



MEDIA RELEASE

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Lengthy blackouts due to shortage of power workers

Recovery efforts following recent extreme weather have been hampered by a severe shortage of distribution power workers, with the Electrical Trades Union saying lengthy delays to the restoration of electricity to tens of thousands of homes is the direct result of massive job cuts.

More than 60,000 homes remain without power across Sydney, the Central Coast and Blue Mountains — with many to be without electricity until the end of the week — as overstretched crews work around the clock in trying conditions to replace damaged sections of the poles and wires network.

In addition to crews being brought in from around the state, distribution company Ausgrid has reportedly requested assistance from Queensland power companies to cover the chronic shortage of staff.

ETU secretary Justin Page said the large-scale blackouts — which come just months after a previous storm left parts of Sydney's north shore without power for more than a week — highlighted the impact of 5,000 job losses since 2015 at electrical distributors Ausgrid, Endeavour Energy, and Essential Energy.

"Our members have been working around the clock in recent days, desperately attempting to restore power to homes and businesses, but the fact is that with 5,000 fewer workers there simply aren't as many highly-skilled people available to do the work," Mr Page said.

"Despite the network growing in size, and the risks posed by extreme weather and climate change increasing, staffing levels in the NSW electricity network have never been as low as they currently are.

"Power workers have been doing emergency restoration work for months straight, including throughout the recent bushfire crisis, repairing unprecedented amounts of damage to vital electricity infrastructure.

"But the NSW Government's privatisation agenda, and imposed cuts from the Federal Government's Australian Energy Regulator, have combined to drive the loss of 40 per cent of the jobs at the state's three electricity distributors.

"While the bushfires may have been unprecedented, scientists have long warned that climate change would cause more frequent and extreme weather events, yet rather than increase resources to make our power network more resilient we continue to see the loss of specialist distribution workers.

"Our union has repeatedly warned that the unsustainable slashing of jobs would impact recovery efforts following fires, floods, storms and other natural disasters, yet rather than act on those warnings we have seen the cuts continue, with another 1,300 jobs at risk at NSW electricity distributors in the next three years.

"We need the NSW and Federal governments to learn from the current situation and deliver an immediate boost to the resources available to repair the electricity poles and wires in a timely way following natural disasters.

"Extreme weather events such as storms and bushfires are becoming more common with climate change, so the prudent way to make the power network more resilient is to immediately stop planned cuts and begin rebuilding job numbers to take action on these risks."

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