

# Letters on the Queens and St. Louis blackouts

2 August 2006

*The following two letters were sent to the World Socialist Web Site in response to “The Queens blackout: the brutal costs of Con Ed’s drive for profit”*

I want to express my sorrow for those who are gravely ill and the families of those who lost loved ones in the Queens, New York, power outage. Evidently, Con Ed learned nothing from the Great Blackout of August 2003—other than to hire better PR people to spin its underwhelming response to a major catastrophe. It’s apparent that it’s also much cheaper for Con Ed to finance the political campaigns of deregulation proponents than to fix its own power grid. And, in the case of Mayor Bloomberg, they don’t even have to do that. They merely have to *not* support his opponents in mayoral elections.

St. Louis, Missouri, and East St. Louis, Illinois, were hit by a freak storm last July 19, and another major storm one two days later. That is still no excuse for the area’s power company—Ameren—to have had its infrastructure hit so heavily.

Ameren needed to update steam turbine generators at one of its coal-fired plants to meet new federal guidelines. To raise the money, Ameren had to improve its bottom line by cutting back on its maintenance and labor force in order to make an IPO stock offering. Effectively, Ameren had cut its workforce so effectively that the Missouri Utilities Commission made them plow \$30 million back into power line maintenance and update vulnerable substations. Most of that money was to be spent on tree-trimming around existing power lines.

It appears now that Ameren spent the \$30 million as sparingly as it could. Moreover, the “fine” was a drop in the bucket compared to what was really needed to upgrade the power grid. While Ameren’s bottom line had to date suffered little effect, the city was nevertheless paralyzed by storms uprooting trees and branches snapping around power lines.

Missouri’s Governor Matt (son of Roy) Blunt sent

the National Guard into St. Louis to help fire departments go door-to-door and bring the elderly to cooling shelters. No doubt, it was also a move to stem the political fallout from TV crews covering removal of the dead from low-income neighborhoods—and also to protect shop owners from looters. Meanwhile, East St. Louis, Illinois, was plunged into total darkness. As one of America’s poorest cities, it became obvious that Ameren had spent as little as possible to upgrade power lines there. Many people were forced to stay inside—while temperatures topped 100 F—rather than go to shelters for fear of looting.

One wonders what it’s going to take before utilities are publicly owned and democratically managed to avoid life-threatening catastrophes in the future. It’s also becoming more obvious that the country is more vulnerable than ever to a terrorist attack on its power grid.

Bill Van Auken can use your vote in the upcoming US Senate elections in New York. And it’s becoming imperative that a state like Missouri needs socialists in political office if the state is to even remain viable.

BR

St. Louis, Missouri

25 July 2006

This event is repeated around the world, with water, gas and electricity being forcibly privatized by IMF, World Bank and WTO restructuring. In some countries, impressive results have been seen when the people rose up in protest and demonstrations against the privatizations. That is what the people of Queens need to do. Too long have our citizens been trusting sheep. Yours is the first real account I’ve heard or seen of what precipitated this blackout. Mayor Bloomberg should be an embarrassment to the city.

JC

Three Churches, West Virginia, US

26 July 2006



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