

Hundreds of thousands without electricity in Southeast Michigan after severe thunderstorm

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Hundreds of thousands in Detroit and Southeast Michigan lost power on Monday afternoon and evening when a severe thunderstorm and high winds ripped through the area. Initial reports said that more than 400,000 people were without electricity across Michigan and Indiana.

By Tuesday morning, DTE Energy, the primary service provider in the region, reported on Twitter that 260,000 customers were still without electricity. The statement said that 3,300 power lines were down and that crews were “assessing damage and beginning restoration.” Consumers Energy, which services western and mid-Michigan, reported 113,000 customers without power.

As of this writing, the DTE Energy outage map shows the storm’s impact on neighborhoods in Detroit as well suburban and rural communities in a nine-county area stretching from Lapeer County in the north to Monroe County in the south and Ingham County in the west.

Winds of up to 70 miles per hour blew through the region for about 10 minutes, according to DTE Energy President and CEO Trevor Lauer. As has been the case with prior storms, Lauer claimed the crisis had nothing to do with the practices of the energy monopoly.

Speaking to FOX2 Detroit and standing in front of a tree that had taken down power lines, Lauer said, it was outside of the “utility right-of-way.” The energy company’s right-of-way is 10 feet on either side of the conductor. Lauer then said, “The vast majority of the outages we’re dealing with today are very large trees that broke outside of the utility right of way.”

Incredibly, Lauer claimed that DTE Energy's efforts to trim trees have worked “really well” and that they

were having “wonderful reliability for ... customers” prior to the storms on Monday. These comments would be laughable if it were not for the fact that the repeated power outages in the Detroit area have devastating economic and social consequences.

For example, the huge number of downed lines pose a significant public safety risk. The DTE Energy message warned people to stay at least 20 feet from any down power lines and be aware of wires making contact with metal fences and other structures.

Tragically, the *Detroit News* reported on Tuesday that a 14-year-old girl was killed Monday in Monroe, Michigan when she came into contact with a line that fell during the storm. A Facebook post by the Monroe Police Department said, “Emergency personnel arrived to discover that the female was still in contact with the energized electrical line” and that “it was obvious that she had succumbed to her injuries.”

The Facebook report said the victim was walking with a friend in her backyard when she, “reached for what she believed was a stick, however, it was the charged electrical line.”

The DTE Energy Outage Center posted a notice over its map saying that more than 2,000 linemen from their own staff and contractors “from across the country” were working around the clock to restore service. The energy company estimates that “80 percent of our customers impacted by Monday’s storm will be restored by end of day Thursday.”

School districts across the area were closed on Tuesday, many of which had just begun fall classes on Monday. Trees were down in roadways throughout the region. The Great Lakes Water Authority called a boil-water alert for some communities in Oakland County as

a precaution. The authority said that Commerce Township, Walled Lake and Novi were under temporary alerts until the system can be flushed and water samples confirm the water is safe to drink.

One year ago, in July and August 2021, a series of storms passed through southeast Michigan that caused historic flooding and power outages. More than 1 million people were without power on August 13 after 75 mile per hour winds wrecked the power infrastructure. At that time, DTE Energy made similar claims to those that Lauer is now making, that the tree trimming initiative that has been underway since 2007 was working well.

When residents ask the government and the energy providers why the electrical infrastructure is not being put underground, they are given explanations that serve the interests of the corporations and their investors. While DTE Energy admits that undergrounding would essentially solve most of the outage problems, their rationale for not doing is that it would be “too disruptive” and cost too much money.

An explanation on the DTE energy website says, “Burying existing overhead power lines carries a hefty price tag—about six times the cost of installing overhead lines. Costs to bury the thousands of miles of overhead electrical lines in Michigan are estimated to be in the neighborhood of \$25 to \$30 billion—an expense that would have to be borne by all utility customers.”

Why do utility customers have to pay for the upgrades needed to make the electrical system more reliable? Energy corporations such as DTE Energy are enormously profitable and have generated massive profits for decades. Over the past ten years, the stock value of DTE has tripled going from \$45 per share in early 2012 to a peak of \$140 in April of this year. Over the past five years, the energy company has generated an average of \$1.14 billion annually.

Instead of investing these resources into the desperately needed infrastructure improvements, the corporate executives paid themselves and handed out hundreds of millions in dividends to stockholders.

For example, DTE’s Lauer earned \$3,269,748 in cash and equity in 2021 alone. In a filing reported by Yahoo, “In the first nine months of 2017, the company had returned \$495 million to its shareholders through dividend and share buyback compared with \$426 million in the year ago period.”

The repeated failure of the electrical grid in Detroit and southeastern Michigan, the center of US and global automotive engineering and manufacturing, is a manifestation of the enormous contradictions and crisis of American capitalism. Side-by-side with major advances in the technology of electric and autonomous vehicles is the decayed infrastructure that has not been upgraded since it was first built in the early decades of the post-World War II era.

Like the failing water and sewage infrastructure, the electrical grid is suffering from a combination of neglect and the ongoing impact of climate change. As Roshi Nateghi, an assistant professor of industrial engineering at Purdue University explained to the Grist after Hurricane Ida knocked out New Orleans’ power grid last year, “The reality is, our infrastructure is built for the climate of the past, and we keep rebuilding it by incremental improvements. And that’s just not gonna cut it.”

Nothing short of the complete socialist reorganization of society, with the working class in power, can fix the increasingly dire condition of the foundational services of mass society. Through its money-mad drive for private property, corporate earnings and personal wealth accumulation, the ruling elite is a threat to society as a whole and is incapable of providing the basic necessities of life for millions of people.



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