

Hundreds of thousands in the dark in Michigan as windstorm cripples aging electrical grid

By Shannon Jones
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Hundreds of thousands of Michigan residents remain without power in bitter cold after a windstorm Wednesday ripped through the state downing thousands of trees and wrecking power lines.

Full power is not expected to be restored until Sunday, as residents face temperatures expected to drop to as low as 12 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 17 Celsius). The winds contributed to five deaths in Detroit on Wednesday when a fire destroyed a building housing elderly and handicapped residents on the city's impoverished east side. Wind-whipped flames forced survivors to jump from windows. Due to cutbacks in the city budget, firefighters took a reported 17 minutes to arrive on the scene.

The storm initially knocked out power to some 1 million people across the state. By Friday evening only slightly more than half had power restored. DTE Energy, the utility monopoly that supplies electrical power to a large portion of the state, reported that more than 4,000 wires were downed by falling trees. DTE has deployed some 3,500 workers, including 750 linemen and 250 tree trimmers from other states, to repair the damage. Consumers Energy, the state's other large supplier of electrical power, reported 7,900 downed wires and 1,000 broken poles.

Events such as floods, blizzards and high winds hit hardest at the most vulnerable layers of society, laying bare festering social contradictions. On Friday, many neighborhoods in the greater Detroit area remained darkened. Traffic lights still did not function at some major intersections. Many residents reported live, downed wires near their homes, but have been informed it may be days until repair crews arrive.

The availability of electrical power is vital to most

aspects of modern life, including the operation of respirators and other medical equipment. Hypothermia is a serious danger, especially for the young and elderly. The use of candles or kerosene heaters dramatically increases the danger of fires. Meanwhile, workers prevented from getting to their jobs or small businesses forced to cease operations will not get any significant compensation, except for perhaps a token credit on their electric bill.

According to DTE, the storm Wednesday was the most damaging weather event in the company's 100-year history. High wind gusts were sustained throughout the day and in some instances reached 60 miles per hour. The winds were caused by a strong low pressure system north of the Great Lakes that brought a cold front to Lower Michigan, a not unusual weather phenomenon. Many trees fell due to rain-softened ground and unusually warm weather that had thawed the soil.

Michigan Governor Rick Snyder activated the State Emergency Operations Center on Wednesday in response to the storm. However, apart from political posturing, the action had little practical benefit, aside from the opening of a few warming centers. As always, millions of people are effectively being left to fend for themselves, huddling under covers or doubling up with neighbors.

As for the state's electrical monopolies, they made the usual claim of being overwhelmed by the supposedly totally unexpected ferocity of nature. At a news conference, DTE president and COO Trevor Lauer said, "We've been preparing for a significant weather event in southeast Michigan, but the severity of the storm exceeded all our forecasts."

Anyone familiar with life in the Detroit-area of Michigan knows that widespread power outages are a frequent occurrence as is violent weather. Indeed, even an average-strength thunderstorm generally results in tens of thousands being left without power. Events involving hundreds of thousands of customers are fairly frequent. For example, 375,000 lost power as recently as July 2014.

According to one meteorologist cited by the *Detroit Free Press*, the high winds Wednesday did not set a record. He noted that he had seen higher wind gusts during his 22 years of weather service.

What the weather disaster in Michigan once again lays bare is the decrepit state of infrastructure in the US, which has been systematically starved of funds in the chase for short-term profits. The same day the storms hit Michigan, some 171,000 electrical customers in western New York State lost power due to the effects of a related weather phenomenon. Many were without power for more than 24 hours, with damage concentrated in areas north and east of Buffalo.

The effects of the storm were entirely predictable. For years DTE and Consumers have neglected basic maintenance, such as tree trimming and the upgrade of power lines, knowing they face no consequences for their lack of action. In fact, the Michigan Public Service Commission awarded DTE a 4 percent rate increase in January, under conditions where DTE recorded 2016 earnings of \$868 million.

Some of the older power cables in Detroit date back nearly 100 years. Like utilities across the United States, DTE maintains the archaic practice of placing power lines on above ground poles instead of putting them underground. In urban areas, tree branches overgrow the wires and have to be constantly trimmed to keep them from becoming entangled. However, DTE has cut back even this minimal service.

The result of the neglect of infrastructure by Michigan's energy monopolies has been catastrophic, particularly in poorer areas such as the city of Detroit. In September 2010, fires ignited by downed power lines destroyed 85 structures, including 71 homes, on the east side of Detroit. In a hearing held shortly after the fire, area residents testified that they had complained of problems with their power lines since 2000, but gotten little response.

In 2013, 14-year old Malik Shelton died after

touching a downed power line on his way home from school in Detroit. Residents in the neighborhood had previously called DTE about the line, which had fallen during a windstorm.

By contrast, the utilities act with brutal efficiency when customers fall behind in their bills. The company regularly cuts off power to residents who cannot pay its inflated charges. In February 2015, 69-year-old John Skelley, a retired factory worker, died of hypothermia after Consumers Energy shut off electricity to his home in Hazel Park, Michigan, a working class suburb of Detroit, for a \$760 bill.

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