

Heat wave, rolling blackouts affect thousands across California

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As record high temperatures for this time of year crossed the state of California, utility companies conducted rolling blackouts affecting more than 410,000 homes and businesses over the weekend. A total of 20 record highs for August 14 and 15 were set or tied in 15 cities across the state, with the most remarkable being 105 degrees Fahrenheit in the coastal city of Santa Cruz, breaking the last record of 96 set 114 years ago. In a troubling indicator of climate change, 13 of the previous records were set last year.

According to the National Weather Service (NWS), highs in inland areas will continue to reach 100 to 110 F through the middle of next week. The NWS has issued excessive heat warnings for much of the country west of the Rocky Mountains. Maximum temperatures have been 5 to 15 degrees above normal in interior areas, and could rival conditions last seen during the deadly July 2006 North American heat wave, which killed at least 147 people in California, according to coroner reports. A 2009 study in the journal *Environmental Research* estimated that the number of deaths due to that heat wave was in fact two to three times higher.

As National Weather Service meteorologist Bruno Rodriguez noted in a video briefing, “the cumulative effect from so many days of above-average temperatures is definitely going to act to increase the overall heat risk.” A study this year in the journal *Environmental Epidemiology* estimated that, nationally, about 5,600 deaths are attributable to heat annually, more than from any other weather-related cause. Extreme heat disproportionately affects children and the elderly, and the vast majority of deaths occur in poor and working class neighborhoods.

A 2019 study from USC, published in *Environmental Research Letters*, found that 31 percent of residential

homes in the Greater Los Angeles area did not have access to air conditioning. “Cooling stations” have been opened in some districts, but with limited capacity due to social-distancing measures. The elderly and people with preexisting medical conditions, among the most vulnerable to both overheating and COVID-19, will now have to choose between extreme heat and exposing themselves to infection. And as sociology professor Eric Klinenberg recently commented to the *LA Times*, “social isolation combined with extreme heat is a proven killer.”

The heat wave comes during a pandemic which has intensified an already intense crisis for working families. Unemployment was 19.4 percent in LA county as of August 3, almost 1 million people. A 2020 study by UCLA’s Institute on Inequality and Democracy estimated that there are 449,000 individuals who are unemployed, with no income, living in rental housing in Los Angeles county, putting them at high risk for homelessness.

For the millions of people who will be affected by extreme heat in the coming week, not to mention the tens of thousands of homeless, the health risks will be compounded by the negligence of profit-driven utility companies and utter inadequacy of infrastructure. Rolling blackouts affected over 130,000 people in Southern California Friday, after the state ordered utilities to decrease power output by 1,000 megawatts due to the increased demand. Blackouts continued Saturday evening after a 470-megawatt power plant unexpectedly went offline, with utility companies cutting power to 130,000 people in southern California and 220,000 people in the Central Coast and Central Valley areas.

This was the first time that state officials were forced to institute rolling blackouts due to an energy shortfall

since the 2001 California electricity crisis. The 2001 crisis occurred after market manipulation by energy companies, chiefly Enron, caused energy prices to increase by 800 percent, leading to a series of blackouts that affected millions of people and cost the state over \$40 billion.

Of course, for many in California, blackouts have become commonplace, as the state's wildfire seasons have become ever more severe. In October and November of 2019, Pacific Gas and Electric, California's utility monopoly, cut power to over 3 million people to reduce the risk of electric ignitions and avoid legal liability for wildfires. Many were without power for nearly a week.

Lisa Murkowski, chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, told a December 2019 hearing that, "Wildfire blackouts could be California's new normal for the next 10 to 30 years, or even longer." In other words, working people should accept decades of regular blackouts as an inevitability, even as the state's billionaires amass vast wealth.

While ample resources exist to update California's aging energy infrastructure and prevent wildfires, state lawmakers have no such intentions. The state has systematically cut funding for social infrastructure, and private utilities have intransigently refused to take basic steps to mitigate the wildfire danger. During the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 154 billionaires in the state collectively amassed an additional \$174.4 billion, only slightly less than California's entire \$202.1 billion budget for the current fiscal year. Meanwhile, California Governor Gavin Newsom has proposed cutting \$681 million from the state budget for environmental protection.

Extreme temperatures and drought conditions, which lengthen the fire season and increase the risk of wildfires, will continue to intensify as the effects of climate change become increasingly severe. The Lake Fire, which started in Los Angeles County last Wednesday, grew over the weekend to more than 17,000 acres. By Sunday evening it was only 12 percent contained and hundreds were ordered to evacuate.

Across northern California, the heat contributed to high wind thunderstorms, sparking several wildfires and minor evacuations in Monterey County. So far, firefighters have successfully prevented the fires from

growing out of control, but these events will be far more likely in the future. A 2019 USC study in *Environmental Research Letters* found that the number of extreme heat days—those with temperatures above 95 degrees Fahrenheit—will more than double by 2070 in urban South Los Angeles.



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