

# Elderly bear the brunt of Texas power outage catastrophe

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The decision by ERCOT (Electric Reliability Council of Texas) to initiate indefinite rolling blackouts across the state of Texas has taken its biggest toll on the elderly. Seniors—particularly those dependent on Social Security benefits for housing, medicine, and essentials—were in many cases trapped inside their homes, unable to leave and impossible to reach for days on end.

As of Wednesday, more than 1.3 million residents across 200 Texas counties remained without clean water in their homes, forcing them to boil water, wait in line for bottled water or purchase it at the store. At the peak last week, nearly 15 million Texans were under a boil-water advisory after widespread power outages knocked out water treatment and distribution across the state.

Freezing temperatures that set in two weeks ago overwhelmed the state's electrical system, freezing natural gas lines and shutting down power plants, leaving more than 4 million people without power, many for days on end. The implementation of weatherization measures that would have prevented the disaster was avoided because they would have cut into profit margins.

ERCOT's CEO, Bill Magness, presented a chart to a meeting of the company's board Wednesday that showed that the electric system was four minutes and 37 seconds away from a complete collapse that would have lasted weeks or even months. "I mean, we saw something here that, you know, outstrips any extreme scenario," Magness reported. Almost half of the state's power generating units shut down at the peak of the crisis.

Millions of Texans were left out of the state's Emergency Warning System, and a disproportionate amount of preventable human suffering fell on the

oldest, most isolated, and most dependent members of society. So far, at least 58 deaths in Texas and across the US have been attributed to the extreme weather, including an 11-year-old who died in his bed of suspected hypothermia after his family's trailer home lost power.

In Houston, two 70-year-old victims—Benjamin Cooks, Jr. and Virginia Cooks—were killed in a house fire on February 15. Like many Houstonians, the couple had lost power to their home earlier in the day and were using any available sources of heat to stay alive. Their son, Benjamin Cooks III, told ABC13 he had spoken to the couple earlier in the day over the phone. He revealed that their only source of light was their stove.

Not long after speaking to them, the sons learned that their parents' home caught fire. Despite the heroic attempts of neighbors to save the Cooks couple from the blaze, they were too late. Although the case is still under investigation, it is clear that this couple would still be alive were they had not abandoned by the utility providers and their accomplices in the state government. A GoFundMe started by a granddaughter for funeral expenses and family support has reached, as of this writing, \$2,252 of a stated \$20,000 goal. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost of funerals and other related burial expenses is higher than ever before.

Another victim of corporate criminal negligence was Bertha C., a 93-year-old woman from Tyler, Texas, who was rushed to the hospital late in night on February 16 after her retirement home, Villas of Pine Ridge (Towne Park Apartments), lost power.

Bertha was found unresponsive by a relative who braved the icy roads to ensure she received her nightly medicine on time. The temperature inside the building

was in the 40s Fahrenheit, suggesting that the power had been out for hours. She was rushed to the nearby hospital, Christus Mother Frances, where she developed seizures. It would later be confirmed that she was initially treated for hypothermia, and that the seizures stemmed from the precipitous drop in her body temperature.

She fell into a coma and passed on Sunday evening, February 21, surrounded by her children and grandchildren. Because the profit maximization of the retirement home cannot allow for vacancies, the family was given seven days to move Bertha's furniture and personal effects—with the countdown starting on a day when roads were still deemed unsafe for travel.

Members of the family told the *World Socialist Web Site* that their beloved matriarch had been taken prematurely. One daughter, Natalie, was particularly vocal: "We can't dwell on the fact that they took her. They always take us. They'll keep on taking us. We just have to be together and be strong." Another daughter, Emily, spoke similarly: "Somebody has to pay. Wrong is wrong. I bet they had power at Primrose [a network of "luxury retirement homes" with 36 properties spread across 18 states]."

The firsthand experiences of Texans throughout the state have shown that ERCOT implemented controlled blackouts—which became indefinite blackouts—in struggling and vulnerable working-class communities while keeping commercial business districts and wealthier neighborhoods comparatively untouched.

The predators constituting the ERCOT executive board understand precisely the level of anger sparked by the power outage and hope to paper over the massive social crime for which it is responsible. Six board members resigned on Wednesday: Sally Talberg (board chair), Peter Cramton (vice chair), Terry Bulger (finance and audit chair), Raymond Hepper (HR chair), Randal Miller (retail liaison), and Vanessa Anesetti-Parra (market director).

ERCOT informed local media that these board positions will not be filled anytime soon, which should come as no surprise—the electric grid operator expects it can wait until the heat from media coverage and perfunctory state investigations dies down before continuing along with business as usual.

Although a number of lawsuits have sprung up at the local level in response to ERCOT's comprehensive

mismanagement and selective blackouts, damages awarded are likely to be capped due to sovereign immunity.

Workers must reject the thorough absurdity of an independent profit-driven electrical system. The utilities must be placed under the democratic control of the working class, run to meet the most basic needs without any concern for profit. The increasing frequency, severity, and unpredictability of catastrophic weather events underscore the need for the investment of trillions of dollars into modernizing essential infrastructure to protect lives and to provide everyone with electricity, heat and clean water.

The Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has issued a series of demands to this end. We encourage Texans and others throughout the South to reach out to the *World Socialist Web Site* to share your experiences with the storm and contribute to our work in exposing the crimes committed against the working class.



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