Social crime in the Calumet region: Blackouts in Gary, Indiana, extend into second week

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On August 11, a derecho swept across northern Illinois and northwest Indiana, producing hurricane-strength winds and eight confirmed tornadoes. A peak gust of 99 miles per hour was recorded at Gary/Chicago International Airport. Downed trees, utility poles and power lines caused widespread destruction across Chicago's southern suburbs and northwest Indiana, including Gary, Hammond, Whiting and Merrillville.

Cities and towns have been forced into survival mode, cleaning debris, repairing or moving out of damaged homes and relying on neighbors for assistance with repairs and support.

Ten days later, tens of thousands of Northern Indiana Public Service Company (NIPSCO) customers remain without electricity. As of 9 p.m. Friday, 38,459 customers across northwest Indiana remained without power, including thousands in Gary, where complete restoration is not expected until the end of August.

Residents across the region have been forced to discard hundreds of dollars in spoiled groceries and refrigerated medicine, catastrophic losses for households living paycheck to paycheck. No systematic meal delivery or nutrition support is being organized by the state or federal government. Schools have been shuttered for weeks, and businesses remain dark, as primarily working class communities are left to navigate heat and darkness without climate control, refrigeration or medical devices.

Gary residents speaking on local news described the extreme stress of the situation: fixing their own damaged homes and property, taking on the responsibility of checking in on elderly and medically vulnerable neighbors while being able to do little for them, and also having to travel to an area with electricity to get phones and other devices charged and find something to eat.

World Central Kitchen arrived in the area on August 21, a charity operated by chef Jose Andres that provides hot meals to war-torn and disaster-stricken regions including Gaza and Ukraine.

Bobby Heinze, a diabetic resident of Griffith, spoke at the town council meeting about how life threatening the lack of electricity is, as he had watched his insulin supply lose its potency in a dead refrigerator.

In Munster, Jonathan Musto was forced to travel across state lines into Illinois simply to secure gasoline for a borrowed generator. Generators are not being distributed, nor is there systematic inspection to ensure existing generators, which produce lethally toxic fumes in and near enclosed areas, are being used safely.

As a response to the major losses experienced by area businesses, a class-action lawsuit has been filed against the electric utility, NIPSCO, alleging inadequate vegetation management in and around power lines.

But this severely understates the case. The collapse in infrastructure in Gary and the Calumet area is the end result of decades of policy in which the financial elite funnels value out of productive assets and into speculation. The area's mega-corporations continue to operate while the surrounding working class communities and small businesses have been plunged into "survival mode" for nearly two weeks due to the collapse of a dilapidated electrical grid.

The corridor stretching from Gary through Whiting and East Chicago is home to an extraordinary concentration of industrial capital, including the Midwest's largest oil refinery, BP, producing 440,000 barrels of fuel daily; the US Steel and Cleveland Cliffs steel mills, some of the world's largest integrated mills; two massive Ford automotive manufacturing facilities and a number of auto parts suppliers; and a large Cargill facility manufacturing food products, among other enterprises.

But there is no contradiction between the enormous concentration of industrial production in the Calumet area and its dilapidated capital infrastructure. The infrastructure is hollowed out due to the speculative profit-taking of a ruling class that demands relentless cost-cutting, ever lower taxes, total deregulation, and the most aggressive attacks on wages and safety standards.

In Whiting, Indiana, more than 850 oil refinery workers at the BP refinery have been locked out for five months after rejecting a BP-USW proposal that would have massively cut pay and benefits, destroyed 100 union jobs, expanded the use of low-wage contract labor, cut hourly wages by $8- $10, and totally shut down the facility's environmental department as well as implement AI technologies without any job protections. While workers were locked out, a major "system-related" power failure in late May forced massive toxic flaring, exposing residents to hazardous gases without emergency warning. The refinery was operated by strikebreakers and managers who had not run units in years.

US Steel has responded in the most callous and hypocritical way to the storm, blackouts and ensuing crisis. Just two days after the storm, on August 13, the company notified workers at the Gary Works steel mill that they could no longer take days off work.

The letter read: "Absence attributed to weather conditions, property damage, loss of electrical services, or other storm-related circumstances will be addressed in accordance with the applicable attendance requirements and may still result in corrective disciplinary action. Employees are expected to make the necessary arrangements to report to their scheduled shifts. We recognize that these storms have created difficult circumstances for many employees. However, we all have responsibilities to one another and to the safe and reliable

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operation of our facilities. We appreciate everyone who has continued to report to work and support their co-workers and our operations throughout these challenging conditions."

