



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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University of Mary Washington students win fossil fuel divestment, 2015-2016

- Fossil Fuel Divestment Movement (2010 -)

February

2015

to: February

2016

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: Fredericksburg, Virginia

Location Description: University of Mary Washington

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 038. Marches › University Students marching
- 162. Sit-in › Students at UMW organize a sit-in outside of the University's president's office

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books › Published report on the feasibility of fossil fuel divestment, outlining both economic and social impacts

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 038. Marches

Methods in 4th segment:

- 038. Marches

Methods in 5th segment:

- 038. Marches

Methods in 6th segment:

- 038. Marches

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 048. Protest meetings

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Environment

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- University of Mary Washington Students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

DivestUMW (presently known as the Environmental Action Collective)

Partners:

UMW President's Council on Sustainability

External allies:

350.org

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- DivestUMW (presently known as the Environmental Action Collective)

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- UMW President's Council on Sustainability

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 2 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Some members of UMW's Board of Visitors

Campaigner violence:

No campaigner violence.

Repressive Violence:

Police forcibly shut down the sit-in that took place outside of the office of President Richard Hurley, permitting students just 30 seconds to evacuate the building. Two UMW students and one Fredericksburg resident were arrested.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Following the success of the fossil fuel divestment campaign at the University of Mary Washington, the UMW Environmental Action Collective has shifted their on-campus focus to a global mission, based on achieving general environmental, racial, and economic justice.

In October of 2014, two students at the University of Mary Washington (UMW), Benjamin Hermerding, president of the Young Democrats, and Nate Levin, member of DivestUMW, requested an informal meeting with UMW administration to discuss the school's investment portfolio. The open question-and-answer session focused primarily on the 5-year plan released by UMW's Strategic Planning Task Force, which prioritized fiscally competitive investments. Several students vocalized concern over the school's investment in fossil fuels and pushed for greater sustainability efforts from the school's board of visitors.

The original discussion on divestment was "cordial and light" but failed to produce direct results. In the fall of 2014, DivestUMW, the student organization at UMW dedicated to environmental justice and divestment efforts, shifted their tactics from discussion to direct action.

As part of this shift, over 200 students from multiple universities in Virginia, including the University of Virginia and Virginia Commonwealth University, marched on UMW's Campus Walk on 15 February 2015 to demand fossil fuel divestment as part of a statewide conference students organized.

In response to this protest, the University of Mary Washington Board of Visitors granted members of DivestUMW 15 minutes to present their demands on 19 February 2015, making DivestUMW the first student organization to be allotted time to speak at a board meeting. At this stage, the organization's requests included: the immediate creation of a subcommittee to form a solidified, well-researched proposal for divestment, the presentation of this proposal, the halting of additional fossil fuel investments, the withdrawal of investments from the "filthy 15" - the largest coal-extracting companies creating extreme environmental hazards - by April 2016, and an official vote on UMW's fossil fuel divestment.

The Board of Visitors Rector Holly Cuellar immediately rejected DivestUMW's request for the creation of a subcommittee.

In response to the Board's unwillingness to move forward, on 26 March 2015, students organized a sit-in outside of the office of University President Richard Hurley. Police forcibly shut down the sit-in after 21 days, giving everyone just 30 seconds to evacuate the premises and resulting in the arrest of two UMW students, Noah Goodwin and Adam Wander, and one Fredericksburg resident, Nina Angelini, on 15 April 2015. Additionally, 17 students received summons on the grounds of trespassing and faced a potential penalty of up to 12 months of jail time.

Outraged, students continued their efforts to elicit a response from the administration. After the sit-in, President Richard Hurley

requested a divestment report that would provide substantial research on the feasibility of divestment. A subcommittee of the President's Council on Sustainability, consisting of students, faculty, and two board members, conducted research for an entire year, creating a report on the implications of divestment.

The special report proposed two recommendations for divestment. The first plan for divestment, known as "Option A," requested that the UMW Foundation's portfolio be 99% free of investments in the 200 companies with the largest fossil fuel reserves - also known as the "Carbon Underground 200." The second and less ambitious plan, known as "Option B," asks the UMW Foundation to remove 98% of the institution's investments in the "Carbon 200."

45 students, from both DivestUMW and Students United, a student organization focused on tuition affordability, protested outside of Lee Hall on 8 February 2016, demanding a vote on divestment from the UMW Board of Visitors. With student tuition and fees increasing from 3.8 percent in 2013-2014 to 5.8 in 2015-2016, many supported the demand for greater accountability from the board.

After recommendations from President Richard Hurley, UMW Student Government Association, the University's Faculty Council, and the President's Council for Sustainability, the University of Mary Washington Board of Visitors voted unanimously on 15 April 2016 to divest 98% of its endowment from the "Carbon Underground 200." This was the first time in UMW history that the board voted in support of any kind of divestment. DivestUMW's campaign succeeded in achieving its initial goals, making the University of Mary Washington the first university in Virginia to divest from fossil fuel companies. Additionally, the UMW Foundation agreed to revise its current investment policies to limit future fossil-fuel investments to a maximum of 4%.

After their victory, DivestUMW changed their name to the UMW Environmental Action Collective, and continued to organize for environmental justice and to support other groups pressing for divestment from fossil fuels.

Research Notes

Influences:

Students at several colleges, like Harvard University and Swarthmore College, began to employ sit-ins and marches for fossil fuel divestment, inspiring efforts at the University of Mary Washington.

Sources:

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[2] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-student-participants>

[3] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/local-community-or-neighborhood-level-campaign>