

Manhattan blackout affects tens of thousands of New Yorkers

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A massive blackout Saturday night struck much of midtown Manhattan, leaving tens of thousands of residences and businesses without power and severely disrupting subway service across New York City.

The blackout began at 6:47 p.m., with a transformer fire at West 64th Street and West End Avenue as well as an issue at the West 49th Street substation cited as possible causes by utility company Con Ed and first responders. A large section of Manhattan—from Fifth Avenue west to the Hudson River and from 72nd Street south to about West 34th Street—lost power. Power began returning after 10 p.m., and was fully restored by midnight.

According to Con Ed, about 72,000 “customers” were affected (an individual “customer” in this case could refer to a whole building, not merely one person). Elevators stalled with passengers inside, commercial refrigerators in restaurants and bodegas failed, and cultural events, including Broadway shows and concerts at Carnegie Hall and Madison Square Garden, had to be canceled.

As of this writing, no injuries or deaths have been reported, despite the potential danger arising from an hours-long blackout in America’s largest city. Ordinary people directed traffic using flashlights and helped one another in many acts of social solidarity that occur in such emergencies.

Subway service was the most significant casualty, with some people stranded in trains for up to 40 minutes. The New York City Transit tweeted that the blackout impacted signals: “Four stations are without power and are closed to the public: 59 St-Columbus Circle, 47-50 Sts-Rockefeller Ctr, 34 St-Hudson Yards, and 5 Av/53 St.”

Thirteen subway lines were directly affected, with cascading effects outside of Manhattan. The New York

City Emergency Management Department reported that it took until 2 a.m. on Sunday to restore service on all 13 lines in both directions.

Some people were forced to walk across bridges to the outer boroughs due to insufficient bus service, as taxis and ride-sharing services were overwhelmed. The Port Authority Bus Terminal suffered “equipment outages affecting some escalators/elevators and kiosks,” as well as its air conditioning system, according to its Twitter account.

Katy, a resident of Queens, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “I tried to get a bus from midtown. There were about 20 people waiting for the bus. I talked to one guy and he told me he had been waiting an hour and when the last bus came it was so packed no one could get on. A few of us tried to organize to get cabs together and split the fare and we tried for 15 minutes but all the cabs passing were full.

“I decided to just walk. It was about an hour walk across the Queensboro Bridge, which I was a little nervous to do at midnight, but it turned out to be safe because everyone else was walking across the bridge.”

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced an investigation by municipal authorities into the exact cause of the blackout. Investigators will “work with Con Ed to get to the bottom of what happened,” according to de Blasio. Police have said that foul play was not involved, and Con Ed has said that the blackout was not caused due to high demand.

Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, a New York Democrat known as “the Senator from Wall Street,” called for a federal investigation into the state of New York City’s power grid.

Saturday’s blackout happened 42 years to the day after the July 13, 1977 New York City blackout, in which 9 million people in the New York City

metropolitan area lost power for over 24 hours. It also came less than seven months after a December 27, 2018 transformer short circuit at an Astoria, Queens, Con Ed power plant shut down nearby LaGuardia Airport for hours and caused a spectacular blue light that alarmed many New Yorkers.

While it is not yet clear what role the state of Con Ed's infrastructure played in Saturday's blackout, this has historically been a problem.

In 2007, the *New York Times* reported that Con Ed was ordered "to return \$18 million to its customers for failing to provide safe and reliable service in 2006, a year that included a nine-day blackout that began in Long Island City, Queens, and affected 170,000 people." The New York State Public Service Commission had issued a report criticizing Con Ed's aging infrastructure.

While the utility boasts of current infrastructure improvement plans, there are ongoing concerns, particularly regarding greenhouse gases produced during high demand periods. A report from the energy-consulting firm Strategen in 2017 found that the aging infrastructure in the area could cause a shortfall of 624 megawatts if not addressed.

Gregory Reed, a former Con Ed employee who is now a professor of electrical engineering at the University of Pittsburgh, told the media: "We have a lot of networks that have aging infrastructure and antiquated systems. We have to build higher levels of resiliency."

Saturday's blackout has to be viewed in terms of the wider social crisis in New York City. Public housing in the city has deteriorated to the point that the Department of Housing and Urban Development has installed a federal monitor to oversee the New York City Housing Authority, the largest public housing program in the country. Meanwhile, subway and bus riders, squeezed by low wages and angry at the level of service, are increasingly evading the fare, prompting Cuomo to flood the system with 500 additional cops.

Conditions in New York City, the home of Wall Street, are of a piece with conditions internationally. Globally, the ruling class is privatizing infrastructure, enacting social austerity and sucking capital out of productive circulation to engage in speculation and the purchasing of luxury items. While its public infrastructure decays, New York City is the home to the

largest number of billionaires and millionaires in the world.



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