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Speak Out Now

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PG&E: Our Lives vs. Their Profits

Over two million people in Central and Northern California recently had their power abruptly shut off by the utility company Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E). Most residents had less than 48 hours notice that their power would be shut off for as long as a week, and had to rush to prepare for the chaos and disruption to their lives.

The PG&E website and call centers were overloaded and shutdown, and many residents had no idea whether their power was going to be shut off or not. Schools, medical clinics, small businesses, and more were closed. People rushed to the nearest grocery stores to get batteries, flashlights, water, ice and food, often finding the shelves were already cleaned out of needed supplies. Those with back-up generators raced to gas stations for fuel, only to find the lines were already over twenty cars deep in many cities. PG&E set up so-called relief centers where residents could pick up some supplies like water and batteries but most of these ran out in a matter of hours.

Hundreds of thousands of workers lost days of work with no pay, had their food spoil, and their safety put at risk. Dozens of car accidents happened where traffic signals and street lights were out. A 67-year old man died 12 minutes after the power went out, cutting off his breathing machine and his back-up oxygen tank. The autopsy report blamed the death on heart failure, but there is no question that a lack of oxygen put stress on his heart. Governor Gavin Newsom said that PG&E should pay \$100 in rebates to customers affected by the power outages – as if that pathetic amount would cover the financial and psychological stress people have endured.

We have every right to be furious at PG&E. A downed PG&E power line was responsible for starting the largest fire in California history last year. The Camp Fire destroyed the entire town of Paradise in less than a day, killing 85 people, destroying 18,000 structures, and burning over 153,000 acres. As a result of the fire, PG&E was fined \$30 billion. In response, the company filed for bankruptcy and said it would double customers' rates in order to pay the fine. Even after PG&E filed for bankruptcy, its top seven board members continue to make well over one million dollars per year. PG&E was so worried about backlash

during these power outages that they put up barricades outside their headquarters in San Francisco.

PG&E tries to justify the power outages as necessary to prevent further fires. Because of warming temperatures and increased drought due to climate disruption, the California fire season lasts year round and is increasingly dangerous during periods of high winds, when the risk of falling power lines increases. This is all true, but it has been a problem for decades, and PG&E has done nothing to fix it.

According to PG&E, there are 81,000 miles of above-ground power lines. They claim it costs about \$3 million per mile to put the lines underground. They devote so few workers to this repair that they only repair 100 miles of power lines per year. That means it would cost about \$243 billion and take 810 years for them to complete this project at their ridiculous pace. And, PG&E has the audacity to claim that the customers would have to pay for it, amounting to about \$15,000 per account. So instead of really fixing anything, PG&E just promises more power shutoffs and continues to put our lives at risk and in chaos.

We don't have to rely on PG&E's insane timeline. This is a problem that should be fixed quickly. California is the wealthiest state in the wealthiest country in the world. California has the highest concentration of billionaires in the world. There is more than enough money and more than enough people in the state who need work and who could be employed to fix this emergency. If the lives of working people mattered in the slightest to PG&E or the politicians in Sacramento, this problem would have been solved a long time ago. Instead, PG&E and the politicians that back them couldn't make it any clearer – protecting their profits is more important than protecting our lives.

U.S. Economic Policy

What's in Store for the 99%

How are billionaires getting richer while the rest of us barely scrape by? Why hasn't the economy recovered for working people? Come hear Jack Rasmus, professor of economics and politics, discuss the current economy and its impact on us.

7pm, Saturday November 9th

South Berkeley Senior Center (2939 Ellis St.)

\$5 admission – no one turned away