

Millions still without power as temperature nears freezing in Eastern US

Bill Van Auken
5 November 2012

One week after Hurricane Sandy pummeled the Eastern Seaboard of the United States with high winds and a record storm surge, nearly two million homes and businesses remain without power in New Jersey, New York and Connecticut as temperatures fall near the freezing mark.

Fear is growing that Sandy's death toll, already topping 100, will be augmented by further fatalities, caused not by natural disaster but rather the inability and unwillingness of all levels of government and a social system driven by private profit to mount an adequate relief effort for the millions of people left without electricity, heat, water and food.

On Sunday, New York City's billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced that between 30,000 and 40,000 New Yorkers would be left homeless by the storm for a lengthy period, the bulk of them residents of the city's public housing developments. Much of this housing, he said, will be "out of commission for a very long time."

Bloomberg said that the numbers left homeless were comparable to those recorded in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, noting that many then left that city for Houston, Texas.

These comments raised the very real possibility that the ruling establishment in New York may use the devastation of Hurricane Sandy as a pretext for eliminating a section of the city's public housing, which layers of the financial and corporate oligarchy have long regarded as an anachronism and an impediment to profitable real estate development.

In many of the housing projects, conditions have gone from bad to worse after nearly a week without power, heat and water. Even where lights have been restored, as in the developments on Manhattan's lower east side, heat remains off and residents are attempting

to warm themselves by turning on stove-top burners or boiling water, raising the threat of fire or asphyxiation.

The overwhelming sentiment heard over and over again throughout the region is that victims of the storm have been left behind in working class and poor areas, while unlimited resources were lavished on getting Wall Street up and running with full power a day after the hurricane ended.

Bloomberg was the target of these sentiments Sunday when he sought to make a brief disaster tour of the Rockaway section of Queens, which has been left without power since the storm. Residents were pushed back by his police escort when they began yelling, "When are we going to get some help?" and questioning what was going to happen to older people trapped in high-rise public housing. The mayor was hastily hustled out of the area by his bodyguards.

The incident took place just a day after Bloomberg was forced to suddenly announce the cancellation of the New York Marathon, an annual event that has been held for more than 40 years. Public anger over the social inequality and class divide that pervades New York focused on the event, particularly after news reports that generators were being set up in Central Park for media tents and other facilities related to the race, while truckloads of food and water were arriving for the runners. People in devastated areas of Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island and beyond demanded to know where their generators, food and water were.

The anger was exacerbated by the fact that the race's starting point was in Staten Island, where the bulk of the city's 41 deaths have taken place, and where the bodies of two little boys swept out of their mother's arms by the storm surge were recovered only on Thursday.

It is still not entirely clear what caused Bloomberg to

suddenly reverse himself only hours after he had insisted that the race was necessary to give New Yorkers something “to cheer about” and to boost business. It has been reported, however, that the city’s police commissioner, Ray Kelly, had weighed in heavily in favor of calling off the event. No doubt Kelly was receiving reports from the commanders of the army of police sent to maintain order in the devastated parts of the city that conditions were turning into a social powder keg that could be ignited by fury over the marathon.

Bloomberg on Sunday urged people without heat to go to warming centers and shelters, warning, “You can die from being cold.” However, people in the affected neighborhoods have reported that many of these centers are already overflowing, without room to sleep or enough food to give those coming for help.

Utility companies have given no precise timetable for when power will be restored, with reports that in the more hard-hit areas it could be off for as long as two weeks or more.

Meanwhile, still another storm is set to strike the region by the middle of this week, bringing heavy rains and wind as well as more coastal flooding.

The *New York Times* noted Sunday that even after power is restored and repairs are completed, the region’s infrastructure will remain “just as vulnerable to the next monster storm,” rendered all the more likely by climate change and the increasing frequency of extreme weather.

The unwillingness of big business to make the necessary investments to provide security to the population has become increasingly clear. The *Times* article and other commentary mention figures like tens of billions of dollars to protect New York City’s subway system or Con Edison’s power stations and delivery system from flooding. This is, of course, a tiny fraction of the money lavished on Wall Street following the financial meltdown of 2008, while Washington is spending at least ten times that much to wage its war in Afghanistan this year.

The attitude of predominant layers within corporate ruling circles was summed up by Ralph LaRossa, the CEO of PSE&G, New Jersey’s major electric utility. Asked about changing the company’s infrastructure to prevent its switchyards and substations from being flooded out, he replied: “If we moved them back, we’d

have to condemn property that people are living in.” Referring to the company’s vital equipment, he said, “Some people say, ‘Why don’t they raise them up?’ We’ll raise them eight feet and the next storm will be nine feet.”

Whether the people of New Jersey will have light and heat, it seems, will be determined by the power of the next storm, as Mr. LaRossa concerns himself with more immediate matters, such as PSE&G’s profits for next quarter and his own compensation package, which topped \$1.5 million last year.

The *Times* article suggested that the failure to take any protective measures was a matter of a lack of “public will.” It states that demands for such protection rise in the immediate aftermath of disasters, but then “memory recedes.”

The article continues: “The sun is shining, the refrigerator cools. The trains are running. Aren’t electrical bills high enough? Don’t we pay enough for the trains?”

Behind this cynical statement is the clear message that no resources are to be diverted from the profits of the banks and corporations or the mountains of wealth accumulated by Bloomberg and his ilk to protect the population. Instead, even if any measures are taken, they will be paid for by gouging the working class in the form of higher rates and fees.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact