



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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University of Massachusetts students win fossil fuel divestment, 2012-2016

- Fossil Fuel Divestment Movement (2010 -)

Time period notes: *This campaign started on 01 December 2012 when Divest UMass took part in its first major action at Amherst Commons and concluded on 20 April 2016 when the last action (the last day of sit-in) took place. The campaign goals were achieved on 25 May 2016 when the UMass Foundation, the Board of Trustees, and administration endorsed divestment. In December 2016, Divest UMass restarted its actions, demanding the Board to give a public timeline for divestment. This action is considered the start of a new campaign in the same divestment movement at UMass; thus, it is not included in this case.*

01 December
2012
to: 20 April
2016

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: Amherst, Massachusetts

Location Description: University of Massachusetts Amherst

Goals:

"Fight for climate justice by demanding University of Massachusetts Foundation divest from the top 200 publicly traded fossil fuel companies and reinvest in projects that promote social justice, equality, and sustainability and funds that do not perpetuate racism, classism, sexism and other systems of oppression."

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches › Speech by Jill Stein, 2012 Green Party presidential candidate
- 002. Letters of opposition or support › Wrote letters of opposition to university's president
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors › Wearing of green shirts

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › Dropped a huge banner in school's parking lot
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions › Declaration by the Massachusetts Society of Professors endorsing the fossil fuel divestment campaign

Methods in 4th segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support › Open letter by the Massachusetts Society of Professors to all UMass faculty members to support the campaign
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 038. Marches
- 050. Teach-ins

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches › A public speech by Jill Stein, the 2016 Green Party presidential candidate on UMass Amherst campus
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 016. Picketing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings › A retreat held to discuss future strategy and collaboration to make the campaign a cross-campus effort
- 162. Sit-in › A weeklong sit-in in the Whitmore Administration Building

Notes on Methods:

Divest UMass effectively utilized social medias such as Facebook and Twitter in pushing for more momentum and publicity throughout the campaign.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Environment

Group characterization:

- students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Divest UMass

Partners:

Massachusetts Society of Professors

University of Massachusetts Student Government Association

University of Massachusetts Economics Department

External allies:

Five Colleges Against Fossil Fuels

GoFossilFree.org

350.org

Involvement of social elites:

2012 & 2016 Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein

State Senator Jamie Eldridge

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- 350.org
- Five Colleges Against Fossil Fuels
- GoFossilFree.org
- Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- State Senator Jamie Eldridge
- University of Massachusetts Economics Department
- University of Massachusetts Student Government Association

Segment Length: 206 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

University of Massachusetts Foundation

University of Massachusetts Campus Administration

University of Massachusetts Board of Trustees

Campaigner violence:

No campaigner violence

Repressive Violence:

Local police officers intervened and arrested 34 students on trespassing charges when they refused to leave the administration building after dispersal order was issued on 13 and 14 April 2016. The police did not charge the students, but the Eastern Hampshire District Court placed them on probation.

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 UMass – a group of concerned students – started the UMass Fossil Fuel Divestment Campaign to fight for climate justice through demanding divestment by the UMass Foundation from fossil fuel companies and promoting reinvestment of funds into projects that supported “social justice, equality, and sustainability.” This cross-campus campaign was a part of a multi-school, national student movement to pressure administrations at various universities and colleges to stop investing in fossil fuel companies.

The first action of the campaign at UMass took place on 1 December 2012 in Amherst Common, where the student activists joined Five Colleges Against Fossil Fuels – a coalition formed by five local colleges (Amherst, Hampshire, Mt. Holyoke, Smith, and UMass) – and encircled the park. Holding up signs and wearing green sweaters as symbols of hope for a cleaner future, over 300 students chanted “fossil fuels are subsidized – it’s time for us to mobilize.” They demanded divestments by their institutions and called on Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts to end subsidies for coal industry. The demonstration was peaceful and concluded with a speech by Jill Stein, 2012 Green Party presidential candidate, who praised the efforts of students, remarking “No one has greater moral authority than what you have.”

In the early months of 2013, Divest UMass met several times with school administrators to discuss divestment but they failed to achieve any progress. The group subsequently stepped up its publicity actions and reached out to faculty and students at the university to gather more support. At the same time, the students sent letters and called the president’s office on a regular basis to request a meeting; however, they were ignored.

On 17 October 2013, Divest UMass organized a rally at UMass Amherst, which ended with a huge banner drop in a parking lot while students lined up in front of the banner with a clear message “Divest from Fossil Fuels and Reinvest in Our Future.” On Twitter, the group (@DivestUMass) started a campaign using a hashtag #divestumass with help from 350.org (@350Mass), a climate change group. Over 200 people tweeted using the same hashtag on that day, sparking a campus-wide discussion.

Following these actions, the Board of Trustees formed the Socially Responsible Investment Advisory Committee and started to negotiate with the student activists over divestment.

In the following year, Divest UMass held several conversations with the administration. Representatives of the student activist group, by invitation of the university chancellor, spoke face-to-face with the university president and financial controller of the UMass Foundation at an endowment conference in May 2014. The students also frequently attended public Board of Trustees meetings. However, the talks proved unsuccessful. In fall 2014, Divest UMass held speeches during one of the Board meetings and demanded a vote on divestment, but the Chairman of the Board rejected the request. In the same year, the Massachusetts Society of Professors (MSP), a union that includes most UMass Amherst professors, passed a resolution endorsing the UMass Fossil Fuel Divestment Campaign and divestment in general.

On Earth Day in spring 2015, Divest UMass again organized a rally at the Board of Trustees meeting, but this time it was more assertive than ever. Protesters, including both faculty members and students, held up signs and banners titled “Whose Side Are You On?” challenging members of the Board to pick a side – either that of “justice” or “injustice.” The demonstration also included picketing at the venue, marching on campus, and speaking at the meeting. On Facebook and Twitter, the students launched publicity campaigns with the hashtag #WhoseSideAreYouOn, which later expanded to a national scale with student activists at other institutions using the same hashtag and question during various sit-ins and other actions.

The divestment campaign grew in support and popularity in fall 2015. Students from UMass Boston joined Divest UMass in a rally at a Board of Trustee meeting at Amherst, while the MSP released an open letter to all UMass faculty members and started a petition to gather more backing for the campaign. At the same time, Divest UMass continued to use tactics including dropping banners, organizing a local Millions Students March, and hosting a Teach-In event to show its determination in achieving the divestment goal.

In December 2015, the Board of Trustees ceded ground and announced that the university would divest \$400,000 from the coal industry. Though it was not full divestment, it was a historical win for the student activist group. This success garnered more support across the whole university system. Divest UMass subsequently strengthened its connections with advocates from UMass Boston and Lowell and collaborated more closely in future actions.

The campaigners held their first ever retreat session in February 2016. Focused on future strategy, the students planned a cross-campus movement involving all UMass campuses in Amherst, Boston, Dartmouth, and Lowell. They aimed to improve collaboration, strengthen influences, and build up more power and momentum.

On 11 April 2016, Divest UMass, endorsed by the UMass Student Government Association and Economics Department earlier in the year, organized their biggest action – a weeklong sit-in to pressure the administration to comply with a 12 April deadline for divestment. The occupation of the Whitmore Administration Building – at some points by over 200 students at the same time – resulted in a near complete shutdown of the campus administration and its work. They held frequent nonviolent direct action trainings throughout the day to encourage new people to join the #SitAtWhit action. UMass Amherst Political Science Graduate Student Association, the representative organization of graduate political science students at UMass Amherst, endorsed the #DivestTheRest campaign during the sit-in, citing that “The extraction, transportation, and burning of fossil fuels pose life-threatening consequences to all humanity.” The sit-in also continued into the nights. When police issued a dispersal order at the end of each day, the students moved outside of the building and continued their rallies, chanting and singing “Stand up, fight back” and “Fossil fuels have got to go, hey, hey, ho, ho.”

However, the UMass Board of Trustees remained unmoved by the students’ actions; its chairman Victor Woolridge addressed the Board on 13 April, “UMass has a long, deep and documented commitment to the environment and the use of its resources in a manner that’s compatible with being a socially responsible and sustainable citizen.” He cited that all five campuses of UMass had agreed to the American College & University Presidents’ Climate Commitment, and that the university had reduced its carbon emissions by 17%.

Police officers were present on campus during the whole week and arrested 34 students on trespassing charges when they refused to leave at the end of the third and fourth day. Though the police did not charge the students, the Eastern Hampshire District Court placed them on probation.

During the occupation, State Senator Jamie Eldridge expressed his support on Facebook, while the 2016 Green Party presidential candidate, Jill Stein, joined the campaigners on 20 April 2016 – the last day of their action – and remarked that the students gave "us hope for the future divest from fossil fuels now."

On 25 May 2016, under immense pressure from the school community and various organizations, the Board of Directors of the UMass Foundation voted unanimously for divestment; the UMass Board of Trustees later endorsed the vote. The University of Massachusetts thus became the first major public university to divest its endowment from direct holdings in fossil fuel industry.

Research Notes

Influences:

The UMass Fossil Fuel Divestment Campaign was influenced by a growing fossil fuel divestment movement nationwide, which was caused by 350.org Do the Math Tour 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 UMass's unprecedented success in making UMass the first major public university to divest its endowment from fossil fuel industry also contributed greatly to the national momentum and indirectly to the divestment efforts at other institutions (2). Moreover, this successful campaign sets an exemplar for other campaigns at UMass regarding social justice issues such as immigration and transgender equality (2).

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