

# Windstorm leaves hundreds of thousands without power across the northeastern and midwestern US

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On Sunday, November 15, a strong windstorm with gusts up to 66 miles per hour swept across the northeastern and midwestern United States, knocking out power for hundreds of thousands of households and businesses in the region.

According to the Weather Channel, more than 792,000 customers from New York to Illinois lost power Sunday. As of Monday evening, nearly 140,000 customers nationally were still without electricity from the previous evening. The most severe outages were reported in Connecticut, Michigan, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Unlike other developed countries, power lines in the US are still above-ground, subject to even the smallest weather events. Power outages from downed power lines, even during relatively minor storms, take place on a semi-regular basis. Dead branches, fallen trees, and sustained winds often down power lines, creating hazardous live wires and fires, and knocking power out across the country's decaying infrastructure.

Sunday's outages have seriously disrupted life for the thousands of people working or learning from home, sheltering in place, or quarantining due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Michigan, which has seen a massive surge in positive COVID-19 cases and death rates in the last few weeks, and which just implemented further lockdown measures, had the most outages at over 340,000 on Sunday. Nearly 150,000 were still waiting for repairs and without power during the day Monday, according to DTE Energy, one of the state's utility companies which raked in \$319 million in its 2019 third-quarter earnings.

DTE, like many of the other widely-hated utility

companies, has notoriously and criminally scaled back its tree-trimming maintenance, allowing nature to run its course on the aging power grid.

In Connecticut, over 16,000 Eversource Energy customers were still affected by Monday. At one point during the peak of the storm on Sunday, over 36,000 in Connecticut were without power. Several school districts were delayed or closed on Monday from either outages or storm damage.

Eversource spokesman Frank Poirot told a local news outlet, "Sunday's intense storm brought a combination of heavy rain saturating the ground and high winds that hit the state, causing trees already weakened by the prolonged drought to come down, taking power lines with them and leaving thousands of our customers without power." Eversource Energy's total 2019 earnings were \$909.1 million.

In Ohio, nearly 100,000 had no power as the storm swept through Sunday evening. Northeast Ohio was worst hit, and by noon on Monday over 20,000 in Cuyahoga County and 12,000 in Summit County still did not have power.

First Energy reported that power "should be restored by Thursday at 4pm," leaving many without power during the pandemic for days on end. At least one fatality was recorded, that of a 63-year-old woman in Dayton who was struck by a falling tree. First Energy's 2019 earnings were \$908 million.

Several recreation centers and bars in the region opened their doors to residents so they could power electronics and warm up. Residents were required to social distance and wear face masks.

Pennsylvania saw nearly 57,000 residents lost power. Most were First Energy customers but several thousand

from other utility companies were also impacted.

Tornado warnings were issued in seven counties in New York. Water levels in Lake Erie rose dramatically due the wind, causing significant lakeshore flooding and erosion in the area. Approximately 40,000 lost power during the worst part of the storm on Sunday. In-person and remote learning was canceled for several schools in the western portion of the state.

Power outages are tracked by private utility companies on a state-by-state basis. No real-time data is managed or tracked by the federal government. However, according to PowerOutage.us, a private company which aggregates data from utility companies, there were still over 87,000 customers without power in Michigan as of this writing.

A recent analysis by the Department of Energy found that there has been a 67 percent increase in major power outages, defined as 50,000 customers or more, from weather events in the United States over the last 20 years. This is due in large part to decayed infrastructure which is barely maintained by private utility companies which rack up multi-million to billion dollar profits every year.

It is not clear how the power outage will impact the skyrocketing cases of COVID-19 in each state. While many state and local governments are requiring or encouraging residents to follow recommended guidelines set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, thousands have been forced to mix with other households to warm up, charge phones, get internet access to complete work or school assignments, plug in needed medical equipment, and other basic necessities.

The private utility companies, many of which refused to implement a moratorium on payments at the beginning of the pandemic—and which swiftly cut power to those who cannot afford their bills, pandemic aside—must be expropriated by the working class and run democratically so that utilities including heat, water, electricity and internet can be provide for free as essential services. Trillions of dollars must be invested in modernizing the country's infrastructure so that predictable weather events like rain and high winds do not disrupt or devastate workers lives.

Such a development can only be achieved through the reorganization of society to meet human need and not private profit.



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