

Heat wave exposes decrepit infrastructure in US, Canada

Tom Eley
8 July 2010

A major heat wave in the eastern US and parts of Canada has further exposed the decrepit state of infrastructure in North America and the perilous conditions created by private ownership of utilities.

Seven deaths have been attributed to the heat wave so far, a number likely to rise. In Philadelphia, a 92-year-old woman was found dead in her non-air-conditioned apartment on Tuesday. And in suburban Detroit the body of a 56-year-old homeless woman was discovered near her car.

Temperatures in New York City, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Providence, Rhode Island, broke records on Tuesday. Baltimore Washington International Airport topped 105 degrees, and Philadelphia and Washington D.C.'s airports recorded temperatures of 102 and 101 degrees, respectively.

High humidity made the heat more intense. New York's Central Park—usually one of the cooler spots in the city—recorded a temperature of 103 degrees on Tuesday afternoon. But humidity made it feel like 111 degrees, according to *AccuWeather*.

Wednesday saw temperatures in the high 90s for most of the region, with some cities once again hitting 100. Forecasts say the heat wave will lessen somewhat over the weekend, but will intensify again next week.

Extra demand for power associated with the use of air conditioners shut down electricity service to parts of New York City and Washington D.C., the nation's financial and political capitals, while Tuesday's largest blackout occurred in Canada's most populous city, Toronto. Partial power failures also occurred in Philadelphia, Detroit, Boston, Baltimore, and many smaller cities and towns in the US and Canada.

In metropolitan New York City, nearly 19,000 homes and businesses lost power, 6,300 of which had yet to be restored to service as of Wednesday afternoon. In the city 4,000 customers lost power due to the grid nearing its

capacity, according to the region's privately-held energy monopoly, Consolidated Edison (Con Edison). At least four of the five city boroughs were affected by power outages, exposing the population to serious health risks.

"I was panicking because my daughter has a seizure disorder," a city resident told a New York news station. "I told them we cannot put up with this. But I put her in the water, to cool her down a little bit. I was able to handle that ... My neighbor also, her husband is on oxygen. She was calling all day. I saw her outside calling, calling."

Con Edison also imposed 5 percent to 8 percent voltage reductions to twenty neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens because of failures in electrical cables. About half a million customers were affected.

"It's scary that in what we refer to as the first world, the most modern city in the world, these things can happen," Aseem Chhabra, a 53-year-old native of India, told the *Wall Street Journal*.

In the Detroit metropolitan area, hundreds of households in Hamtramck and Birmingham lost power due to overheated transformers owned by Michigan's energy giant DTE, whose winter shut-off policies have led to the deaths of a number of area residents over the past year.

In and around Stamford, Connecticut, nearly 20,000 households lost power on Tuesday when a transformer caught fire and melted. Some residents were still without power Wednesday. In Baltimore, 8,700 customers lost power on Tuesday, and 8,000 Philadelphia homes were without power on Monday. In Boston, 1,500 households still had no power on Wednesday morning after heat-related outages on Tuesday. About 3,000 homes in Washington D.C. lost energy after a power line incinerated due to the high temperatures.

The only response of the major US power utilities has been a media campaign requesting residents to restrict their use of power. "We are anticipating a potential record-breaking day for electric usage," said John Miksad of Con

Edison. “It’s not a record we’re hoping to break and we are encouraging conservation among all our customers.”

By far the worst power outage occurred in Toronto, where a breaker belonging to utility Hydro One burst into flames, leaving 240,000 residents without power on a day when the temperatures reached the mid-90s. The failure was directly attributed to the age of the power grid.

“Much of the Crown-owned utility’s equipment is nearing the end of its design life,” complained the *Globe and Mail*. “The outage was a stark reminder that an aging electricity grid is leaving many regions vulnerable to blackouts.”

“You get what you pay for,” said Canadian energy policy analyst Keith Stewart. “If you aren’t willing to pay for a reliable system, then you get an unreliable one.”

Unlike most US utilities, Hydro One is a crown corporation owned by the province of Ontario. However, the Energy Competition Act of 1998, passed by the Ontario government under Conservative Mike Harris, created a “free market” in the electricity markets. While energy rates have risen drastically since 1998, there has been no major investment in the power grid.

To the embarrassment of the Ontario elite, the Toronto power outage coincided with a visit from Britain’s Queen Elizabeth, leaving her in a hotel with no electricity in advance of a meeting with Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Visiting New York, the queen “made it through the day without being affected by the outages,” noted the *Hindustan Times*. “But on Monday, as she wrapped up a week-long visit in Canada, power crashed across large swathes of Toronto, including the hotel where she was staying.”

In the eastern US and southern Ontario, power usage this week has approached, but generally not surpassed, the record levels reached in the heat wave of 2006. This may be owed, ironically, to the economic slump. “Fewer industrial users, fewer commercial users just simply because their production is down due to the economy,” commented Joe Hoagland, of Eastern Tennessee’s energy utility, TVA. Nonetheless, the North American power grid began to stutter and stop.

The heat shut down or limited other components of major East Coast cities’ infrastructure.

The New York City Transit Authority suspended elevators and escalators at several subway stations, and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority determined that it could not raise a series of century-old drawbridges along its New Haven Line, allowing the Metro-North train to proceed as usual, but blocking boats from passing

below.

New Jersey Transit canceled nine trains due to the high temperatures, forcing passengers to wait for hours in the heat. In Washington D.C., commuter trains were ordered to slow their speeds after welded rails began to warp.

In Baltimore, a nursing home for the elderly was evacuated on Tuesday after its air conditioning system broke down.

It is not the first time that the East Coast has been hit by major power outages related to high temperatures. A heat wave in 2006 claimed dozens of lives while setting power usage records and overwhelming the grid in numerous locations. And in 2003, massive blackouts cascaded across the East, Midwest, and southern Canada, leaving some 50 million households without power in New York, Cleveland, Detroit, Toronto, Ottawa, and elsewhere.

At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* commented: “Privatisation, mergers, costcutting and restructuring have resulted in a lack of investment in new plant and maintenance. As a consequence, the various power grids across the US have become increasingly unstable, particularly at times of high demand such as during heat waves. Any fault in one plant or at one point in the transmission system creates a cascading effect as one station after another shuts down automatically to avoid dangerous overloading.” (see “Massive power blackout hits millions in Canada and the US”).

After the 2003 disaster, numerous promises were made by utility company and government officials in the US and Canada that the power grid would be revitalized. Seven years on, next to nothing has been done.

The situation in New York City is particularly telling. Con Edison’s operations have now suffered major blackouts numerous times in recent years, including 1999, 2003, 2006, and 2010.

This would appear surprising in the nation’s largest and richest city, except that the purpose of energy giants such as Con Edison is in fact not to deliver energy, but profit.

Con Edison reported net income of \$226 million in the first quarter of 2010 alone. This enormous sum is primarily distributed to shareholders and executives—CEO Kevin Burke was paid nearly \$9 million in 2009, according to *Businessweek*.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact