition in the Ontario legislature, urged the government to outline its plans to deal with a power failure. The Tories refused, saying the Liberals were fear-mongering. Similarly, last winter the Tories dismissed concerns of possible power outages when it was revealed that Ontario was routinely importing 10 percent of its electricity needs from US providers.

The organization of Ontario's electricity system has been at the center of public debate for the past year-and-

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a-half, with the California electricity crisis, the collapse of Enron, and the multiple crises caused by the Tories' dismantling of public services fuelling increasing public scepticism and opposition to privatization and deregulation. Due to a public outcry, the Tories made a sudden about-face in the spring of 2002, abandoning their plans to privatize Hydro One, the transmission utility spun off from Ontario Hydro. They did proceed, however, with deregulating energy prices. But when prices shot up, the government was compelled to cap consumer electricity rates.

This week's blackout is only the latest in a series of public health and security crises to hit Canada's most populous and industrialized province—crises that have been aggravated, if not caused, by the Tories' assault on public services. In May 2000, seven Walkerton residents were killed and more than 2,000 made sick when the town's water supply became contaminated. Outside East Asia, no place in the world was more severely affected by this spring's SARS outbreak than Toronto.

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