

The heat wave in the US and the decay of infrastructure

Statement by Phyllis Scherrer, SEP candidate for US vice president

Phyllis Scherrer, Socialist Equality Party candidate for US vice president
6 July 2012

A devastating heat wave has hit much of the eastern United States. Violent storms have combined with record high temperatures to cause the deaths of at least 23 people, and likely many more. A week after the storms, hundreds of thousands of people remain without power.

Storms late last week knocked out power for a total of 4.3 million people in Washington, DC, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland and New Jersey. Temperatures are expected to hover around 100 degrees (37.7 Celsius) in the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic states over the next few days.

Unable to find municipal emergency cooling centers, or reach cooler wooded areas as a retreat, millions of elderly people, workers and their families have resorted to sheltering in air-conditioned grocery stores, restaurants and strip malls.

Coming on the heels of the Colorado fires, extraordinary heat points to the consequences of climate change and global warming. Scientists are issuing increasingly dire warnings yet President Obama, completely subservient to Corporate America, has done even less about it than his Republican predecessor. On an international scale, the major powers can come to no agreement because they all defend the corporate interests in their own countries.

As always, the extreme weather serves to expose the decrepit state of social infrastructure and gapping social inequality in the United States. This is a country that expends \$1.5 trillion for wars in Iraq and Afghanistan alone, and trillions to bail out the Wall Street banks. Yet, when it comes to the most basic requirements of modern life, the American ruling class insists there is

“no money.”

Under capitalism everything is subordinated to private profit. The electrical grid is a case in point. The giant utility companies neglect to maintain lines and refuse to commit resources to modernize electrical systems. Con Edison, one of the utility companies in New York, locked out 8,500 utility workers at the beginning of this week. In its determination to extract greater profits, Con Ed is putting the entire population at risk of power outages, delays in service and even deaths.

Some of the main power companies in the region, including the Potomac Electric Power Company (Pepco), have claimed that the extent of the storms was unexpected. This is why, the corporate executives claim, such a broad area was affected, and why it is taking so long to restore power. That is simply a lie. While this year’s weather is particularly extreme, it is neither the first time that the East Coast has been hit by major power outages, nor the first time such heat waves have led to major deaths.

In fact, heat is the number one weather-related killer in the United States, resulting in hundreds of fatalities each year. On average, excessive heat claims more lives each year than floods, lightning, tornadoes and hurricanes combined.

The most vulnerable of our society, the elderly, infants, young children, and people with chronic health problems like heart disease, or disabilities are more susceptible to the effects of heat waves.

So, what is to explain the inability of the electrical infrastructure to deliver energy effectively, despite what have become routine weather patterns, and storms? It is the fact that the main aim of energy giants

such as Pepco and Con Edison is not to deliver energy, but to deliver profits to wealthy shareholders and investors.

These companies have no fear of being held accountable for their negligence by the politicians of both big business parties. Last December, Pepco was fined \$1 million for failing to fix problems that led to frequent outages. This was little more than a slap on the wrist, however, that represented only a tiny fraction of the company's revenues. In the third quarter of 2011, it took Pepco Holdings about a day and a half to earn \$1 million, according to the company's government filings. Pepco Holdings paid more than \$240 million in dividends alone last year.

More broadly, the entire structure of American society is geared not toward developing the productive forces and infrastructure of the country, but at funneling massive sums of money into the bank accounts of the financial aristocracy. The ruling class in this country has accumulated vast sums of wealth through speculation and fraud. At the same time, governments at the state and federal level, under both Democrats and Republicans, are taking a ruthless cost-cutting axe to all spending programs.

It is well known that burying overhead power lines would protect them from weather extremes and greatly reduce if not eliminate power outages. One estimate of the cost of burying overhead lines in the DC Metro area is \$5.8 billion. The resources for this and other vital improvements could be attained if taxes were sharply increased on the richest 58,000 Americans whose combined net worth is \$7.6 trillion—more than half of the entire country's annual Gross Domestic Product. But neither Obama nor Romney will carry out such a necessary measure because both are multi-millionaire defenders of the super-rich.

The need for an updated, regulated, national grid to replace infrastructure established in the 1930's and 1970's is a critical necessity. However, meeting this and every other social need depends on the restructuring of American and world economy on the basis of democratic and rational control of production—not private profit. The Socialist Equality Party demands the nationalization of the electrical and energy industries as part of the socialist reorganization of economic life.

A multi-trillion dollar public works program—paid for by a wealth tax on the super-rich—must be launched to put the more than two million unemployed construction workers back to work rebuilding and improving the infrastructure.

Socialist planning in the US and around the world is also the only means to marshal the scientific, human and natural resources needed to combat climate change and develop environmentally sustainable energy sources, a vast expansion of public transportation and other critical measures to protect the planet.

To fight for this, my running mate Jerry White and I are calling on workers not simply to give us your votes but to join our campaign to build a mass political party to fight for workers' power and the replacement of the profit system with socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact