California utility PG&E imposes mass blackouts for second time this month

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Citing wildfire risk due to hot, dry, windy conditions, Northern California electric utility Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) shut off power to nearly 180,000 customers in 17 counties beginning yesterday. The shutoffs, which began Wednesday afternoon and have continued into Thursday, thrust hundreds of thousands of people back into conditions akin to the pre-electricity days of the 19th century for the second time this month.

The blame for this state of affairs lies squarely with PG&E, which has opted for decades to prioritize enriching its shareholders at the expense of critical maintenance and modernization efforts, and with California's Democratic Party political establishment, which has consistently enabled the utility's profiteering.

The latest round of so-called Public Safety Power Shutoffs primarily affected more rural counties to the north and east of the San Francisco Bay Area, but also extends to parts of San Mateo, Alameda, Contra Costa, and Santa Clara counties within the Bay Area. The country's largest energy utility, PG&E provides electricity throughout the northern two-thirds of California.

Although high winds are only present in limited parts of northern California, PG&E claims it cannot do more targeted shutoffs because of risks surrounding large transmission lines, which the utility uses to supply substantial amounts of electricity demand.

The shutoff affects an estimated 8,000 or more medical baseline customers, many of whom require electricity for life-saving equipment such as respirators. PG&E policy requires that they attempt to notify these customers in advance of a shutoff, up to and including knocking on their door. Beyond a notification, PG&E simply asks that all customers have a plan in case their power is shut off.

After shutoffs earlier this month cut power to 2 million people, 67-year-old Robert Mardis, Sr. died after he lost power for his positive airway pressure machine. The coroner claimed he died of a heart attack that began 12 minutes after power was cut and as Mardis and his daughter frantically searched for an alternate source of oxygen.

Many rural community health centers are relying on inadequate backup generators if available, with 40 percent of health centers having no generator at all. The *Napa Valley Register* reports that a health center in Winters, California was forced to send its vaccines to a hospital with a backup generator for refrigeration because they only had enough electricity for lighting and the electronic medical records system. Many of the impoverished residents of central, far northern, and eastern California will have restricted access to medical services at a time when residents no longer have electricity at home to power critical medical equipment.

As a palliative measure, PG&E has set up "community resource centers" in roughly 25 locations across California. According to PG&E's website, these centers, which are open only from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., "provide restrooms, bottled water, electronic device charging and air-conditioned seating."

Schools in six districts shut down Thursday, in some cases with plans to remain closed Friday due to the power shutoffs. Many districts have not budgeted for makeup days, meaning that students will simply lose valuable instruction time.

Schools were also closed, and homes evacuated in response to the Kincade fire in Sonoma County which erupted overnight Wednesday and continued to grow Thursday, forcing approximately 2,000 people in Geyserville and the surrounding areas to flee for safety. While PG&E had cut power to distribution lines in the area, its high-power transmission lines were still operating when the fire first broke out.

A string of wildfires also broke out in Southern California on Thursday burning buildings and homes and shutting down roads and freeways.

The first of these was a fire near the city of San Bernardino two hours east of Los Angeles. The Old Water fire, as it became known, started shortly after 2 a.m. local time Thursday. Significant wind gusts broke out at the time threatening a number of rural communities in the mountainous region north of the city.

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Classes were cancelled at California State University San Bernardino as well as several local elementary and high schools.

Intensifying winds throughout the day also led to a sudden and fast moving fire in the Santa Clarita region north of Los Angeles. The Tick Fire broke out in the early afternoon Thursday and moved at a speed in which emergency alerts were not distributed in time to affected residents. Many who tried to fend off the emerging flames with garden hoses before being forced to retreat.

According to the Los Angeles County Fire Department, multiple buildings were on fire as of mid afternoon.

"We're doing everything possible to reduce the spread," said Sean Rios, a spokesman for the L.A. County Fire Department. "The wind is a major factor. All ground and aerial resources are being utilized to the best of their capabilities, but we're going to be here for a while."

Fires also reached into the city of Los Angeles itself with a ten acre brush fire burning in the Sepulveda Basin which broke out around 4:00 p.m. local time. Another brush fire broke out in the East Los Angeles community of Eagle Rock, also on Thursday afternoon.

Like PG&E, the Southern California Edison utility has sought to escape potential liability for the fires by shutting off power to tens of thousands and potentially hundreds of thousands of residents. The utility has threatened to shut off power to more than 300,000 residents and has already shut off power to 27,000 area customers.

PG&E claims it will fully restore power within 48 hours of the end of hazardous weather conditions and after visually inspecting 8,000 miles of distribution lines and 600 miles of transmission lines with thousands of ground inspectors and 42 aircraft. Centered in the San Francisco Bay Area, home of Silicon Valley and numerous companies that make advanced sensors, PG&E has essentially no way of knowing the state of its infrastructure during a deliberate blackout without sending a person to look.

After this month's first round of shutoffs, PG&E CEO Bill Johnson claimed inspectors identified over 100 incidents of damage and hazards on de-energized power lines. The severity of the damage and hazards was not stated, but it may well be that PG&E's decrepit infrastructure would indeed have started multiple fires in the absence of the shutdown.

Despite estimates of economic damage on the order of $1 billion per day from its shutoffs and the very real risk of injury and death due to the absence of electricity to power medical devices, traffic lights, and other basic services, PG&E has evidently decided that its liabilities are lower if it shuts off power than if it risks starting a wildfire by leaving its rickety system in operation during fire-prone conditions. This is in part because the utility knows it can count on the complicity of the state government.

California Governor Gavin Newsom, whose 2018 gubernatorial campaign received $208,000 from PG&E, has sought to posture as an opponent of the utility. He claimed in a note to Johnson that the severity of the shutoffs was the result of "decades of PG&E prioritizing profit over public safety."

Newsom fails to note that as a regulated monopoly, PG&E's revenues are almost entirely dependent upon electricity rates charged to customers that are approved by the California Public Utilities Commission, a government agency whose commissioners are appointed by the governor. In other words, the government has had the power for decades to compel PG&E to change its ways. If Newsom truly felt this way about PG&E during his eight years as lieutenant governor under Jerry Brown from 2011 to 2019, why did he neglect to bring it up until now?

Newsom's actual policy proposals fall far short of his rhetoric. In response to the earlier shutoffs this month, which affected 2 million people for up to four days, Newsom called for PG&E to provide affected customers with a bill credit of $100 for households and $250 for businesses. While Johnson has asserted that power shutoffs will remain a fact of life for the next decade, Newsom has argued for fixing the system somewhat more quickly but on an as-yet-undecided timetable.

The energy utilities and the Democrats and Republicans all agree on one thing: The working class must pay for failures of the capitalist system. While the affluent can afford backup generators or solar panels and batteries, workers are left to fend for themselves during power shutoffs. If a damaged power line starts a fire and destroys homes, workers have no good options for rebuilding, while the rich can easily relocate or fund the construction of new mansions. If PG&E is compelled to pay damages to fire victims or takes grid modernization measures such as burying fire-prone lines, it will recoup the costs by raising electricity rates, with the full complicity of the government.

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