



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Syracuse University students win fossil fuel divestment, 2012-2014

- Fossil Fuel Divestment Movement (2010 -)

10 October

2012

to: 21 November

2014

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Syracuse, New York*

Location Description: *Syracuse University*

Goals:

Extend Syracuse University's environmental commitments into the University's endowment. Divest the University's endowment of holdings in the top 200 fossil fuel companies.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches › Bill McKibben – an environmentalist and a professor at Middlebury College who founded climate justice group 350.org – spoke of the danger of global warming and the need for divestment
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention › Divest SU sent an email to University Chancellor Nancy Cantor about the group's goal of achieving divestment and asked for a list of investments by the university
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols › "We are unstoppable, another world is possible."
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › "Divest = Freedom", "Dive\$tment" and "There is no planet B"
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions › the SU Student Association Student Association passed a resolution in support of fossil fuel divestment by an overwhelming majority of 28-2
- 036. Performances of plays and music › Divest SU screened "Do The Math" – a documentary film about the national divestment movement to change the terrifying math of the climate change

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention › Divest SU wrote several public letters to The Daily Orange to raise awareness of the pressing climate issues

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches › Divest SU invited speakers from community organizations such as the Alliance for Green Economy and Citizens Climate Lobby
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions › The University Senate passed a resolution in support of fossil fuel divestment
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention › Divest SU sent a formal request for divestment from fossil fuels to University Chancellor Kent Syverud and Chief Financial Officer Marcoccia
- 006. Group or mass petitions › The protesters delivered over 70 letters, some handwritten, to Chancellor Syverud's office
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support › Divest SU wrote an open letter that was published in The Daily Orange, demanding the university to respect the resolutions passed by the University Senate and Student Associations
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols › “Global warming is not an investment.”
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 6th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support › Assistant Professor Matt Huber wrote a letter to Divest SU supporting the group's sit-in and divestment efforts
- 002. Letters of opposition or support › The protesters delivered a 43-page document on grievances to the university chancellor
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 162. Sit-in

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Environment

Group characterization:

- Environmentalists
- faculty
- students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Divest SU

Partners:

Divest ESF

Students of Sustainability

THE General Body, a coalition of student activist groups that each protested school administration policies in the past

Democracy Matters

External allies:

Bill McKibben, an environmentalist and a professor at Middlebury College who founded climate justice group 350.org

350.org

Alliance for Green Economy

Citizens from Citizens Climate Lobby

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- 350.org
- Bill McKibben
- Divest ESF
- an environmentalist and a professor at Middlebury College who founded climate justice group 350.org

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Students of Sustainability

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Alliance for Green Economy
- Citizens from Citizens Climate Lobby
- Democracy Matters

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- THE General Body
- a coalition of student activist groups that each protested school administration policies in the past

Segment Length: 129 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Syracuse University administration

Campaigner violence:

No campaigner violence

Repressive Violence:

No repressive violence

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Divest SU – a group of concerned students at Syracuse University (SU) joined by activists at the nearby State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY-ESF) – started the SU Fossil Fuel Divestment Campaign to fight for climate justice through demanding the school administration freeze new investments in fossil fuel companies and fully divest from the industry. This campaign was a part of an international student movement to pressure universities and colleges to stop investing in oil, coal and gas companies.

The divestment campaign at SU began after a public lecture in October 2012 by Bill McKibben – an environmentalist and professor at Middlebury College who founded the climate justice group 350.org. McKibben spoke of the danger of global warming and the need for divestment, remarking that “We have to take initiative for the sake of not only our future, but our children’s future.” He also cited the divestment effort in the 1980s to fight against apartheid in South Africa, noting that SU divested in 1988 but reinvested in 1994 after the abandonment of apartheid policies. While McKibben’s speech inspired the creation of Divest SU, Hurricane Sandy – one of the deadliest and most destructive hurricanes in U.S. history that struck in late October 2012 – mobilized students and sparked wide discussions on campus regarding climate change.

