

The Detroit blackout

Thomas Gaist
4 December 2014

On Tuesday morning, the city of Detroit suffered a massive power outage that affected large sections of downtown. Some 900 structures were impacted, including hospitals, schools, fire stations and other public buildings. The blackout centered on core areas of the city, leaving passengers stranded in elevators throughout the downtown area and forcing the closure of numerous public schools and the evacuation of the Detroit Institute of Arts.

The power outage, attributed to the failure of a single cable on the city's municipal power grid, speaks to the decline of Detroit and the decay and neglect of infrastructure throughout the country.

This is hardly the only power outage to hit Detroit, the historic center of auto manufacturing in the world and now the poorest large city in the US. Infrastructure failures led to major outages in downtown Detroit in 2010, 2011 and 2013. Every major storm—and even a significant wind—brings down power lines and cuts off electricity to large sections of the city.

Over the past decade, Detroit has moved to privatize all remaining publicly owned electricity infrastructure, which is increasingly under the domination of energy giant DTE. The municipal power plant where the failure reportedly occurred has been shut down and converted into a “switching station” to transfer electricity from DTE onto the city's grid. The energy company is supposed to be implementing a program to “modernize” the grid as it prepares to take it over, but it reportedly failed to inspect the suspect cable.

The latest blackout comes as Detroit is emerging from a bankruptcy process and preparing to implement a financial restructuring plan, the basic aim of which is to reconfigure the entire city in the interests of the rich through attacks on workers' pensions and health benefits, along with the privatization of prime city assets.

Energy in the city is to be placed even more firmly

under the control of DTE, a politically connected company that, through its policy of utility shutoffs, is playing a critical role in the effort by the ruling class to shut down entire sections of the city deemed unprofitable.

The decay of infrastructure is not unique to Detroit, nor to electricity production and distribution. A report recently published by the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) gave US electrical infrastructure nationwide a rating of D+. The report pointed out that much of the country's electricity system was built in the middle of the 20th century, and some components are more than 120 years old.

The ASCE found that the number of major power system failures in the US rose from less than 80 in 2007 to more than 300 in 2011.

Overall, US government investment in infrastructure has reached its lowest point since 1947, according to a recent CBS report entitled “America's Neglected Infrastructure.” US air transport is the most congested in the world, and most US seaports are not deep enough to receive the latest generation of cargo ships. Out of some 14,000 miles of high-speed rail currently operated around the world, none are located in the US.

Hundreds of bridges constructed during the 1960s remain in service despite being considered “structurally deficient,” according to sources cited by the CBS report. More than 10 percent of US bridges, a total of nearly 70,000, have serious structural problems, and some 32 percent of major US roads are in “poor condition.”

In 2007, a bridge on Minnesota's I-35 highway collapsed, killing 13 and wounding 145 more. The collapsed bridge was one of a class of bridges constructed during the 1960s, hundreds of which remain in service despite being considered structurally deficient.

The potential for unmaintained infrastructure to

exponentially magnify the fallout from natural disasters has been demonstrated again and again during the past decade. In 2003, downed power lines in Ohio catalyzed a massive electrical infrastructure failure that caused some 50 million to lose power across the Northeast US. In 2005, flooding caused by Hurricane Katrina, combined with the neglect of infrastructure protecting New Orleans, destroyed large sections of the city and killed at least 1,800. In 2011, Hurricane Irene caused millions of people to lose power across the eastern US.

The accelerating pace of infrastructural failures is a product of a decades-long process of capitalist neglect and decay. The economic decline of American capitalism over the past four decades has found expression in the rise of a parasitic financial aristocracy, increasingly insulated from the development of the productive forces and hostile to such things as long-term planning and social investment.

While massive resources have been monopolized by this oligarchy, there is no section of the ruling class that proposes serious investment in social infrastructure. Instead, the political establishment, led by the Obama administration, has devoted its energies to slashing social spending to pay off the trillions of dollars in public funds that have been handed over to the banks.

At the same time, in the name of “homeland security” and “public safety,” vast social resources have been diverted to the expansion of the surveillance apparatus and the transformation of local police departments into combat-ready paramilitary forces armed with state-of-the-art military weaponry. The ruling class is preparing to defend the fruits of its economic plunder by unleashing mass repression against the working class.

For growing sections of working people in America, both democratic rights and basic elements of civilization—electrical power, running water, transportation—are incompatible with the profit system. This system has failed. The working class must replace it with a new system based on public ownership and democratic control—that is, with socialism.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact