

Power outage at Atlanta airport causes chaos

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A massive power outage last Sunday lasting 11 hours affecting the entire Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport resulted in unprecedented chaos with the authorities abandoning passengers, visitors, employees and others to their own devices at the airport. The outage occurred around 1 p.m. and power was only restored shortly before midnight.

As a result of the blackout at the world's busiest airport, over 1,200 flights were cancelled on Sunday and another 300 flights cancelled on Monday. As of this writing the situation was still not back to normal with many passengers still waiting to get on departing flights. Travel distress is expected to continue for several days.

What is particularly striking about this latest catastrophe was the absence of any sort of help from the authorities to stranded, tired and hungry passengers. Flights which were in mid-air were diverted to multiple airports throughout the country with passengers having to make their own arrangements for hotels without any reimbursement.

This is a second major disaster to occur at Hartsfield-Jackson recently, following the August 2016 outage of the computer system of the Atlanta-based Delta Airlines. That outage also led thousands of flight cancellations and worldwide travel chaos.

Sunday's electrical outage was the result of a fire erupting from a connect/disconnect switchgear, similar to an automatic circuit breaker, located in the underground tunnel carrying thick electrical cables supplying electrical energy to the airport. The cause of the fire has not been made public, the power company, Georgia Power, told local media that they are still investigating.

The restoration of power had to be delayed for several hours because of the toxic fumes filling up the tunnel. These fumes had to be completely vented out before the repair crew could commence restoration work.

The CEO of Georgia Power, Paul Bowers, blamed the outage on a failed switchgear without elaborating on why it could have failed. It cannot be ruled out that the company, which has been making annual cuts to the maintenance budget, deliberately postponed requisite maintenance leading to the switchgear's deterioration.

However, the design of the power supply itself is preposterous since both the primary and backup cables, despite being sourced from different substations, were housed in the same underground tunnel with the cables in close proximity to one another. As a result of this set-up the primary and backup feed were both vulnerable to fire and flooding at the same time and in this instance they did get knocked-out simultaneously. In addition, even the substations which were the source of electrical power were "impacted," perhaps referring to automatic isolation due to faults.

The existing design—no doubt chosen by the city authorities perhaps with the connivance of Georgia Power management as a cheap option—if not corrected quickly makes this major national and international transport hub extremely vulnerable to similar failures in the future.

Other major airports in the US are sure to possess similar vulnerabilities and the Atlanta debacle reveals the utter irresponsibility of the authorities who, in order to save money, are willing to risk the well-being of thousands of travellers.

The shutdown of Hartsfield-Jackson caused a cascading impact upon air travellers not just in Atlanta but also across the country and the world. Stranded passengers at the airport organized themselves in an ad hoc fashion to help others requiring assistance, including carrying numerous passengers in wheelchairs up or down steep and lengthy escalators.

Other passengers were livid with rage after being stuck on planes stranded on the airport's tarmac for many hours without food or water. One of the

passengers who was allowed to leave the plane only after seven long hours told local media that she saw people being forced to sleep on the floor just like the homeless and said that she had never experienced anything like it in her life.

Airport authorities absurdly instructed employees working at the airport and passengers to keep track of updates via Twitter feed even while passengers were walking about with dead cell phones or desperately trying to find cell-phone signal.

These shameful scenes revealed not only the utter incompetence and bewilderment of airport management in the face of a real disaster but also the fact that no genuine emergency plans had been put in place.

Atlanta's outgoing Democratic mayor, Kasim Reed, in his comments to the press after several hours of absence, displayed his utter ignorance of the situation, insisting that "the airport has a very redundant system, a very robust system." He has long been lobbying big businesses to move to Atlanta, touting the airport as one of the city's strengths.

Ultimately the chaos at Atlanta's airport shines a bright light on the decrepit state of infrastructure in the United States. A report released in March of this year by the Airports Council International- North America found that it will require about \$100 billion over the next five years to perform "much-needed" maintenance and upgrades to the United States' airports.



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