

# Seven months after Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico suffers total blackout

**Daniel de Vries**  
**19 April 2018**

Nearly seven months after the electrical grid collapsed during Hurricane Maria, all of Puerto Rico is again in the dark. A break in a transmission line in the southeast triggered an island-wide blackout Wednesday. Officials from the electrical utility expect the outage to continue for 24 to 36 hours.

Power outages of various degrees have become part of daily life for Puerto Rico's three million residents. Wednesday's outage comes less than a week after a single fallen tree knocked out electricity to 870,000 households and businesses in the capital San Juan and surrounding areas. Two months earlier an explosion at a substation left the northern half of the island powerless.

The island remains mired in the worst power outage in US history, at present nearly four times worse than any other in the country in terms of customer hours of lost electricity, according to a report released last week by the Rhodium Group. On a world scale, the Puerto Rican crisis is second only to the power outages experienced in the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan in 2012.

Even now, seven months after the category 4 storm struck, approximately 50,000 electrical customers still have not seen power restored.

The federal government has allocated only around \$2 billion in federal funds to restore the grid, in contrast to a projected need of \$16 billion. The Federal Emergency Management Agency, which oversees the national government's response, and the Army Corps of Engineers, which is in charge of the power restoration, are winding down emergency response efforts. With makeshift repairs in place, thousands of stateside grid repairers have been sent home.

Yet Wednesday's massive blackout, along with the more frequent surges and smaller scale outages,

underscore the fragility of this restoration. Any accident can set off a complete collapse of the grid. Wednesday's blackout occurred after an excavator clearing a downed tower got too close to a transmission line and caused a fault. Last week it was caused by crews clearing vegetation.

The government of Puerto Rico, in conjunction with US banking officials overseeing the fiscal restructuring of the bankrupt island, are moving forward with plans to privatize the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA).

Provisions were included in the latest draft fiscal plan published this month aimed at "restructuring the power industry by bringing in private operators." Approximately \$9 billion in debt, with only a pittance of federal aid forthcoming, PREPA has no means to properly restore the grid. This fact has been seized upon by privatization backers to push through the selloff of the United States' largest public utility under the guise of providing private capital to rebuild the system.

PREPA officials scrambled Wednesday to energize critical infrastructure such as hospitals and water pumping stations. Priority was also given to banks and other financial institutions. Five hospitals and the airport in San Juan were re-powered as of Wednesday afternoon.

Many luxury hotels in the tourist districts remained unscathed, with backup generators powering on within moments of the outage. A Major League Baseball game between the Minnesota Twins and Cleveland Indians went on as planned, with the mayor of San Juan, Carmen Yulin Cruz, ensuring generators were available to power Hiram Bithorn Stadium.

Meanwhile masses of residents, once again cut off from necessities of modern life, continue to face the disruptive and wearing impacts of the power outages.

Beyond the immediate challenges of transportation, medical care, access to clean water, safety and security, the prolonged uncertainty has had a devastating impact on the physical and mental health of residents. Hundreds of thousands have simply fled Puerto Rico to the US mainland since the storm.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**