Pacific Gas and Electric utility confronts mass outrage a week after Northern California power shutoffs

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Outrage continues to mount a week after the Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) energy monopoly cut power to millions of residents throughout Northern California.

After reports of high winds and low humidity last Wednesday possibly leading to more wildfires caused by outdated and poorly maintained electrical lines, PG&E cut off electrical power without advanced warning to more than 800,000 customers, leaving nearly two million residents in the dark. Service wasn't fully restored until four days later on Saturday.

During last week's outage, traffic signals went dark, water was not pumped from ground wells, food spoiled, and medical devices failed to operate. The PG&E website frequently crashed leaving residents completely in the dark about the nature and extent of the outages aside from a few Twitter postings released by the company.

PG&E is California's largest utility, serving 4 out of every 10 people in the most populous state in the country.

The *Washington Post* reported last week that anger against the utility—which has been responsible for a series of public disasters including the 2018 Camp Fire in which 85 people lost their lives and the 2010 San Bruno gas explosions which left 10 dead—boiled over into threatening letters and at least one office being pelted by eggs.

The company also reported that a PG&E truck was shot at from a pickup truck driving alongside it. Local police began patrolling PG&E offices after these incidents with employees at the company's San Francisco headquarters constructing makeshift barricades in front of the entrances as well.

The deliberate outages last week likely led to at least one death, that of 67-year-old Robert Mardis Sr. whose positive airway pressure machine ceased operation while he slept.

The El Dorado County Coroner's Office concluded that the cause of death for Mardis was due to a coronary atherosclerosis leading to a heart attack and was thus unrelated to the machine shut off. Mardis's daughter, however, noted that her father succumbed only 12 minutes after the power shut down as both scrambled for a substitute portable oxygen machine. Intense stress and panic under such conditions could have easily led to his heart attack. The elder Mardis needed his airway pressure machine as he suffered from Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease or COPD.

Mardis also had a backup power generator that neither he nor his daughter were able to turn on before his death. For many Californians, however, backup power generators powerful enough to supply an entire household are often prohibitively expensive, with even the cheapest versions costing thousands of dollars.

Moreover, even though more than a million Californians have solar-power homes, the majority of these are connected to the electrical grid and were also shut off during the PG&E outage. Batteries for solar-powered homes typically range from $5,000 to $7,000 for the most "economical" models. In both cases, the region's wealthiest residents either had the backup units already installed or were able to quickly obtain them while millions of workers in one of the wealthiest and most technologically advanced areas of the planet suffered through conditions akin to a developing country.

On Monday, California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) president Marybel Batjer wrote in a letter to PG&E CEO Bill Johnson, "The scope, scale, complexity and overall impact to people's lives, businesses, and the economy of this action cannot be understated." Batjer demanded that the company perform an audit of its performance during last week's outage, which is to be delivered to the commission Thursday followed by an appearance by PG&E officials before the CPUC on Friday.

Batjer also ordered the utility to institute several corrective actions including restoring power within 12 hours rather than the company's current goal of 48 hours once it deems conditions safe to do so.

In a separate filing with the commission on Monday, attorneys for several of the affected Northern California counties noted that PG&E largely failed to contact local governments about the outage along with the fact that the company uses a website to communicate with the agencies that failed to align with public emergency standards. "It appears never to have occurred to the utility to confirm with its local public safety partners that the tool would meet their needs, nor

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did PG&E show the website to the local governments who had long been asked for situational awareness before launching the website publicly," the attorneys wrote.

Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom, for his part, demanded that PG&E provide meager bill credits of $100 for residential customers affected by the outage and $250 for small businesses affected.

Representatives of PG&E delivered their response to the governor and the CPUC this week by informing residents that they should be prepared for further power outages lasting five to seven days each over the coming months. High winds and low humidity in the months of October and November give rise to increased dangers of wildfires across the state. It is therefore highly likely that PG&E along with other major utilities will shut off power once again and maybe several times in the coming weeks.

The company has made clear that it does not hold itself responsible for any damages caused as a result of its power outages and has patronizingly told residents, with the backing of local officials, that it is the responsibility of the general population to prepare for the shutdowns it will impose on them.

Residents are essentially told to prepare for the shutdowns as if they were a series of repeated natural disasters, which, from the perspective of their social impact, they certainly are. To satisfy the utility's insatiable drive for profit, workers and small businesses are expected to always have reserves of clean and potable water on hand along with supplies of nonperishable food, means to keep perishable medications cool and backup sources of power at the ready. If any of these emergency measures prove cost prohibitive, that's the residents' and not the utility's problem.

In order to save billions of dollars for its shareholders the company has refused to invest in any significant upgrades to its infrastructure which could seriously prevent the danger of wildfires. After it declared bankruptcy in January to escape further lawsuits and customer liabilities, the company informed the state government that it would be implementing shutoffs to avoid fires rather than investing in needed upgrades.

The CPUC letter on Monday acknowledged the company's plan and simply bemoaned the fact that its use of overextended transmission lines prevented it from carrying out more strategic shutdowns such as those conducted by Southern California Edison during the series of wildfires affecting the region last week.

An investigation by the *Wall Street Journal* found that funds which could have been used to upgrade its power grid and performance maintenance activities were instead diverted to billions in dividend payouts to investors along with millions in campaign contributions to Democrats and Republicans alike.

One such lucky recipient was Governor Newsom, who received $208,400 from PG&E during his 2018 gubernatorial election campaign. Of this, $58,400, the maximum allowable, was contributed directly to Newsom's campaign, while the remaining $150,000 was spent on Newsom's political action committee "Citizens Supporting Gavin Newsom for Governor 2018."

In total, PG&E spent $800,000 directly to candidate campaigns since 2016 along with $372,000 for ballot initiative lobbying and another $3.2 million to political spending groups during that same period.

Newsom in particular has worked hard to repay the company for their support by helping to broker legislation to keep PG&E and the other mega utilities financially solvent after disasters of their own making and has worked to reform legal liability standards for the industry.

In 2016, a jury found the company guilty of five counts of willfully breaking federal gas pipeline safety laws and one count of obstructing the federal investigation into the disaster. Recently asked why he would accept campaign contributions from PG&E after it was found guilty of committing felonies, Newsom replied, "It's a strange question. I don't know what more I can say."

There is no faction within the local, state or national political establishment that will act to curb the predatory activities of the large utility conglomerates.

Deliberate power outages are not a new phenomenon in California but derive in large part from the deregulatory activities in the 1990s which was seized upon by Texas-based Enron to drive up energy prices through the use of rolling blackouts putting the lives and well-being of millions of Californians at risk.

The only solution to the criminal activities of PG&E, Southern California Edison and the other utility conglomerates is to place them under the democratic control of the working class. Such a reorganization would fully modernize the electrical grid and put adequate safeguards in place to fully prevent fire risk, safeguards which are impossible as long as utilities are held hostage to the profit-making activities of the large investors and their defenders in the Democratic and Republican parties.

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