

Blizzard cripples northeastern US

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A major blizzard struck the northeastern US on December 26, cutting power to tens of thousands, crippling budget-strapped emergency crews, and stranding holiday travelers. As always, such events expose the deplorable and declining state of America's infrastructure, as well as the indifference and incompetence of governments and big business.

The storm buried New England in nearly two feet of snow, driven by strong winds into deep drifts. Maine, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Maryland, as well as Virginia and North Carolina, all declared states of emergency.

Public activity in New York City, Boston, Newark and numerous other major cities was brought to a virtual standstill. In New York's Central Park snow accumulation on Sunday was 20 inches, making it the worst winter storm to hit the city since recordkeeping began in 1869, according to the National Weather Service. New York's borough of Staten Island received 29 inches; the city of Rahway, New Jersey also saw 29 inches; 19 inches fell on South Boston. Wind gusts of up to 65 miles per hour were reported, along with single-digit temperatures (Fahrenheit).

Tens of thousands of households across the region were left without power because of wind-snapped trees and downed lines. Some media reports placed the number of residences left without heat and electricity on Monday at upwards of 60,000 in Massachusetts and 8,000 in New Jersey. Connecticut Light & Power reported that outages rose to nearly 34,000 on Monday, up by more than 20,000 over the course of the day.

At least 8,000 households were without power in New York City and Westchester County, 8,700 on Long Island. As of Monday night, according to lower Hudson region news reports, some 5,500 households remained without electricity and gas.

Much of the transportation system was brought to a halt. More than 4,500 flights out of New York area airports were canceled. At JFK airport, the busiest in the US, thousands of passengers trying to get home from holiday

visits were stranded in terminals. Upward of 1,400 people spent the night at JFK and La Guardia, according to the New York Port Authority.

Characterizing the storm as an "act of God," the airlines absolved themselves of providing any sleeping accommodations or food provisions. Aside from a limited number of cots that were distributed, most passengers were left without help, to sleep on the floor or on baggage carousels.

In media interviews, travelers described being promised vouchers for hotels and being forced to rely on dwindling food stocks at airport restaurants. Others said they were not allowed to retrieve checked luggage, leaving them without basic toiletries, medications, or changes of clothing. An Associated Press report recounted the plight of a disabled woman who was denied her wheelchair, already stowed under the plane when her flight was cancelled.

Travelers desperate to re-book flights were simply stonewalled by the air carriers. "The phone kept on ringing—it couldn't go through," one stranded traveler told CNN. "They would hang up on us. The automated system would come on, and it just hung up (after saying the) volume of calls are still high. It took us a couple of hours before we got a person."

In New York City, multiple subway trains lost power, trapping hundreds of passengers in extremely cold cars for hours. Two Manhattan-bound subway trains were held up for seven hours. Passengers were repeatedly assured that a rescue train was on the way, but it too became stuck on the tracks and never arrived.

New York Daily News reporter Erin Durkin, who was among those stranded, described the harrowing conditions: "So we waited—without food, water, bathrooms, and most of the time without heat."

The official response to the subway breakdown was dismissive. "We assured the people it was safe on the train," transit head Jay Walder commented to ABC News. "I know it wasn't comfortable." Transit officials have not

given an account of how many trains were stranded, but media reports list at least nine cases of stalled trains. Six other subway trains were reportedly shut down for most of Monday, and four down for at least several hours at a time.

Amtrak service along the northeast corridor was cancelled Sunday and Monday. On Monday evening, Amtrak officials said trains to and from Penn Station were subject to signal problems and delays.

Media reports described conditions facing rail commuters as extremely poor. One CNN reporter stranded aboard a New Jersey line commented, “Real big gusts, very, very cold, and the train stuck on the tracks in Secaucus Junction with no electricity and doors open.... Everyone’s very, very discouraged.”

The suburban Long Island Rail Road was also shutdown for most of Monday and was providing only limited service runs from Penn Station on Tuesday. Busy Metro-North commuter lines were halted on Monday so crews could clear snowdrifts, and the railway will run on a limited weekend schedule while gusting winds continue. New York City transit officials said more than 400 buses had been stuck in drifts, and that bus service was “uniformly bad” citywide.

The severity of the storm is undeniable. However, its crippling impact on transportation and public facilities in general, reveals the disastrous consequences of rampant budget-cutting and fanatical “free market” deregulation and privatization, as well as the unpreparedness of local and state authorities.

Perhaps nowhere is this more starkly on display than in New York City, where the stupefying wealth of Wall Street billionaires co-exists with extreme poverty and want. New York’s Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who has spearheaded a campaign of slashing city services and jobs, spelled out the contempt felt for the general population by US officialdom at a press conference Monday.

Defending the city’s response to the storm, Bloomberg commented, “There’s no reason for everybody to panic. Our city is doing exactly what you’d want it to do, having the government providing the services that people want, particularly adjusted to the conditions.” He added, “The world has not come to an end. The city is going fine. Broadway shows were full last night. There are lots of tourists here enjoying themselves. I think the message is that the city goes on.” Whether complacency or stupidity predominates here, it is difficult to say.

While the upscale business and entertainment district of

Manhattan might have ‘gone on’—it was the only area of the city where roads were cleared—the residential boroughs went largely unplowed. As of Tuesday morning, most of the secondary and tertiary streets in the working class areas of the city were still piled with snow.

This state of affairs is a consequence in part of cuts to the city’s Sanitation Department. Harry Nespoli, president of the Uniformed Sanitationmen’s Association, told the *Wall Street Journal* that the department was understaffed by 400, leaving plows and other snow equipment unmanned. Last month Bloomberg announced a planned reduction of the sanitation budget that would cut the workforce down by a further 265 workers by 2012.

Impassable roadways, skeleton crews on emergency squads and high winds contributed to a spate of accidents in New York. Auto accidents, which killed at least five people, have been attributed to the storm and the inability of emergency responders to help. New York City responders said they faced a “backlog” of 1,300 calls, and at one point some 100 ambulances were stuck in the snow. Paramedics were forced to park their vehicles blocks away from the scene of a given emergency and then carry patients through unplowed snow.

The region was also subject to multiple devastating fires. On Sunday night, a five-alarm fire raged through the top floor of a six-story Queens apartment building, injuring three residents and four firefighters. Firefighters said they had difficulty reaching the fire because of abandoned vehicles and uncleared roads, and crews worked for more than three hours before bringing it under control. The blaze displaced 100 families.

A downtown apartment building in Bridgeport, Connecticut was destroyed by fire, rendering homeless 18 residents, including four children. In the coastal town of Scituate, Massachusetts—struck first by the storm and then by major flooding—a fire leapt from house to house, prompting the evacuation of multiple families by boat.



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