On the same day, August 13, 28-year-old Jonathan Stepp was killed while working at the Cleveland Cliffs Burns Harbor steel facility. The father of six worked for Phoenix Services, a contractor owned by SunCoke Energy. News reports indicate he was operating a pot hauler, a machine that moves large amounts of molten slag, when he died.

The workers who have been killed in the region's mills—Troy Allen, 45, in 2020 at Gary works, Edwin Fleming, 49, in 2019 at ArcelorMittal, Jonathan Arrizola, 30, at US Steel in 2016, and others—are casualties of the same profit-seeking and total indifference to life that has caused the blackouts and the lockouts.

2026 NIPSCO lockout

The immediate background to the 2026 blackout is the offensive launched by NIPSCO and its parent company, NiSource, earlier this year. In April 2026, NIPSCO locked out 1,700 utility workers, the technicians and linesmen responsible for the grid's integrity. NIPSCO took the lockout decision in response to a powerful strike vote by workers who opposed the contracting out of high risk line work, and the very high overtime hours the company demanded which strain the workforce and create even more dangerous conditions.

NIPSCO and BP coordinated their offensives, locking out approximately 2,500 industrial workers in the region simultaneously. While NIPSCO workers were locked out, Northwest Indiana residents saw their utility bills skyrocket, in many cases doubling over the past year. The month-long lockout saw the company and the USW force through a "last, best, and final" offer: a concessionary contract that gutted safety protections and reduced the skilled workforce for "efficiency." The company boasts of having beaten profit estimates, with full-year net income rising to $929.5 million in 2025.

Gary, Indiana, occupies a singular position in the history of American capitalism. It was a purpose-built "City of the Century," summoned into existence in 1906 by the board of the United States Steel Corporation. Named after the corporation's chairman, Elbert H. Gary, the city was the flagship of the steel trust, an entity capitalized at $1.4 billion and representing roughly one-twentieth of the entire U.S. GDP at the time. Gary was designed to be the crown jewel of American industrial power, bridging Minnesota's iron ore and the Appalachian coal mines.

The "Magic City" has been transformed into a monument of American capitalism's decline through a process of social counterrevolution. Gary's population has collapsed from a peak of 178,000 in 1960 to roughly 68,000 today. The steel industry, which once employed 65,000 primary workers in the region, has seen that number cut to under 14 percent of that, or about 9,000. Between 1990 and 2017 alone, jobs at Gary Works and surrounding mills declined by 58 percent.

This "Long Death" was a result of a conscious policy of disinvestment. The structural turn of American capitalism towards Wall Street speculation in the 1970s is summed up in US Steel CEO David Roderick's infamous declaration that the company was "not in the business of making steel," but rather "in the business of making money." The shift to speculation transformed the region's assets from usable public goods into dividends.

Independent working class action is needed

The history of the Calumet Region is written in the blood of workers, but it is also a history of political betrayal by the trade union bureaucracy. In 1919, Gary was the epicenter of the Great Steel Strike. Challenging a company dictatorship that enforced a brutal 12-hour "long turn" workday and maintained an elaborate spy system, a quarter of a million workers walked out. The strike was a revolutionary moment; workers in Gary demanded recognition of the Soviet Government and the withdrawal of US troops from Russia. This was met with martial law and the occupation of the city by 2,000 federal troops. Similarly, the 1937 Memorial Day Massacre saw Chicago police shoot ten unarmed workers in the back during the "Little Steel" strike, while President Franklin Roosevelt issued his infamous "plague on both your houses" remark, equating the murdered with their killers.

Today, the United Steelworkers (USW) bureaucracy functions as an instrument of corporate management. The 2026 coordinated lockouts at BP Whiting and NIPSCO illustrate this. The USW international leadership isolated these struggles, and its nationalist poison—blaming Chinese or foreign workers for the decline of steel—serves only to obscure its own collaboration with management. In steel and auto, the trade union bureaucracy has consistently policed the workforce, ensuring that the destruction of jobs and the decay of social and capital infrastructure proceed without a revolutionary challenge.

The Democratic Party machinery that governs Chicago, Gary, and the Calumet cities has presided over the entire process of deindustrialization, infrastructure decay, and environmental poisoning.

The path forward for the working class lies in a struggle to build rank-and-file committee controlled by workers themselves and independent of the union bureaucracies and the Democratic Party that have presided over this decline. The formation of these committees is integral to the building a mass socialist movement of the working class to take political power, expropriate the oligarchy and redirect society's resources from war to a vast improvement and expansion of social infrastructure.

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