

Storm's damage to aging infrastructure leaves New York City paralyzed

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Flooding from Hurricane Sandy has left New York, America's largest city and financial capital, paralyzed because of damage to aging transit and power infrastructure.

Public schools and most workplaces remained shut for a second day Tuesday as the shutdown of the city's mass transit system left the 5.3 million who ride it daily stranded. The shutoff of electrical power to Manhattan south of 39th Street has left over 250,000 customers, including public housing, luxury apartment buildings, universities, stores, offices and schools, in the dark.

Power outages also hit 180,000 Con Ed customers in Westchester County, 108,000 in Queens, 109,000 in Staten Island, 87,000 in Brooklyn, and 45,000 in the Bronx.

Con Edison has warned that residents of the lower third of Manhattan could face up to four days without power as the utility repairs storm damage to its electricity distribution system.

While residents of lower Manhattan's public housing developments are to be left without heat, hot water, lights or elevators into the weekend, the Wall Street stock exchange is set to resume trading today, and major financial firms are expected to be back in business. Multiple utility and communications firms have been pressed into service to assure that American finance capital is able to resume profit-making operations.

As the *New York Times* explained: "The New York Stock Exchange is one of the world's most identifiable symbols of capitalism and its inability to operate is often viewed as a larger statement on stability of United States stock markets and the economy."

As for the mass transit system, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which is responsible for the city's subway and bus systems as well as commuter rail lines—all of which were shut down by the storm—has provided no concrete timetable for a full restoration of service.

While limited bus service began to appear on Tuesday

afternoon, there was no indication of when subways would be up and running after Sandy's flood surge poured into all six of the under-river subway tunnels linking Brooklyn and Manhattan as well as the Steinway tunnel, which connects Manhattan and Queens. Some estimates, however, have suggested that it could be a month or longer before mass transit is back to normal.

The immense social and economic crisis confronting millions of working people in the city of New York due to the breakdown of its transit and power systems is a far more accurate barometer of the stability of American capitalism than the ability of the city's financiers to exercise their options on the equity markets.

A sustained paralysis of the city due to the failure of its transit and power grids spells a potentially major blow to city, national and even world economies, not to mention substantial suffering for hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people.

While the news media continues to refer to Sandy as "the storm of the century" or a freak event, the reality is that scientists and indeed a panel created by New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) itself had predicted precisely this type of event, as well as its impact on the city's infrastructure.

Indeed, the storm surge from Hurricane Irene in August 2011, which led to the first-ever preemptive shutdown of the entire transit system, came within barely a foot of creating the same catastrophe as Sandy.

At the time, then MTA chief Jay Walder commented: "The worst fear we had, which was that the under river tunnels on the East River would flood with salt water, were not realized. We certainly dodged something there."

Little more than a year later, the transit system failed to "dodge" a wholly predictable event.

Klaus Jacob, a climate scientist at Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, worked with the MTA in the wake of Irene to plot the effects of rising sea levels combined with similar storms flooding the subway tunnels.

He recounted in an interview last year that he had presented his results to the MTA and asked how long it would take to restore the transit system after such a flooding.

“And there was a big silence in the room because the system is so old,” he said. “Many of the items that would be damaged by the intrusion of the saltwater into the system could not recover quickly. You have to take them apart. You have to clean them from salt, dry them, reassemble them, test them and cross your fingers that they work.”

Jacob’s own estimate was that it would take at least 29 days to get the subways back fully in operation, costing the city billions of dollars in economic output.

Similarly, Mortimer Downey, a former MTA executive director, said that it would take “possibly weeks” to restore service. “From the New York viewpoint, they’ve got a lot of work ahead of them,” he said.

At the root of the problem is the antiquated state of the city’s transit system, which is 108 years old. In the country’s wealthiest city, the capital of finance capital, much of the technology used in the transit system dates back to the 1930s. In particular, this affects the electronic signals that line subway tracks and are indispensable for running the subway trains. Some of the parts date back to the early 1900s.

The transit authority has yet to carry out all but a handful of the recommendations made by its own commission. A serious overhaul of the system to secure it against disasters like Sandy would require tens of billions of dollars in investment. Much of the MTA’s revenues are poured into paying off interest on more than \$32 billion in debt held by the Wall Street banks.

Similar problems plague Con Edison, which saw a fiery explosion at its 13th Street substation in Manhattan on Monday night. A major cause of the massive failure that has shut off power in the city is suspected to be the effect of floodwater on underground and unprotected wiring. Likewise, most of the utility company’s transformers are underground.

While this has been recognized as a serious vulnerability, the regulatory agency in charge of monitoring the utility, the state’s Public Service Commission, spent nearly two decades without auditing the company’s operations.

Driven by profit, Con Ed has concentrated on cutting costs, including through imposing sweeping takeaways on its workers, while neglecting capital investment, including the upgrading of its transmission infrastructure and the placing of critical equipment above ground.

New York City’s billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg Tuesday praised Con Edison and brushed off a question about whether the city needed to prepare for similar storm events in the future, casting doubt on whether climate

change—a phrase he accompanied with air quotes—had any real impact on the city. Instead, he said that the principal problem was the failure of people in areas threatened by the storm to heed his demand that they evacuate. In retaliation, Bloomberg shut off heat, hot water and elevators in the city’s public housing in the affected areas.

The reality is that the city’s own agencies have produced reports making clear that climate change and the increasing frequency of extreme weather events were bound to produce the results seen with Sandy.

A “Blue Ribbon Commission on Sustainability and the MTA” appointed in September 2007 produced a report warning that climate change “represents a new and potentially dire challenge, for which the MTA system is largely unprepared. A number of climate changes have been measured in the MTA service area, and altered weather patterns are already impacting the MTA infrastructure, primarily through increased storm activity and related flooding.”

It added that a team of climate and economic experts had “identified three key trends significantly impacting MTA operations: higher average temperatures, rising sea levels with related coastal surges, and increased storm activity with more severe precipitation events and related flooding,” which would have “their greatest impact on the MTA at subway system stations and tunnels below water level.”

The commission proposed a series of measures to confront the threat. In the short term, these included “increased fixed-station pumping capacity, raised subway entrances, curbing and ventilation grates, and additional tunnel sealing.”

The commission found that more long-term strategies were needed, including “the creation of strategic storm barriers for the NYC harbor and estuary.”

The failure of New York City, which boasts the greatest concentration of wealth of any urban center in the United States, to make any serious attempt to confront these challenges is testimony to the inability of the profit system to deal with complex problems confronting modern society. Instead, as Bloomberg’s response indicates, the only reaction is to blame and intensify the attacks on the working class.



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