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OPINION

BILLIONAIRES WON'T SAVE CALIFORNIANS FROM PG&E DISASTERS. IT'S TIME WE OWNED OUR POWER

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This week, howling winds whipped through Northern California, fueling fires, downing trees and blowing toxic smoke into Bay Area cities. The utility giant Pacific Gas & Electric cut power to large swaths of the state to prevent more wildfires but left some high-voltage transmission lines running—including the one that malfunctioned where the Kincade Fire broke out. Hundreds of thousands of people were forced to evacuate their homes, and up to 2 million more were left in the dark when PG&E cut its power without addressing how to meet people's needs.

Now, Governor Gavin Newsom is suggesting that Warren Buffet's Berkshire Hathaway should buy PG&E. While some may see Berkshire's plans for the company as preferable to other vulture funds, the impact on most Californians will be similar: more power shutoffs, more fires, multibillion-dollar bailouts for investors and skyrocketing electric bills for the rest of us.

The billionaires won't save us. It's time to completely transform how we power our communities.

The old electrical system—shaped through backroom deals between billionaire investors and politicians—relies on nearly 200 dirty gas power plants to generate massive amounts of electricity and carry it across dangerously long distances. This system produces profits for a few at the expense of many: working-class communities of color who are getting sick from living near dirty gas power plants, the medically vulnerable who rely on powered medical devices, and all of the people whose lives and livelihoods are disrupted by prolonged power outages and wildfires yet still have to pay rising rates.

This system cannot be salvaged.

Yet, just last week, the California Public Utilities Commission voted unanimously to move forward with AB 1054—a bill that sets up a \$21 billion bailout fund to cover fire damages. It allows investor-owned utilities to pay off wildfire liability, in part, by keeping additional charges on our already skyrocketing electric bills. Wildfire victims should be compensated through corporate profits, not through ratepayer-funded bailouts.

Instead of pouring billions into propping up a dangerous, antiquated electrical infrastructure, Governor Newsom, our legislators and the California Public Utilities Commission must move California toward a safe, reliable, community-owned energy infrastructure that reinvests in local communities.

The contours of what a 21st-century energy system should look like are clear—we need a web of decentralized, distributed energy systems that generate, store and distribute clean renewable power locally and regionally. Workers and communities need to own and make meaningful decisions about our energy systems, not big corporations like PG&E. And we need to start building the 21st-century grid in working-class communities of color that have been unfairly burdened by this dirty energy system.

Now, with PG&E in bankruptcy, our elected officials need to step in and stand with communities like ours—communities that have been unfairly burdened by a dirty extractive energy system.

We're already shaping the building blocks of the energy future we need. Locally, we built East Bay Community Energy, a local Community Choice energy program that takes procurement decisions away from PG&E and puts it in the hands of local communities so we can move toward cleaner, more affordable energy. Unlike the investor-owned utility model, which extracts wealth out of our communities, the revenues from East Bay Clean Energy are reinvested into local Green New Deal projects for energy efficiency, local clean energy generation, shared solar cooperatives and microgrids. We've approved \$5.1 million to construct local solar, wind and battery storage projects over the next two years, including the replacement of an old jet-fueled power plant in Oakland.

We're not alone. Community Choice energy programs like ours have sprung up in [29 counties and cities across California](#). Our goal is to build enough distributed energy resources that we will no longer be dependent on PG&E's volatile and expensive transmission system. And we need massive investment to multiply solutions like these.

California should also expand existing initiatives like the California Public Utility Commission's community shared solar projects and Solar on Multifamily Affordable Housing, which invests \$1 billion to bring solar power to working-class renters. These projects extend the benefit of clean, renewable energy generation and bill savings to thousands of Californians. And people want it. Within weeks of the SOMAH program launch, wait lists were already full.

In the short-term, PG&E should fund the clean renewable backup power that our communities need to survive their power shutoffs. We can turn our local libraries, recreation centers and designated public evacuation sites into hubs for climate resilience with solar-powered microgrids and storage. When PG&E decides to cut power to millions, climate resilience hubs can be a space for people to power their medical devices, access heat, breathe clean air, and refrigerate breastmilk and medicine. These climate resilience hubs can also serve as sites for community energy generation that help bring energy costs down for entire neighborhoods, not just individual households, and transition us to the safe, stable energy system we need.

Let's dismantle PG&E's dirty, dangerous electrical infrastructure—and truly own our power.

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A burned car sits on a property devastated by the Kincade Fire, off Highway 128 in Geyserville, California, on October 31. PHILIP PACHECO/AFP/GETTY