

Students Escalate Divestment Campaign After Universities Refuse to Sell Fossil Fuel Stocks

350.org | Dec. 12, 2013

Students across the country are escalating their campaigns for fossil fuel divestment after a number of high profile colleges and universities have rejected measures demanding they sell their stocks.

Schools that have rejected requests for divestment include Harvard University, Cornell University, Middlebury College, Boston College, Vassar College, the City University of New York, Brown University and Swarthmore College.

Divestment activists at each of these schools and others have come together and written a joint letter “rejecting the divestment rejections” and pledging to take future action. Over the last two weeks students around the country took various actions and delivered the letter to their president’s home or administrative offices.

“We can’t continue to pretend that we’re working towards a sustainable campus if we’re still investing in fossil fuels. It’s time for the Vassar community to stand up to what is wrong, and stop turning a blind eye to the injustices we’re funding,” said Graham Stewart, sophomore at Vassar College, where students will host a teach-in on fossil fuel divestment on Friday, followed by a letter delivery to President Catherine Bond Hill.

In the college-rich Boston area, more than 150 students from 10 area schools gathered on a footbridge crossing the Charles River Sunday for a joint divestment demonstration. Schools represented included Boston College, Boston University, Harvard, Tufts, Brandeis, MIT, Northeastern, Wellesley, Olin College of Engineering and Lesley University. Speakers at the Boston event included climate activist, and Harvard Divinity School student, Tim DeChristopher, who spent over a year in prison for disrupting an oil auction in Utah.

After the rally, students from Tufts and Boston College marched directly to President Leahy and Father Monaco’s houses to deliver their demands for divestment, while Harvard students marched to President Faust’s office.

Meanwhile, students at other campuses turned up the heat as well. On Friday, divestment activists at Middlebury and Swarthmore delivered the “rejection” letter to their college President and Board of Trustees. Students from the City University of New York delivered a holiday care package to Matthew Sapienza, the CUNY administrator who said “no” to divestment, requesting a joint meeting with Cambridge Associates, the university’s money manager.

“After getting a ‘no’ from the College administration, we have shifted our focus on consolidating our own power through a number of ways, including participating in a national divestment network, getting faculty and alumni support, and organizing more educational events for our peers on campus,” said Adrian Leong, a student at Middlebury College.



In Boston, more than 150 students from 10 area universities gathered on a footbridge crossing the Charles River for a divestment demonstration.

“Our newest venture is collaborating with other student groups on campus to broaden our support base. We will organize until we win, so there’s no getting rid of us from the College administrators’ perspective, ever.”

Tomorrow students at Cornell will speak at a faculty meeting where a vote on whether or not to support divestment will take place. Cornell’s President David Skorton said last spring that the university wouldn’t be divesting “in the immediate foreseeable future,” but students hope that a “yes” vote from faculty will increase pressure on the administration.

“Of course we’re not giving up,” said Jimmy O’Dea, a postdoctoral scholar researching clean energy technology and active with Cornell’s divestment campaign. “The ‘no’s’ campuses have gotten are just responses, not answers or end-alls. This isn’t an ‘ok, if you say so’ kind of movement. This is a ‘spread the word and stand up for what’s right’ kind of movement.”

Groups like the Responsible Endowments Coalition, the Sierra Student Coalition, the Energy Action Coalition, **As You Sow** and 350.org are working closely with students to help provide them training and support for escalating their efforts on campus. From media coaching to workshops on how to organize a successful sit-in, the campaign is training hundreds of new activists in the skills it takes to win campaigns.

“Working with students across the country, I have seen the fossil fuel divestment movement galvanize millennials to confront the increasing role of corporate interests in university decision-making.” said Lauren Ressler, national organizer with the Responsible Endowments Coalition. “By refusing to take no for an answer, these students are challenging their universities to stand with students and impacted communities instead of the fossil fuel industry.”

Over the last year, the fossil fuel divestment campaign has spread to more than 300 colleges and universities and more than 100 cities, states and religious institutions across the U.S. The movement is also active in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Europe, where the climate campaign 350.org recently concluded a multi-city tour promoting the effort.

“Communities all over the world are currently feeling the effects of extreme climate change and environmental injustice,” said Sara Blazevic, a student from Swarthmore College. “This global crisis will only continue growing unless society’s power-holders throw their weight behind solutions to climate change, instead of remaining complicit with environmental destruction.”