

California utility PG&E plans regular blackouts for another ten years as more residents have power cut this week

Anthony del Omo, Dan Conway
21 November 2019

Earlier this week, the Pacific Gas and Electricity utility (PG&E) announced that they would shut off electrical power to 375,000 customers beginning Wednesday morning in the fourth such mass power outage since October. The power outages were prompted by red flag warnings from the National Weather Service of winds topping 55 miles per hour coupled with low humidity readings in the Northern Sacramento Valley and North and East San Francisco Bay areas.

Due to more favorable than expected weather conditions, including rainfall on Wednesday, however, the utility actually shut off power to 48,000 customers north of the San Francisco Bay Area. Sonoma County officials reported that PG&E would start inspections and re-energization around 8 a.m. today and have power completely restored by 10 p.m. A timeline for power restoration in neighboring Napa County has yet to be shared.

In spite of the reduced fire risk yesterday, winds topped 71 miles per hour in the highest elevations and forecasters believe that humidity levels will continue to fall and temperatures rise in the coming days. This will inevitably lead to further risk of wildfires and more power shutoffs by the company. PG&E meteorologist Scott Strenfel said in a press conference Tuesday night that 2019 has been one of the driest starts to a rainy season in more than 100 years.

“If you look at precipitation totals for cities across Northern and Central California, some have observed no precipitation as of October 1st,” Strenfel told reporters. “As an example, a climate station in Napa, which is called the Napa State Hospital Fire Station, has not recorded any measurable precipitation since

September 15 and the last time that occurred was 1905.”

It was only last year that the state of California emerged from its longest drought in recorded history, lasting from 2011-2017. Unless there is a drastic increase in precipitation over the next few months, the state will be in drought conditions once again, raising the risk of further wildfires and associated power outages.

The power outages were implemented after PG&E was found at fault for some of the largest and deadliest wildfires in state history including the 2018 Camp Fire that destroyed the town of Paradise, population 26,800. Furthermore, the planned power outages did not stop the Kincade Fire last month which destroyed 374 structures and burned through 77,758 acres. That power outage, according to investigators, was caused by a poorly maintained PG&E transmission line. That line remained operational while power along distribution lines serving customers was cut off, sending residents scrambling for food and supplies with virtually no warning from the company.

Since the unprecedented moves to shut down power for entire counties and regions began in October, over 3 million residents have been affected, including businesses, schools, hospitals, and residents who depend on electricity for life-saving equipment. In the face of high winds and low humidity conditions that heighten the risk of fire by downed power lines, PG&E unilaterally restricts millions from electricity instead of repairing and updating its infrastructure.

In spite of the power cuts, episodes like the quickly moving Kincade Fire, which forced over 200,000 people to evacuate in Sonoma County at night without

electricity, highlight the bankruptcy of this maneuver.

The continued practice of power blackouts and urging of residents to be regularly prepared for unexpected days without electricity or to evacuate from a fire at a moment's notice is meant to create a new normal in the wealthiest state in the United States. The practice itself confirms that the decrepit infrastructure that PG&E oversees is a consistent risk to fire-prone areas.

Following the first round of shutoffs in October, PG&E CEO Bill Johnson claimed that inspectors identified over 100 incidents of damage and hazards on de-energized power lines. Though the severity of the damage was not reported, one may well assume that energized power lines could have very well started multiple fires.

This month in fact marks the one year anniversary since the destruction of Paradise. The Camp Fire raged for two weeks in the Sierra foothills of Northern California throughout Butte County, taking the lives of 85 residents while destroying over 18,804 structures and burning over 153,000 acres.

Many of those whose planned shutoffs were rescinded Wednesday had already made plans to stay home from work to take care of children, had disposed of refrigerated food and otherwise had their lives seriously disrupted in anticipation of another outage.

The shutoffs are first and foremost an attempt to place the cost of the criminal activities of PG&E on the backs of the working class. After billions in claims were made by victims in the aftermath of last year's Camp Fire, the company filed for bankruptcy on January 29, 2019 in order to escape its financial obligations which amounted to more than \$30 billion in liabilities. Despite the bankruptcy filing, however, the utility attempted to award \$16 million in bonuses to its top executives last June before the move was struck down by US Bankruptcy Court Judge Dennis Montali on August 30. Nonetheless, many of these executives, who refuse to make the necessary investments to upgrade the utility's outdated infrastructure in order to reduce wildfire risk, enjoy seven- and eight-figure salaries and compensation to this very day.

Johnson, for example, took over as CEO of the utility in May of this year with a three-year salary package of \$2.5 million. This was on top of a one-time "transition payment" of \$3 million for his first day on the job, along with an annual equity award of \$3.5 million. In

an interview with ABC7 News on November 3, the multimillionaire CEO told residents whose food had spoiled and couldn't afford to replace the items to just go to food banks. "There are community-based things you can do," Johnson said, "food banks, these kinds of things."

To add insult to injury, the company announced that residents may have to live with the specter of shutoffs for at least another ten years. This only demonstrates that PG&E's commitment is not to the customers and employees it serves but to its CEOs and shareholders with the full backing of Democratic and Republican party politicians, who over the years have received numerous large donations from the utility. One of these recipients was California governor Gavin Newsom who received \$208,400 from the utility during his 2018 gubernatorial campaign.

Most recently Newsom has been demagogically threatening to break up the company if it does not improve its safety record. Even if such a court-ordered breakup were to come to pass, however, the operations of the utilities would continue to ensure that basic safety for homeowners and workers is sacrificed at the altar of profit.

There will in fact be no solution to the California wildfire crisis and utility shutoff program outside of the working class taking control of the large utilities and running them democratically on the basis of human need rather than private profit. Only on that basis can the power monopolies' outdated equipment be updated to modern, safe standards such that wildfires can be prevented or quickly eradicated with the uninterrupted provision of critically needed electrical power to all the state's 40 million residents.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact