

# Texas tragedy wasn't inevitable: Take over the utilities!

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People line up for water at a park in Houston on Feb. 18. Many Texas households are without running water due to frozen and burst pipes.

Feb. 20 — Millions of people in Texas are living in misery after a winter storm hit the state. For days they have been without heat, light and water.

The loss of electricity caused food and medicines, like insulin, to spoil in refrigerators. Many homes and hospitals still don't have water because the pumps froze.

Hundreds of people may have died, including [at least three people in Abilene](#). One of the victims was a homeless man found on the street.

Thousands of prisoners in Houston are being [held in freezing cells with clogged toilets](#). Many haven't been convicted of anything but are too poor to post bail.

Gloria V. of the Socialist Unity Party reports from Dallas that "people are helping each other to survive. Some have opened their homes to neighbors.

"The utilities have rolling shut-offs without notifying residents when power will be turned on and off," said the SUP organizer. "Internet service has also been interrupted. People trying to warm up in their cars have died of carbon monoxide poisoning."

How can this be happening in the biggest energy-producing state in the country? This tragedy isn't a natural disaster. The culprit is a capitalist system on steroids that places profits ahead of human life.

Not everyone suffered. Hundreds of thousands of people living in the dark in Houston could see the downtown skyscrapers brightly lit. [Eleven-year old Cristian Pavon](#) froze to death in his family's trailer home while U.S. Senator Ted Cruz flew from Houston to a luxury resort in Cancún, Mexico.

The soaring gas and oil prices were “like hitting the jackpot,” [bragged Robert Burns](#), a top executive at Comstock Resources. Comstock’s biggest investor is billionaire Jerry Jones, the owner of the Dallas Cowboys football club who attacked Colin Kaepernick.

## **Blame deregulation, not windmills**

Four hundred years ago the novelist Cervantes wrote about Don Quixote attacking windmills. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and Fox News are blaming wind and solar power for the catastrophe.

That’s more than a fable, it’s a lie. Wind normally produces just 10 percent of the electrical power in Texas. It was when former President George W. Bush was Texas governor that the state started harvesting wind power.

More important than frozen blades on wind turbines have been frozen natural gas pumps. Even coal-fired power plants stopped running because the coal froze. One of the state’s four nuclear reactors shut down.

Gov. Abbott is now trying to divert people’s anger by breaking contracts to sell natural gas to Mexico. That’s another colonial attack that’s forcing over four million Mexicans to go without heat.

The old pharaohs would have been better prepared even without electric power. They planned ahead for floods and famines. Food was stored in warehouses so people wouldn’t starve — and the rulers wouldn’t be overthrown.

The capitalist utilities in Texas refused to build enough backup power because doing so would cut into their profits. The Lone Star State has its own electrical power grid so its utilities wouldn’t be subject to the Federal Power Commission.

That also makes importing power from other states much more expensive.

Homeowners are now being [socked with electric bills](#) as high as \$10,000.

[Electric companies in northern states](#) regularly operating in cold weather are forced to invest in more insulation, heated pipes and crushers to break up frozen coal. Wind turbines can be equipped with heaters and insulated gearboxes.

Texas utilities can get away without spending money on this stuff because of deregulation. The current disaster is the result.

Another consequence was the \$40-billion-plus Enron utility bankruptcy 20 years ago. This was the biggest financial scandal in U.S. history.

Among the cheerleaders of Enron's corrupt management were members of the Bush family and their political associates. Former Secretary of State James Baker and former Commerce Secretary Robert Mosbacher — both members of President George Herbert Walker Bush's cabinet — [were put on Enron's payroll](#).

Baker was even awarded the "Enron Prize" for public service.

### **Shut-offs also kill**

Nobody should sneer at Texas. The millions of poor and working people who are suffering need solidarity.

Yankee utility companies are just as greedy and incompetent. Wall Street has billions invested in Texas.

ConEd in New York City owns hundreds of miles of ancient cast-iron gas mains. Eight people died in El Barrio (East Harlem) on March 12, 2014, when their apartment building collapsed because of a gas explosion.

The cause was a century-old gas main that the utility didn't replace. That year [ConEd had a net income](#) of \$1.09 billion. Every cent of it should have been used to

upgrade infrastructure.

The California utility Pacific Gas and Electric decided to boost profits by cutting back on tree trimming near its power lines. Over six years, [1,500 forest fires broke out](#), including the deadliest in the state's history.

Top executives at PG&E were [awarded pay raises](#) for these crimes.

Utility shut-offs are just as deadly. Three adults and seven children died in a Baltimore house fire on May 15, 1982, when a kerosene lamp fell over. Among those killed was a 7-month-old baby.

The family had been [disconnected by Baltimore Gas and Electric](#) because they couldn't afford a \$808 back bill. That's eighty dollars for each victim of BG&E greed.

Just as all housing foreclosures and evictions should be banned, so should all utility shut-offs. We need to cancel rent, mortgages and utility bills. Our water should be safe and free!

Despite regional outages, the utility industry wasn't even willing to upgrade its power grids. There was no profit in doing so. Billions had to be included in President Obama's 2009 stimulus bill to begin this necessary work.

[Congresswoman Cori Bush](#), who was pepper sprayed at a Black Lives Matter demonstration, declared: "Corporations shouldn't be allowed to profit off our suffering. Utilities need to be public goods."

To hell with Ted Cruz! The tragedy in Texas shows we need a people's takeover of the utilities.