In November 2012, Divest SU sent an email to University Chancellor Nancy Cantor about the group’s goal of achieving divestment and asked for a list of investments by the university. Though Cantor did not provide the investment portfolio, she expressed her willingness to work with the students and discuss the matter of divestment; she subsequently formed the Sustainability Action Council that analyzed how the university’s “financial, capital and human resource investments” aligned with the American College and University Presidents’ Climate Commitment – an agreement that recognized climate issues and encouraged participating institutions to take steps to be more environmental friendly. Vice President Shere Abbott also commented on the topic of divestment, remarking that the Fossil Fuel Divestment Campaign was “less clear-cut” from the divestment in the 1980s vis-à-vis the immoral apartheid in South Africa; she also cited that SU, like many other institutions, would face problems in maintaining its level of services, particularly with regard to financial aid and scholarships, if the endowments decreased. However, Abbott said that she was happy to see students getting involved in helping to solve important issues such as climate change, and that she would be open to dialogues in the future.

Divest SU organized a major action on 4 March 2013, joining the rest of the United States in the “March Fo[u]rth on Climate” campaign. Though the weather was tough and snowy, over 20 students from SU and SUNY-ESF gathered on the steps of

Hendricks Chapel at SU and chanted “We are unstoppable, another world is possible.” The ralliers held up large, hand-made signs and banners with messages, such as “Divest = Freedom,” “Dive\$ment” and “There is no planet B,” while they marched to Crouse-Hinds Hall, where leaders of Divest SU met with members of the Sustainability Action Council, Vice Chancellor and Provost Eric Spina, and Chief Financial Officer Lou Marcoccia.

During the meeting, the students outlined their demands the university cease to invest in the fossil fuel industry and eliminate all fossil fuel investments within the next five years. Ben Keubrich, one of the student leaders, said in his email to The Daily Orange, the school’s student newspaper, that the administrators were willing to work with Divest SU to find ways to reduce fossil fuel investments without hurting the school’s endowment and other functions. The students and administrators also explored the potential technical and financial challenges in the “total elimination of the fossil fuel investments.” Vice Chancellor Spina noted that while some investments were “locked in” for a long term, others were managed not by the university but third-party groups. Spina also reiterated the university’s commitment to the environment, saying that “We are committed to exploring the facts and making both a socially and financially responsible policy recommendation, understanding that the administration will work with the Board of Trustees on this matter [of divestment].”

The rally in March 2013 also drew much attention from students and faculty, not only at SU but also at SUNY-ESF. Jack Manno, an environmental studies professor at SUNY-ESF, said after the demonstration that “Ending the fossil fuel era is essential if we are going to have viable environment. We have to switch our energy so people can thrive;” Associate Professor of Geography at SU, Bob Wilson, remarked that it was crucial for the university to demonstrate its obligation to “the welfare of its students and the environment.” While the March protest bridged the gap between SU and SUNY-ESF, it also shed light on the issue of climate change that was “usually invisible to the students.”

Having learned from the protest that SU had a large investment in fossil fuel production that contributed to global warming, the student body united behind the cause. On 29 April 2013, the SU Student Association passed a resolution in support of fossil fuel divestment by an overwhelming majority of 28-2. In the following months, Divest SU continued its effort for divestment and partnered with Students of Sustainability on events, such as a screening of “Do The Math” – a documentary film about the national divestment movement and the science of climate change; the student group also wrote several public letters to The Daily Orange to raise awareness about pressing climate issues.

In March 2014, Divest SU sent a formal request for divestment from fossil fuels to University Chancellor Kent Syverud and Chief Financial Officer Marcoccia. The letter highlighted the urgency and grave consequences of a warming planet, citing natural disasters, such as Typhoon Haiyan and Superstorm Sandy, and statistics from a World Bank report. It reiterated the students’ demand to “extend SU’s environmental commitments into the endowment through ending support for the top 200 fossil fuel companies.” The letter also denounced the fossil fuel industry for its greed and showed the unwavering determination of the students for divestment. At the same time, Divest SU garnered more support from other student groups, such as Democracy Matters, and the wider community. Divest SU organized an “Up For Climate Justice” session in early April 2014 and invited speakers from community organizations, such as the Alliance for Green Economy and Citizens Climate Lobby, as well as two bands, Palm Full and Ethan & Max.

With growing support for divestment, the University Senate, like the SU Student Association, passed a resolution in support of fossil fuel divestment on 16 April 2014. Subsequently, the school administration took an initiative to form a nine-member Socially Responsible Investment Matters Committee and held a closed door meeting to discuss divestment. Though the committee had three members from the student body, they did not invite Divest SU to its meeting.

On 21 April 2014, Divest SU held a demonstration on the steps of Hendricks Chapel to raise awareness and celebrate the beginning of Earth Week. Members of the student activist group also delivered over 70 letters, some handwritten, to Chancellor Syverud’s office to persuade him to push forward divestment along with the Board of Trustees. The demonstrations were caused by the frustration of how the school administration handled divestment. Ella Mendonsa, a member of Divest SU, said that the students sent multiple emails to the Chancellor but received no response.

Two months later, Divest SU received a letter from the Socially Responsible Investment Matters Committee that stated the university would not divest from fossil fuel industry, concluding that it was not “practical or fiscally-prudent.”

In response to the rejection, Divest SU staged a protest in the Shaw Quadrangle on 30 September 2014, where students, faculty, and alumni expressed their support for divestment, chanting “Global warming is not an investment.” The students wrote an open letter that was published in *The Daily Orange*, demanding the university respect the resolutions passed by the University Senate and Student Associations and take necessary steps to carry out the democratic will of the students to divest while instituting greater transparency. This protest was the third time in 2014 that the students rallied for divestment.

On 3 November 2014, Divest SU joined THE General Body, a coalition of student activist groups, in its largest action since the start of the divestment campaign in 2012. Despite snowy weather, over 300 students staged an eighteen-day sit-in at Crouse-Hinds Hall, rallied at Hendricks Chapel before marching to Chancellor’s office and delivered a 43-page document on grievances to Chancellor Syverud. The students organized the action in light of the Board of Trustees meeting on 6 November 2014. Colton Jones, co-president of Students for Sustainability, stated that Divest SU and other students groups were frustrated with the lack of transparency, saying that the students faced a “top-down model of decision making behind closed doors.”

Though the Chancellor scheduled many listening sessions, he never personally attended them. Jones charged the Chancellor with being “focused more on appeasing student demands than taking concerted action.” THE General Body also expressed its concerns about the effectiveness of administration-run work groups, which were supposed to serve as driving forces behind policy changes. However, according to Jones, the work groups and ad hoc committees had “overridden established governance processes” and did not have the power to “produce the structural changes that the campus community needs.”

Like other groups in THE General Body, Divest SU had major concerns regarding the transparency of the Socially Responsible Investment Committee and its commitment to continue the discussion on divestment. The students stated in the grievance document that though the Committee included presidents of Student Association and Graduate Student Organization and had a better student to administrator ratio than many other groups, Divest SU was not allowed to speak or attend the meetings. In the resolution part of the grievance document, Divest SU proposed a meeting between the group and the Committee to discuss and push forward actions on fossil fuel divestment by Fall 2014, asked for a list of fossil fuel investments, and demanded by Spring 2015 a five-year plan to withdraw fossil fuel investments.

Following the sit-in, the school administration agreed to meet with Divest SU and further committed that “participation in the occupation of Crouse-Hinds Hall will not result in sanctions through the Code of Student Conduct, the Code of Ethical Conduct, or other disciplinary policies.” In February 2015, members of Divest SU came together with the administrators to discuss divestment in their first ever meeting.

A month later, on 31 March 2015, Syracuse University announced that it would end its direct investment in fossil fuel companies, and that it would also direct its external investment managers to “take every step possible to prohibit investments” in these companies. In addition, the university sought to invest in green-technology developing companies in areas such as solar energy, biofuels, and advanced recycling. With this announcement, Syracuse became the biggest university in the world to have committed to divest its endowment (\$1.18 billion) from the fossil fuel industry.

In a public statement, Chancellor Syverud remarked that “Syracuse has a long record of supporting responsible environmental stewardship and good corporate citizenship, and we want to continue that record through formalizing our commitment to not invest directly in fossil fuels.” Environmentalist Bill McKibben praised the SU divestment as “a great tribute to the students who made real sacrifices to stand up to power and to an administration that can see where the future lies.”

Research Notes

Influences:

The Fossil Fuel Divestment Campaign at Syracuse University was influenced by a growing fossil fuel divestment movement nationwide, which was caused by 350.org Do the Math Tour by Bill McKibben and Swarthmore College Mountain Justice's campaign in 2010 (1). This campaign resembled many similarities to the anti-apartheid divestment movement at various academic institutions in the 1970s (1). Divest SU's unprecedented success in making Syracuse University the biggest university in the world to have committed to divest its endowment (\$1.18 billion) from fossil fuel industry also contributed greatly to the national momentum and indirectly to the divestment efforts at other institutions (2). Most notably, this campaign at SU influenced a week of divestment actions at Harvard University supported by high profile alumni Natalie Portman and Robert Kennedy Jr. in April 2015 (2).

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