

# Wildfires and forced blackouts lead to multiple deaths in California

By Evan Blake  
14 October 2019

Over the weekend, wildfires continued to rage across California following a severe statewide windstorm, with three deaths reported so far from the blazes. At the same time, at least one death has been reported that is attributable to the utility monopoly Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E), which forcibly cut power to over two million residents across the state last week in a desperate effort to mitigate the outbreak of wildfires.

Twelve minutes after power was cut in Pollock Pines, near Sacramento, 67-year-old Robert Mardis Sr. died of a cardiac arrest after his continuous positive airway pressure machine lost power. While the coroner's autopsy report does not attribute the death to the blackout, Mardis's daughter Marie Aldea told the *Los Angeles Times*, "The power had just gone off, so he was going to his portable oxygen machine. We weren't even able to get to the generator, it happened so quick."

Aldea further commented, "The power outage didn't help. It was only a matter of time before this [death] happened, but it happened sooner than it was supposed to."

The wildfires that hit the state after months of dry weather were fanned by the high winds, conditions that have become increasingly common and severe due to climate change. In the past decade—and over the last two years in particular—California's wildfire season, which has long plagued the state to varying degrees, has reached nightmare proportions.

As of this writing, six fires have broken out across California since Thursday. The largest is the Saddleridge Fire in northern Los Angeles, which has burned 7,965 acres and is only 41 percent contained. The fire has forced 100,000 people to evacuate, in the process killing one man who suffered from cardiac arrest. The Sandalwood Fire in Riverside, also in Southern California, has burned 1,011 acres and is 71

percent contained, killing two people from unspecified causes, including 89-year-old Lois Arvikson. The other four fires are all less than 500 acres and nearly fully contained.

The exact cause of the different fires is yet to be determined, but the Los Angeles Fire Department has revealed that arson investigators cite one witness reportedly seeing sparks or flames from a power line near one of the fires, likely yet again implicating the utility monopoly Southern California Edison (SCE), which covers the Los Angeles metropolitan and southern Central Valley regions.

In Northern California, the mass blackouts imposed by PG&E affected over two million people beginning Wednesday morning. Currently embroiled in bankruptcy proceedings after incurring \$30 billion in legal liability for a host of wildfires, including the deadliest and most destructive in the state's history in last year's Camp Fire, PG&E chose to cut power instead of facing further legal liability.

With the continuation of windstorms in the Los Angeles area and also implicated in hundreds of wildfires, SCE similarly cut power to 20,644 customers, after warning that as many as 174,000 would lose power.

Following the devastating 2007 Witch Fire in San Diego, which killed two people and destroyed 1,265 homes, San Diego Gas and Electric (SDG&E), the state's third and smallest utility monopoly, first began the practice of deliberate power shutoffs, which have since gained the imprimatur of the state and going forward will be the new standard practice whenever wildfire conditions emerge.

A 2013 study published in the scientific journal *Epidemiology* concluded that "power outages can immediately and severely harm human health."

Analyzing mortality rates during the August 2003 blackouts in New York City, the study found that “during the blackout, total mortality rose 28%, resulting in approximately 90 excess deaths” over roughly a 24-hour time period.

In total, PG&E cut power to over 700,000 homes or businesses in two phases last Wednesday and Thursday, likely equivalent to over two million people, given that the average household size in the state is roughly three people. On Thursday evening, 510,000 remained without power, by Friday afternoon this figure was down to 195,000, and by Saturday just over 12,000 remained without power. Undoubtedly, many more premature deaths such as Mardis’s can be attributed to PG&E’s reckless decision to cut power for so many people.

The past week of events in California underscores the complete bankruptcy of the entire capitalist system, which subordinates every aspect of life—including the most basic needs of the population such as electricity—to the profit interests of the financial aristocracy. With all control over this vital resource left in the hands of the executives of the utility monopolies, Californians are offered the miserable choice: burn to death in wildfires or die prematurely when forced blackouts power down your ventilator or cause you to get into a car crash from the lack of stoplights.

In a scene reminiscent of the French aristocracy at Versailles on the eve of the Great French Revolution, on the day of the public announcement that the mass shutoffs would go forward, PG&E staged a party for their top clients at a Sonoma County winery. The bacchanal took place exactly two years after the Tubbs fire that tore through Sonoma County, killing 22 people and destroying 5,643 structures, for which the victims’ families are still seeking compensation from PG&E in a pending state court trial.

The decision to cut power across Northern California was made entirely in secret, with executives calculating whether they would face more fiscal liability in the event of a wildfire or through cutting power to the most vulnerable layers of society. Knowing that they had the regulatory approval of the state-run California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), which has established the framework for the practice of mass shutoffs, PG&E felt more financially secure going with this route.

While state officials such as CPUC representative

Elizaveta Malashenko and Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom have mouthed empty criticisms of PG&E for their haphazard implementation of the blackouts, in reality the Democratic Party has worked tirelessly for decades to prop up all of the utility monopolies and ensure their ability to maximize profits.

Most recently, in June Newsom signed into law a \$21 billion wildfire fund to protect SCE and SDG&E from insolvency. If PG&E emerges from bankruptcy by June 2020, they will qualify for the emergency fund as well.

For decades, PG&E, SCE and SDG&E have done next to nothing to improve their infrastructure or reduce the risk of devastating wildfires. Rather, all three monopolies have drastically cut labor costs by scaling down their tree-trimming and vegetation clearance projects, allowing brush to accumulate around thousands of miles of wooden electrical poles.

In bankruptcy court filings last month, PG&E revealed that they had completed only 30 percent of their tree-trimming program for this year’s wildfire season, and had removed less than 40 percent of the roughly 50,000 dead or dying trees that threaten to collapse onto live wires and start wildfires.

All three companies allocate the bare minimum of funding towards repurposing their antiquated wooden poles with steel or concrete ones or investing in underground lines. Instead, the vast bulk of profits are diverted to dividend payouts and payoffs to executive, including severance payoffs of \$2.5 million to former PG&E CEO Geisha Williams and \$6.5 million to ex-president Nick Stavropoulos. The latter was responsible for falsifying company records after the San Bruno pipeline explosion in 2010, another social catastrophe caused by the utility’s criminal negligence that led to eight deaths and 58 injuries.

To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>