

Millions remain without power in Texas, as freezing temperatures wreak havoc across the US

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16 February 2021

A storm system spanning from the central and southern United States into the mid-Atlantic, and making its way Northeast, unofficially named Winter Storm Uri by the Weather Channel, has knocked out power for 5 million people.

Over 4 million in Texas, more than 146,000 in Kentucky, 115,000 in Louisiana, 95,000 in West Virginia, 74,000 in Virginia, 39,000 in Mississippi, 30,000 in New Mexico, 28,000 in Missouri, 19,000 in Arkansas, and 17,000 in Oklahoma, are without power and heating. At least 23 deaths have been attributed to the extreme winter weather and record-breaking cold which began to sweep across much of the country last week, according to the *New York Times*.

Entergy, the utility which provides electricity for a portion of southeastern Texas began “rolling blackouts” early Tuesday morning to ease pressure on an overtaxed electrical system, leaving more than 47,000 customers without power following a night of sub-freezing temperatures. The utility had issued a warning Monday night, explaining, “High electrical power demand has caused a power shortage, and issues caused by the freeze are impacting generation units and transmission lines.”

Rolling blackouts were reported in many states, including Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, Oklahoma, and New Mexico, affecting tens of thousands of customers each time.

Beyond the planned outages, hundreds of thousands lost power indefinitely. Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards reported that much of the power outages in the state were caused by frozen tree limbs falling onto power lines. He also noted that utility crews are having difficulty repairing the downed power lines due to icy road conditions.

Bill Magness, President and Chief Executive Officer of Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT), which coordinates distribution of power to most of Texas and has all but collapsed under the impact of the extreme weather, said in a television interview on KXAN TV Tuesday that the company is “trying to get people’s power back on as

quickly as possible” while simultaneously “safely manag[ing] the balance of supply and demand on the grid” to avoid blacking out the entire power grid. “As hard as these outages are,” Magness declared, “they avoid a much more catastrophic situation.”

At the national level, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) and the North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC) said Tuesday they would jointly investigate the blackouts and electric grid failures. Both the FERC and NERC stated they would work with federal and state agencies, as well as the utility companies, to ameliorate the water and power crisis by “identify[ing] problems with the performance of the bulk-power system and, where appropriate, solutions for addressing those issues.”

With temperatures dropping well below freezing in the typically warm Southern US and millions without power to heat their homes, waterlines are freezing, leading to burst pipes. The power outages are also forcing some water-treatment plants to shut down, leaving many without access to water.

In Texas, the city of Abilene, population of 120,000, shut off water service Monday night after power outages were experienced at all three of its water-treatment plants. The city issued a “boil water notice,” instructing residents, upon restoration of services, to boil their water before drinking. Manville Water Supply Corporation in Williamson County, has issued a boil water notice, including for the cities of Pflugerville, Taylor, and Fort Worth with its 212,000 residents. The city of Kyle instructed residents to refrain from using water altogether until further notice, tweeting, “Due to a loss of power ... we are close to running out of water supply in #KyleTX.”

Texas Governor Greg Abbott has received a waiver from the US Department of Energy that allows the state’s power generators to increase production. However, information released by the ERCOT indicating that the weather

conditions have limited the supply of natural gas to the power plants and frozen half of the state's wind turbines, leaving many of the generators in question unable to increase production.

"Due to the severe weather and freezing temperatures across our state, many power companies have been unable to generate power, whether it's from coal, natural gas, or wind power," Abbott reported. "ERCOT and the [Public Utility Commission of Texas] are working nonstop to restore power supply. The state has also deployed resources to assist Texans without power and to help essential workers continue to carry out their jobs. In the meantime, I encourage all Texans to continue to stay off the roads, and conserve energy as state agencies work with private providers to restore power as quickly as possible."

Jackie Sargent, the general manager for Austin Energy, said, "Most of the plants that went offline during evening and morning today were fueled" by coal, gas, or nuclear power. According to 2020 ERCOT data on energy output, nearly 40 percent of electricity in Texas comes from natural gas, 23 percent from wind turbines, 18 percent from coal, and 11 percent from nuclear power.

In addition to a the 133-car pile-up last Saturday which killed six people in Fort Worth, Texas, more than 20 deaths have been linked to Winter Storm Uri.

A woman and her three elementary-school-age grandchildren died in a house fire around 2:00 a.m. Tuesday in Sugar Land, Texas, leaving two others injured. The neighborhood had been without power for at least eight hours and the family had been using a fireplace in their effort to stay warm.

In Houston, Texas, a woman and an eight-year-old girl perished as a result of carbon monoxide poisoning, leaving a man and a seven-year-old boy hospitalized Monday. According to Houston Police, the deaths appear to be the result of the adults having left their vehicle running in the garage in a desperate effort to warm the house, which had no power. Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo reported that the Fire Marshal's office received nearly 50 carbon monoxide poisoning calls overnight.

A man was found dead Monday on a median in Houston, the likely cause of death was exposure to below-freezing temperatures. Just outside city limits, a 60-year-old man was found dead in a van, also is suspected to have suffered the same fate. According to the Harris County Sheriff's Office, after a wreck brought on by the icy conditions of Interstate 10, a man exited his vehicle and was struck and killed late Monday.

In Tennessee, a 10-year-old boy and his six-year-old sister fell through an iced-over pond Sunday morning near Millington, seventeen miles northeast of Memphis. The boy

died and his sister is in critical condition.

In North Carolina, Uri spawned a tornado that killed 3 people and injured 10 in Ocean Isle Beach, 46 miles southwest of Wilmington.

Despite the dangerous and often impassable conditions of the roads, lack of water for hygienic purposes and the continuing threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, workers are under pressure from their employers to maintain their scheduled shifts and report to work.

A worker at a ShipBob fulfillment facility located in Grapevine, Texas, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the dangerous conditions under which they are being compelled to work. "We were supposed to come in Sunday from 10-6, but due to the weather they canceled. They then sent out an email saying that we have to work 10-6 Monday and waited until 9 a.m. Monday morning to cancel because too many people were calling out due to the weather.

"They then sent out an email telling us to standby for tomorrow's shift, then sent out another saying we would work our regular shifts, then another one saying we have to work 10-6 due to the storm we are supposed to get today.

"As soon as I got on the roads this morning, they were somewhat melted, but there was still ice everywhere and then upon arrival inside the warehouse, the power was out. The entire building was freezing and the warehouse was dark until about 11 a.m. Even then there was barely any light because of the skylights on the ceiling covered in snow.

"They have mini generators powering the computers and router for the Wi-Fi and are keeping us here until the battery runs out."

Amazon whistleblower Shannon Allen also spoke with *World Socialist Web Site*, saying, "I left my water dripping in the sink, but the pipes froze over. My power went out and now I have no heat. This is unbearable."



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