

Severe winter weather leaves millions without electricity during record cold temperatures across the US

Alex Findijs
16 February 2021

Severe winter weather across the United States has ground traffic to a halt and cut power to millions of people. Temperatures in areas as far south as New Orleans have fallen below freezing with many parts of the country facing subzero temperatures.

Nearly 800 temperature records have been shattered in the past week under severe polar vortex conditions which have become more frequent in recent years, with human-induced climate change destabilizing the jet stream allowing for Arctic air to descend deep into the southern parts of the country.

Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Arkansas, all states which experience little average snowfall, received several inches of snow with some areas recording up to a foot of snowfall in the past couple of days.

The severe weather has been destructive and deadly. Last week icy conditions resulted in six people dying in a 133-car pileup near Fort Worth, Texas.

Officials from Harris County, Texas believe the death of a homeless man in his van was related to storm conditions on Monday. The homeless, particularly in typically warmer regions of the country, are the most at risk of freezing to death or suffering severe injuries during sudden cold snaps. Those who are able to take shelter in warming centers, which have been opened across northern Texas, confront the additional danger posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Texas in particular has faced some of the most severe fallout from the storm. Governor Greg Abbott called the storm “unprecedented” and remarked that snow and ice would make travel in the coming days “virtually impossible.”

While the snow and ice have been dangerous, the threat posed by the bitter cold is even greater. Predicted

low temperatures for today in Little Rock, Arkansas will reach -1 degree Fahrenheit, with Oklahoma City potentially dropping to -9 degrees F. Freezing temperatures are even reaching as far south as the eastern coast of Mexico.

The dangerously low temperatures, the lowest below average anywhere in the Northern Hemisphere at the moment, are made even more concerning by the rampant power outages that have affected several states. Four million households and businesses have so far experienced power outages during this winter storm, with 3.5 million left without power in Texas alone. More than 100,000 people lost power in Louisiana, 66,000 lost power in Mississippi and tens of thousands lost power in neighboring states.

The Southwest Power Pool (SPP), which manages the power grids for 14 states in Central and Southern United States, has warned that the drop in temperatures has drastically increased demand for electricity beyond the ability of the power system to provide for everyone.

“After exhausting usage of available reserve energy, SPP has now subsequently directed its member utilities to implement controlled interruptions of service to prevent further, more widespread and uncontrolled outages,” the utility said in a statement.

SPP moved to direct regional and local power systems to conduct controlled outages, called “rolling blackouts,” of up to an hour. These bursts of power outages are intended to relax the pressure on electricity generators with the hope of averting a broader blackout and to ensure that essential facilities, such as hospitals, are able to receive the power they need.

However, several grid systems experienced systemwide failures that resulted in many areas facing

full blackouts that lasted hours or are continuing.

Kenny Mercado, executive vice president for CenterPoint Energy, told KPRC that rolling blackouts cannot be conducted in southeastern Texas anymore because there is not enough electricity to move around the system.

Desperate to reduce the consumption of electricity, utility companies and energy agencies are calling on residents to reduce consumption as much as possible. If more power is not provided soon, millions could face dangerously cold temperatures in their own homes under blackout conditions.

The lack of electricity is also impacting other social services. A water treatment plant in Fort Worth, Texas lost power Monday for several hours. The resulting lack of water pressure forced 100,000 people to be put under a “boil water notice” and could be without water through Wednesday.

The problem with Texas’s power supply is not just an issue of demand, though. The storm has had drastic effects on power production infrastructure that has impacted 75 percent of the state’s power generation capacity.

Information released by the Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) indicates that the cold has limited the supply of natural gas to power plants, and half of the state’s wind turbines have frozen.

Oil and gas production have been halted due to the weather, pipelines are facing issues and gas refineries have suspended operations. Even coal and nuclear power plants have reported issues due to the extreme cold conditions.

The drop in power production and rise in demand have seen electricity prices rise by upwards of 10,000 percent to the point where they may reach the limit of \$9,000 per megawatt hour. In Oklahoma, the price of natural gas skyrocketed to \$600 per million BTU, or British Thermal Units. (The average cost for natural gas is \$3 per million BTU, according to the US Energy Information Administration.)

Temperatures are not expected to reach above freezing until Friday of this week, and further snowstorms are anticipated to move over the central United States, sweeping into the Northeast. If power generation is unable to return to normal levels, then millions of people could continue to see power outages and a lack of heating throughout the rest of the week,

leading to injury and death for those stuck without any alternatives.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact