

Power outages leave six dead in western New York

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Six people have died in the western part of New York state in the wake of a major windstorm last Wednesday, which knocked down trees and power lines, leaving tens of thousands of people around the cities of Buffalo and Rochester without power for days. Immediately following the storm, temperatures began to rapidly drop, forcing many to heat their homes with fireplaces and generators or to head to shelters to stay warm.

On Monday, the Monroe County Department of Public Health reported that six deaths could be attributed to the storm. Two people were killed when they fell down stairs in their homes due to lack of light. Two more people were killed in a suburb of Rochester when they caused a fire while attempting to power their home with a generator. Another man was killed after falling from his roof while checking for damage.

Earlier in the week, a 70-year-old man was killed when he drove through an intersection that had lost its traffic lights and collided with another vehicle.

Despite the strong winds that caused trees and power lines to fall, all of the deaths came after the windstorm itself had passed and were the result of a social and economic system unable to cope with emergencies and provide for the basic health and well-being of the population.

Four days after the storm, over 32,000 homes in the Rochester area still lacked power as a winter storm moved into the region, threatening to cause more damage and blackouts.

The painfully slow response-time and lack of preparedness by the area's utility company, Rochester Gas and Electric (RG&E), were criticized by Governor Andrew Cuomo, who stated, "I don't consider three days to restore power an adequate response plan. I want to know what happened." Cuomo also called for an investigation into RG&E as to whether the company

correctly followed its emergency response plan, which it is required to adhere to by law.

Despite Cuomo's public criticisms of RG&E, in June of 2016 the New York Public Service Commission, which Cuomo oversees, allowed RG&E to raise rates for both gas and electricity. The four individuals who sit on the Public Service Commission and make decisions on price hikes for consumers are appointed by the New York governor.

Due to the rate hikes, customers who receive both gas and electricity from RG&E will pay \$147 more on average per year by 2018. This price increase would apply only to the delivery charge. Actual prices consumers see on their bills could be even more due to the fluctuating price of gas and electricity.

The conglomerate that owns RG&E, Avangrid, has already started to reap the rewards from the rate increase and recently reported a net income of \$630 million for the year 2016, compared to a net income of \$267 million in 2015. By 2018, RG&E will make an additional \$76.5 million a year thanks to the rate increase, and another Avangrid-owned utility company, New York State Electric and Gas Corp. (NYSEG), will make \$131.6 million more in revenue annually.

Avangrid claims the rate hikes were needed to make up for losses incurred during Hurricane Sandy in 2012 and to upgrade its transmission network.

While burying and upgrading power lines has been proposed as a solution to avoiding widespread outages that cost lives and money, the cost of the initial investment is often cited as the prohibitive factor. In fact, the biggest obstacle is the capitalist system itself, which allows companies like Avangrid to enrich their shareholders and profit off of outdated energy infrastructure while the working class foots the bill and is subject to fees and shutoffs for failing to pay up.



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