

# Signs point to Southern California Edison's negligence and Democrats' complicity in Los Angeles fire disaster

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Two months after the devastating fire that tore through Los Angeles, California, on January 7, claiming 29 lives and causing up to \$275 billion in economic losses, alarming signs of corporate negligence and government complicity continue to emerge.

As investigations unfold, the evidence increasingly points to electric utility Southern California Edison (SCE) management as a prime culprit. The utility giant had long-standing work orders for critical maintenance on power lines near Altadena—where the Eaton fire ravaged entire neighborhoods—including vegetation clearance and repairs deemed an “ignition risk,” yet the company failed to act in time. Now, with the devastation of homes and communities still fresh, one must ask: Why is basic public safety still subordinated to corporate profits?

As of December 31, SCE had 94 open work orders along three lines under suspicion for sparking the Eaton fire. Many of these orders carried a clear warning of ignition risk, meaning Edison had full knowledge of the potential for disaster yet chose inaction. Two of the implicated power lines were active, delivering electricity up until the moment of the fire. The third, the Mesa-Sylmar line, had been decommissioned since 1971, yet it is now under scrutiny as a possible ignition source.

Last week, it was revealed that SCE was warned in 2022 that a partial emergency power shutdown could overload their transmission lines, increasing wildfire risk. Despite this, necessary upgrades were delayed repeatedly. Robert McCullough, a veteran energy analyst, confirmed that surges can lead to overloading and “catastrophic failure” of power lines.

The 2022 study showed that by “reconductoring” the line and implementing improvements to substation terminal equipment, the plan, bearing the modest cost of \$17 million and already approved by the California

Independent System Operator, would have had “a significant impact on reducing the risk of [Public Safety Power Shutoff] or wildfire event impact.”

Moreover, in June 2023, a Level 2 priority work order for vegetation clearance targeted a transmission tower near Altadena, where the fire may have started. Another “Structure Brushing” work order for the Eagle Rock-Mesa line was issued the same week. Despite being labeled “Ignition Risks,” both orders remained open past the six-month deadline.

Experts have also pointed to the possibility that an idle power line could have become energized through electromagnetic induction, sparking the fire that consumed thousands of acres and displaced families. In a grotesque admission of their failure, SCE executives have scrambled to assure the public that they are conducting an internal investigation, all while maintaining that they had done “everything possible” to prevent such an event.

The facts ultimately show, however, that SCE management allowed critical maintenance tasks to remain unaddressed, even in areas flagged for high wildfire risk. The work orders included the replacement of broken insulators, securing loose connectors, and repairing transmission towers—all tasks directly related to preventing catastrophic failures.

Fire safety scientist Vyto Babrauskas has pointed out that running electricity through old infrastructure without proper upkeep is a well-known fire hazard, making SCE's negligence all the more egregious. “An electromagnetic field from the transmission line that is operating will basically cut through that dead line and induce a current in it,” Babrauskas told the *Los Angeles Times*.

Another expert, Ali Mehrizi-Sani, an electrical engineering researcher and director of Virginia Tech's Power and Energy Center, was more explicit: “It seems

some high-risk lines had repair due dates quite far into the future.” This raises the concern that SCE may have been “negligent in following proper policies related to maintenance of their equipment” before the Eaton fire.

It would be a mistake to view Edison’s failures in isolation. The political establishment of California, overwhelmingly led by Democrats, has long protected the profit interests of utility companies. Multimillionaire Governor Gavin Newsom, whose political career has been bankrolled by corporate donors, including energy giants like PG&E and SCE, has consistently prioritized these relationships over the safety of Californians.

When it became clear PG&E was responsible for the devastating Camp Fire in 2018, which claimed 85 lives, Newsom quickly intervened to shield the company from the full consequences of its actions. He facilitated the passage of legislation that allowed PG&E to emerge from bankruptcy while saddling ratepayers with the cost of its liabilities. Rather than demanding stringent safety measures, Newsom and his allies ensured that corporate executives could continue reaping massive profits while the public bore the risks and consequences of their actions.

Other top officials in California share this culpability. The California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), ostensibly tasked with regulating utilities, has repeatedly failed to hold these corporations accountable. Utility companies have successfully lobbied for regulatory exemptions, enabling them to defer maintenance and delay the removal of aging infrastructure under the guise of “future potential use.” This dereliction of duty has led to one preventable disaster after another, each more devastating than the last.

A 2022 report by the state auditor found that state officials, including the CPUC, were not effectively ensuring that California’s electric utilities took adequate steps to prevent fires caused by their equipment. The report emphasized that the newly established Office of Energy Infrastructure Safety approved utility prevention plans without sufficient scrutiny, raising concerns about the effectiveness of regulatory oversight.

In January 2024, the CPUC approved a settlement agreement penalizing PG&E \$45 million for its involvement in the 2021 Dixie Fire, one of the largest and most destructive wildfires in California history. Such paltry penalties are insufficient compared to the extensive damages caused by these fires, and from the perspective of PG&E stockholders, they are considered modest operating expenses.

The Eaton fire is the “canary in the mine” for a far deeper systemic failure. It is not simply a story of one company’s negligence but a broader indictment of capitalism’s inability to prioritize human needs over corporate profits.

In a rational, socially planned system, the maintenance of critical infrastructure would not be left to the whims of for-profit corporations or ambitious pro-capitalist politicians. Fire prevention would not be relegated to backlogged work orders that remain open for years, while executives collect multi-million-dollar bonuses. Public utilities must be managed for the collective good, with proactive safety measures and investments in modernizing electrical grids.

Furthermore, California’s worsening wildfires are exacerbated not just by corporate negligence but by the lack of comprehensive urban planning and fire prevention infrastructure. Decades of deregulation, driven by both Democratic and Republican administrations, have stripped away essential public services, leaving communities vulnerable to disaster. Capitalist-induced climate change, only heightens the risk, creating the perfect conditions for repeated devastation.

The fascistic policies of the Trump administration’s attack on science, social programs and regulations, combined with Democrats aligning with Trump instead of fighting him, heighten risks to public safety. Governor Newsom’s recent interactions with Trump and his podcast interviews with far-right figures are a pathetic example of this trend.

The Eaton fire illustrates that private ownership of essential infrastructure is incompatible with public safety. Corporate-run utilities prioritize profits over maintenance and fire prevention, endangering entire communities.

A socialist model, where energy and infrastructure are publicly owned and worker-controlled, would focus on safety rather than shareholder returns. More broadly, socialism would redirect resources from corporate subsidies and the coffers of the ultra-rich to wildfire prevention, climate resilience and sustainable energy. Housing and infrastructure would prioritize safety and sustainability over corporate profits.



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