



04 MAR, 2020

Cuts 'behind long outages'

St George & Sutherland Shire Leader, Sydney



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Labor says Ausgrid is fudging the figures Cuts 'behind long outages'

BY MURRAY TREMBATH

AUSGRID has been accused of fudging staff numbers in trying to justify long delays in restoring power after last month's storms.

More than 300 homes and businesses in St George and Sutherland Shire were among 13,000 properties in Sydney and on the Central Coast left without power for about a week after storms on February 8-9.

As Ausgrid battled to restore supplies, a leaked internal document revealed staffing levels had fallen 10 per cent below the minimum legal levels put in place under the terms of its 2015 partial privatisation.

The electricity network operator was required to maintain at least 3570 full-time equivalent staff up until the end of June 2020.

However, the number was only 3238 in December 2019.

Ausgrid's chief operating officer Trevor Armstrong said the figures did not take into account long-term contractors and, together, the number was above the legal requirement.

However Labor MLC Mark Buttigieg, a former long-time power worker and the party's spokesman in St George and Sutherland Shire, said long-term contractors were not involved in emergency responses.

Mr Buttigieg said the contractors were engaged only

on specific projects.

"Ausgrid is fudging the figures," he said.

"What they don't tell you is that these 400 contractors are useless when these events happen because they can't go and restore supply.

"I worked there for 30 years (when it was Energy Australia and before that Sydney Electricity) as a high voltage operator on the front line and I was a union organiser for seven years, so I know how it works.

"We used to have people reconnected in a day or two maximum.

"The bottom line is they have had significant staff reductions, to a level well below the jobs guarantee legislation.

"It's just not possible to restore supplies quickly when you have lost so many staff over a short period."

Ausgrid was asked for comment on February 26, but had not provided a response to the *Leader* by our print deadline.



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CRITICAL: Mark Buttigieg (right), with local resident Phill Edwards, says staff cuts at Ausgrid were to blame for the long delays in reconnecting power. **Picture: John Veage**



POWER-LESS: A portable generator in use at Peakhurst South Public School after a power outage lasting several days from Sunday February 9. **Picture: John Veage**