

Infrastructure Collapse Blacks Out Large Portions of Detroit

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The failure of key power infrastructure produced a large-scale electrical blackout throughout downtown and midtown Detroit Tuesday morning, forcing the closure of schools and other public facilities, while shutting off power to hospitals, 36 fire stations and an estimated 740 traffic signals throughout the city.

More than 900 Detroit locations on the city's municipal power grid lost power in the morning, with more than two-thirds of outages continuing at least until the late afternoon, according to the *Detroit Free Press*. Detroit firefighters worked throughout the day to rescue numerous individuals trapped inside elevators in downtown buildings, the *Free Press* reported.

The Detroit Medical Center-Detroit Receiving Hospital was forced to reroute some patients to other medical centers, the newspaper reported. The lights inside the facility "flickered on and off" throughout the day, a DMC spokesperson acknowledged.

Legal proceedings at the Frank Murphy Hall of Justice were suspended and the courts were completely evacuated, with prisoners being hustled back to their cells. Coleman Young Municipal Center, the Belle Isle Aquarium and Cobo Hall Convention Center both lost power and were evacuated, according to the *Free Press*. The People Mover transit system also ground to a halt.

When the outage struck the Detroit Institute of Arts, some 900 children visiting the museum were forced to leave immediately. Wayne State University, with nearly 30,000 undergrad and graduate students, cancelled classes for the day. Residents in five multi-unit apartment buildings also lost power.

According to the *Detroit News*, the outages were caused by a "major cable failure" at the city-owned Mistersky Power Generation Plant around 9:30 a.m. "During the Public Lighting Department's efforts to reconnect customers through another circuit," the *News* reported, "a breaker on the new circuit failed, triggering a system-wide shutdown around 10:30 a.m. that resulted in the loss of power to all customers on the city's grid."

Up until the last eight or nine years, the city-owned plant produced power for traffic and streetlights, public buildings and private customers on the city's grid. The station, located along the riverfront on the city's eastside, no longer generates power. Instead it functions as a "switching station" to connect lines from the city's grid to cables carrying electricity from DTE Energy—the utility giant that sells electricity to Detroit.

As part of the city's bankruptcy restructuring plan, the entire municipal power grid is being

handed over to DTE Energy. Under the terms of the agreement, the company is supposed to be implementing a four-year \$200 million modernization program, which was due to involve a full inspection of the grid's infrastructure over the last 18 months. The cable that failed had not been inspected, according to reports.

"Today is another reminder of how much work we still have to do to rebuild this city, and a bankruptcy order doesn't solve the decades of neglect in our infrastructure," Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan said in an afternoon press conference on the blackout.

Seeking to deflect criticism from the energy company, Duggan said that DTE was still in the early stages of its investment program, according to an account published in the *Detroit News*. Although the company had not addressed the circuit that failed, the mayor said, "obviously it'll become the focus of inspections right now." The Democratic mayor added that inspecting circuits "will make an event like today far less likely to occur again."

However, he added, "We will, for another few years, have some risk of this happening."

The blackout of a major American city highlights the chronic neglect of the electrical and other essential infrastructure systems in the United States. A recent study by the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) found that the country's infrastructure was mostly below standard, with many elements approaching the end of their service life. "A large portion of the system exhibits significant deterioration. Condition and capacity are of significant concern with strong risk of failure," the report concluded.

It also underscores the impact of the decades-long deindustrialization of the former Motor City, which has suffered from the loss of 90 percent of its manufacturing jobs over the last half century. Decades of federal, state and local budget cuts by Democrats and Republicans have starved essential services while billions in tax cuts have been showered on the auto companies and other major corporations.

This culminated in the bankruptcy restructuring of the city, overseen by an unelected emergency manager, which slashed the pensions and health care benefits of city workers, privatized many city services and handed over public assets, including the DIA art museum and the city lighting system, to private interests.

A large number of lives were placed in danger by the outage, including those riding in elevators, driving on crowded streets where stoplights suddenly stopped functioning, and hospital patients relying on electrically powered medical equipment. Though inevitably framed by the corporate media as an accidental and entirely contingent failure of infrastructure, such events always reflect deeper social and political processes.

The seven-hour-long Detroit blackout highlights the lethal dangers posed by the takeover of critical infrastructures by capitalist corporations, a process that is taking place internationally and for which Detroit is serving as a testing ground.

The systematic transfer of vital public infrastructures into the hands of predatory private firms, a process that found very concentrated expression in Detroit's Chapter 9 bankruptcy process, can only produce a steady rise in such incidents.

Touted by the political establishment and the media as marking a new dawn for Detroit, the bankruptcy has enabled powerful corporate-financial interests to accelerate the privatization

of essential city assets, including the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD), the Department of Public Works (DPW) and the handing over of large parts of the city's electrical infrastructure to DTE Energy.

DTE, which has benefited handsomely from the parceling out of the choicest pieces of city property under the auspices of Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr and the bankruptcy court of Judge Steven Rhodes, has played a central role in the corporate restructuring of the city, including participation in the drafting of plans to discontinue water, electrical and other essential services to parts of the city deemed too poor and underpopulated for investment.

The installation of Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr was secured as part of a secret agreement between former Detroit Mayor David Bing, a member of DTE's board of directors for more than a decade before becoming mayor in 2009, and Michigan Governor Rick Snyder. In exchange for Bing's public endorsement of Orr's installation, the Republican governor assured the Democratic mayor that Orr would use his dictatorial powers to expand DTE's control over the city's power grid.

The plan formulated by Orr made good on Snyder's word, calling for the sale of nearly half of the city's 80,000 streetlights and the liquidation of the Detroit Public Lighting Department (DPLD) into the corporate utility giant. Orr's plan received a stamp of approval from the federal judiciary in December 2013, when federal bankruptcy judge Steven Rhodes approved the sale of hundreds of millions worth of DPLD bonds.

Under the plan, DTE itself assumes "operation and maintenance" of the city's entire streetlight system. The system was already in a catastrophic state of disrepair, as illustrated by the killing of a 14-year-old girl at a blacked-out intersection just days before Rhodes's approval of the \$210 million bond sale.

Such policies are creating conditions in which large-scale public infrastructure catastrophes such as Tuesday's blackout, leading to countless similar tragedies, are unavoidable.

Last year, another 14-year old Detroit resident, Malik Shelton, was electrocuted by a downed DTE power line while walking near his public school. DTE trucks arrived to fix the damaged lines only after Shelton's death was reported on the local news, despite numerous calls to the company placed by residents in the area during the previous night and early morning.

Controlled by executive committees of professional profiteers, capitalist firms such as DTE plan their operations based strictly on their own short-term financial interests, excluding completely from consideration their impact on the population as whole. Corporate leadership sees little reason to expand the resources necessary to repair and upgrade ailing infrastructure. From a purely profit-driven standpoint, the more rational policy is to wait for outages to occur, and then to make the bare minimum level of repairs necessary after the fact.

As a result, DTE-owned power lines across Michigan languish in various states of collapse, insuring that tens and hundreds of thousands of residents lose power, often for periods lasting days or longer, every time a significant storm system passes through the state of Michigan. Unmaintained DTE lines throughout the city are in contact with and entangled with flammable materials, creating conditions in which a windstorm can generate raging infernos that spread rapidly throughout the metropolitan area. In September 2010, 750 DTE

power lines fell during high winds, producing large fires in numerous residential areas throughout the city.

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