

US extreme weather causes new power outages

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New storms were responsible for nearly 23,000 more power outages in the Washington DC area last weekend, as temperatures continued to reach record levels in many areas across the US. Several dozen people died in heat-related incidents last week, although reports vary on the exact number of victims.

Residents in the nation's capital—forced to endure nearly two weeks of record-breaking high temperatures—may now also be hit by a new storm system, coming just days after a high-powered system knocked out residents' power for nearly a week. The new storm system claimed the life of a woman in New Jersey, who was reportedly struck by lightning.

Temperatures stayed at above 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius) for the fourth day in a row last weekend in the metropolitan DC area, the highest temperatures sustained for such a period in the area since July 1930. The heat was reportedly enough to bend the tracks of the city's metro system, causing a train on the Green Line to derail. Ten heat-related deaths were reported in the region after the record-breaking heat last week.

To get a sense of the grueling temperatures, an article in the *Washington Post* stated that it felt as though the region had been “buried alive in heat.”

According to Dominion Power, 23,000 residents lost power in Northern Virginia. Three thousand Pepco customers also reportedly lost power in the District and in Maryland. This is in addition to an estimated 15,000 residents who have yet to regain power, after losing it following last month's “derecho” storm.

The social crisis is undoubtedly accentuating the impact of this disaster, throwing the region into crisis. The inadequate electric infrastructure is also at the mercy of the private utility companies, which subordinate the delivery of power to their profit

margins.

The Northern Virginia region has seen a large population influx in the last 10 years due to an economy somewhat less affected by the recession than in many other parts of the country.

This population growth in the area has been accompanied by an increase in social inequality. A study released by the D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute in March showed a massive disparity in incomes between the top and bottom earners in Washington DC, as well as a lack of affordable housing. (See “Widening social inequality in US capital”)

The heat crisis has also exacerbated the budget crises of many regions. In Fairfax County, Virginia, Democratic Board of Supervisors Chairman Sharon Bulova stated she expected increased operational costs for administering cooling centers in the region, among other factors.

In West Virginia, about 77,000 homes and businesses were still without electricity over the weekend. Appalachian Power said those numbers were rising again due to severe thunderstorms that moved in on Sunday.

This was the third major thunderstorm to hit the state since June 29, when winds of up to 75 miles an hour caused widespread damage and power outages. About 45,000 Appalachian Power customers and 32,000 MonPower customers remained without service as of Monday.

As with many natural disasters, the hardest affected are those least able to care for themselves, including the elderly and the young. In Marion County, Indiana, a 92-year old man was found dead in his home, which lacked ventilation. In Indianapolis, a three-month-old girl was found dead, while a 16-month-old was hospitalized after being left inside of a vehicle in

105-degree temperatures. Eight more deaths were blamed on the hot weather Sunday in Cook County, Chicago.

This reporter recently visited several registered cooling centers in the region, as they had been advertised by the *Washington Post*. At each location it was reported that these facilities had been without power at the time the *Post* ran its alert. All of the facilities had been shut down during the initial power outages.

Efforts to restore power have been exacerbated by recent attempts of private electricity companies to cut back on expenses. “It’s very frustrating,” stated Jim Griffin, an International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) business agent representing power workers. “When we have a major storm like this we rely heavily on assistance from other utilities. We have crews coming from Quebec and Oklahoma ... We have half the linemen we had 15 years ago.”

Utility Pepco, for its part, bragged about being able to restore power to most customers in the DC region by last Thursday, two days ahead of reported schedule. Power remained out for over 15,000 residents in the DC area at the beginning of the week.

The government body overseeing the operations of public utilities in the DC area has rejected burying power lines underground, a move that would all but eliminate power outages during severe weather.

As the WSWs reported recently: “The DC Public Services Commission (PSC), a district government body which oversees the operations of public utilities, rejected placing power lines underground in October 2010, following the release of a study by Shaw Consultants International into the cost of the operation. While the analysis showed that 100 percent of outages during storms would be prevented by burying the lines, the associated cost of \$5.8 billion was declared to be too great.”



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