Without Russian gas imports, France prepares winter power cuts

Samuel Tissot
2 December 2022

On Thursday, French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne distributed instructions to regional political leaders to prepare the country for regular electricity outages in coming weeks and months. This includes contingency planning for a total blackout of the French power grid.

The government's circulation of the document is a tacit admission that the energy "sobriety" campaign called for by President Emmanuel Macron on July 14 has failed, and that large parts of France face significant electricity and heating cut-offs this winter.

High energy prices in Europe are primarily a consequence of NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine. While EU governments attempt to shift the blame to Putin for Europe's energy shortage this winter, it was their own decision to cease Russian gas and oil imports in the spring, bowing to US and NATO demands.

The instructions were distributed while Macron was in the United States on a state visit. Despite complaining about the ruinous impact of the US's nationalist economic policy on French energy prices, Macron reiterated his government's continued commitment to fight NATO's war in Ukraine against Russia. This includes continuing ongoing sanctions against Russia, even if this means the French population goes cold this winter.

The energy rationing measures circulated in the French government's plan have not been known in France since the aftermath of the Second World War.

Sixty percent of the population live in areas that will be subject to alternating power cuts where electricity will be shut off during peak hours. The regions impacted by this will alternate day-by-day, but it is estimated that each outage will affect four million people. The outages will be announced to the impacted population at 5 p.m. the day before.

While French government spokesperson Olivier Véran stated that, "We are not in a disaster movie," he went on to explain that there will be likely be periods this winter where people "cannot withdraw cash" and traffic lights will stop working.

On Wednesday, Christel Heydemann, general manager of Orange, France's largest telecommunications provider, warned that during periods of electricity cuts all phone and internet signal would be lost, preventing even emergency calls.

The government is instructing local authorities to supply critical infrastructure such as hospitals, fire stations and prisons with emergency generators in order to continue functioning during down periods.

Schools in regions impacted by power cuts will also be shut. This exposes the hypocrisy of the Macron government's support for imperialist war on Russia in Ukraine. The same government that forced children and teachers back into packed classrooms amid the free spread of COVID-19 in the name of protecting children's educational continuity and mental health, is forcing children to stay home and freeze to support the war effort in Ukraine.

The inter-ministerial crisis unit is also preparing contingency plans for a total blackout, which is possible if average energy consumption cannot be further cut down, or if demand spikes due to prolonged cold weather.

Given the density and interconnectivity of energy lines in Paris, government officials have said it is likely the capital will not be subject to rolling power cuts. As one official explained, "You can't cut off Le Bon Marché [department store] without cutting off the Necker hospital." This means smaller cities, towns, and rural areas would shoulder the brunt of the cuts.

Although the government's measures are being

© World Socialist Web Site

prepared for peak energy consumption in January and February, the energy crisis is already having an impact on the French economy. Compared to November last year, 7 percent less energy was consumed in France. This is mostly due to cuts in industrial production as electricity costs increase, according to the Network of Electricity Transport.

In the new year, French consumers will also see their bills increase by fifteen percent. This is due largely to energy companies' price-gouging expensive US liquefied natural gas exports to Europe and France, which replace Russian gas.

While the primary cause of the energy shortage in France is the cessation of Russian gas and oil imports, the crisis has been exacerbated by the flagrantly inadequate maintenance of France's nuclear power plants. In early November, only 30 of France's 56 reactors were connected to the electricity grid. Repairs and safety checks on the remaining reactors are not expected to be totally completed until 2025.

While the German Federal Office for Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance stated that it is "considered unlikely that targeted power cuts will occur regionally," large surges in demand during cold periods could lead to similar measures being put in place in Germany and other parts of Europe previously dependent on Russian energy imports.

The energy crisis in France and Europe is ultimately a product of class rule. Chasing its share of the spoils of victory over Russia in Ukraine, and using the war as an excuse to kickstart its own re-militarization, the European bourgeoisie decided to subordinate the health and well-being of the working population to its geo-strategic aims.

In September, the EU's voluntary policy became irreversible following the bombing of the NordStream pipeline, which strategically benefited US imperialism by ensuring continued European reliance on its gas supply. The bombing was blamed on the UK, the principal US ally in Europe, by the Russian government.

Nonetheless, as energy companies in France and across Europe continue to achieve record profits in 2022 through price hikes, no significant action has been taken to protect energy supplies for the mass of the population this coming winter.

Just as it handed trillions to the banks and corporations and sacrificed nearly 2 million lives to COVID-19 to appease the markets, the EU is handing billions to the Ukrainian government while forcing its population to freeze this winter.

The struggle against inflation and energy poverty is intimately connected to the struggle to end the imperialist war in Ukraine, the principal driver of energy shortages and food price inflation. Workers and youth seeking to oppose the capitalist class's drive to war and its offensive against living standards should attend the IYSSE's December 10 webinar "For a mass movement of students and youth to stop the war in Ukraine."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site