

More than a million without power in US following major ice storm

Another failure of the American infrastructure

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Approximately 1.3 million people have been left without power following major ice storms that struck a large section of the midwestern United States this week. The storms have caused at least 27 deaths across 9 states: Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Indiana, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia and Ohio.

Kentucky was the hardest hit as more than 607,000 residents were without power at the peak of the outages Thursday, making this the worst power outage in the state's history. President Barack Obama declared a state of emergency in Kentucky, as well as Arkansas, where over 350,000 are without power. Between one and two inches of ice collected on power lines and tree branches in these states causing them to snap, spreading debris across roads and cutting off power to homes and businesses.

In a letter sent by Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear, a Democrat, to Obama requesting federal assistance, the governor estimated that there would be more than \$5 million in damages caused by the storm in his state. Adding to Kentucky's difficulties in coping with the storm--and to popular suffering--is the fact the state currently faces a \$456 million shortfall in its budget. Kentucky's unemployment rate as of December has also risen to 7.8 percent, the highest in two decades.

Getting help to those in need has proven difficult under the harsh circumstances. Many charitable organizations such as God's Pantry, which has already seen a 40 percent increase in food requests this year, and Moveable Feast in Lexington, have reported difficulty in delivering meals to clients this week

because of road conditions and power outages.

Ninety-one emergency shelters have been established throughout the state, though some of these have also been forced to close due to a lack of electricity. Many small towns like Danville and Berea are suffering from severe water shortages or have run out altogether.

Destroyed utility lines have also led to interruptions in phone and Internet services, adding to difficulties in communication among citizens, rescuers and utility companies. In several cases, authorities have been forced to go door-to-door informing people where to go should they require food and shelter.

Reports in the Associated Press paint a picture of the situation facing some of those affected in Kentucky and Arkansas. The AP quotes a storm victim in Kentucky: "I've been sitting 'round for two days, eating cold hot dogs and bologna," said 70-year-old John Grimes, describing what he ate at home before coming to the shelter. He uses a wheelchair, is blind in one eye, and a diabetic."

In Arkansas: Jimmy Eason "was headed to his Ford F-150 pickup truck, which was warmer than his one-story house. 'I'm sleeping in a car, which is just fine,' Eason, 74, said. 'There's nothing wrong with a car. Every couple of hours I turn it on, I let it run for 10 minutes and that keeps it pretty warm.'"

In western Kentucky, the AP reports, "In the small town of Marion, hundreds fled to a shelter and others went back to getting water the old fashioned way--hauling it from a creek."

Estimates regarding the time it will take to restore

power to homes and businesses throughout the affected region vary from one utility company to the next, but many residents are expected to remain without power for another week; some estimates suggest power may not be restored in some areas until mid-February.

Once again a substantial layer of the population in the United States faces difficult and, in some cases, life-threatening conditions due to a combination of a natural disaster and the inability of the profit system to meet its elementary social needs.

Decades of deregulation, the short-term pursuit of earnings to satisfy shareholders, and the anarchy and waste of private ownership have left the electrical power system in shambles. A severe storm brings out the real state of affairs, to the general public's detriment.

The maintenance of power lines and other equipment, as well as investment in new technologies to bring the system into line with increasing energy demands, have consistently been neglected in favor of reaping fast profits.

As the WSWS noted in the aftermath of the massive August 2003 blackout, which affected 50 million people: "The energy industry today consists of a patchwork of companies with different and competing interests. Even though the electrical grid on the North American continent is now split into two large sections plus Texas, the responsibility for producing, distributing and maintaining energy is shared among thousands of power companies and utilities. The *New York Times* reports, 'The 6,000 or so power plants, owned by 3,000 utilities, pour power into 140 regional 'control areas,' which communicate with one another to coordinate moving the electricity as it is bought and sold.'"

"We have fragmented and balkanized our electronic power system," noted John Casazza, who has written a number of books critical of energy deregulation. "No one is taking a look at what is best for the grid and our nation. Instead, you have 1,000 different entities just looking out for themselves and how to make the best profit."

The system of oversight, to the extent that it exists, is every bit as fragmented as the electrical system itself with various state, corporate and private interests left in control in different regions of the country. The result of this irrational system, when faced with a challenge such as this week's ice storm, is a breakdown. As recovery efforts begin, the mobilization of manpower and resources needed to repair damage caused by the storm is also left in the hands of privately-owned utility companies. Progress has been slow and disorganized thus far.

The author also recommends:

The politics of electrical power--*Power Play: The Fight to Control the World's Electricity* by Sharon Beder [7 April 2004]

The North American blackout: deregulation, profit and the decay of the social infrastructure [23 August 2003]



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