

Students Organize Against Stanford's Investment Policy

By Bob D.
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It is 7:45 pm, Monday, May 9. I have just been arrested for trespassing in the Old Union at Stanford University. I'm standing at the back door of the Union, my hands bound by plastic handcuffs, surrounded by a dozen Sheriff's Deputies. I am accompanied by three fellow demonstrators. Each of us is firmly in the grasp of two deputies. I joke with a deputy at the door about the long night ahead for both of us. He addresses his fellow officers: "Are you ready, gentlemen? Okay, here we go." The doors open, TV cameras light up. I hear: "Stanford legal assistance, please call out your name." Each of us responds. Then clapping and cheering flood the courtyard behind the Union. "The People, United, Will Never Be Defeated." As we march to the waiting van I can only smile, for I am deeply moved by the outpouring of support from the more than 500 people gathered.

VOTING STOCKS

That moment, repeated 74 times throughout the evening until 4:30 am when the last protester was taken from the Old Union, climaxed a process which began in February with the formation of the Stanford Committee for Justice at J. P. Stevens. This group campaigned to have Stanford vote its shareholder proxies at the J. P. Stevens annual meeting in favor of resolutions challenging the textile company's illegal anti-union labor practices.

Despite widespread support for the resolutions in the Stanford community, including the endorsement of the official University Commission on Investment Responsibility, Robert Augsburger, Stanford's vice president for business and finance, abstained on the key second vote.

On February 28, more than 50 people staged a quick sit-in to protest the administration's arbitrary action. In his explanation to protesters, Augsburger argued that voting yes on the second resolution "could be detrimental to stockholders' interests." Though his "logic" outraged the protesters, they believed civil disobedience would not be effective at that time.

"Well," commented demonstrator Walt S., "from the administrations' action, some of us concluded that there might be something wrong with the University's proxy voting procedure." Students formed the Stanford Committee for a Responsible Investment Policy (SCRIP) and organized a course to further study Stanford's voting policies on shareholder resolutions involving social issues. In April, they produced a position paper examining America's corporate role in South Africa and Stanford's investment in several US companies active there, including Ford Motor, General Electric, Standard Oil of California, Texaco, Phelps-Dodge, and Union Carbide. It

argued that Stanford should vote yes on church-sponsored shareholder resolutions asking each company to withdraw from South Africa because:

- 1) Withdrawal by US corporations would put significant economic, moral, and political pressure on the South African government to change its policy of apartheid;

- 2) US investment does not discourage, and may even encourage economic discrimination against South African blacks; and

- 3) The rate of return for US investments in South Africa has fallen dramatically.

These three arguments became major supports for SCRIP's basic policy of "Vote yes, and if the proxy resolutions fail, divest."

ORGANIZING

Meanwhile, non-white, women's, and progressive groups on campus were forging two coalitions. Women's groups coalesced into Half the Sky, which in turn joined the umbrella Stanford Organizing Committee (SOC). SOC succeeded where other alliances had previously failed, largely because initiative came from Chicanos and other non-white students.

The strength of the new coalition was tested almost immediately. On April 12, the Committee Against Racism and the Alliance for Radical Change, member organizations of SOC, held a rally against Marine Corps recruiting on campus. This rally was combined with a march on the Education Research and Development building, where the Trustees, Stanford's governing board, was meeting, to present them with the demand to vote yes on the shareholder proxy resolutions. After a "sit-out" outside the building, Trustee chairman Peter Bing reiterated the Stanford administration's criteria for voting yes on proxy resolutions: the undesirable acts of the company must be substantial and there must be a consensus in the Stanford community as to the undesirability of the acts. Faced again with the vague policies of the CIR, students went to work creating a "consensus" within the Stanford community over the South African issue. SCRIP created a dorm organizing committee which showed a documentary film on the conditions of blacks in South Africa (*Last Grave at Dimbaza*) over forty times and canvassed door-to-door asking for support. Their basic argument was that US investment supports a government which denies "the native black community the right to vote, to collectively bargain, to choose their permanent residence, and to protest their discriminatory wages." (*Daily* editorial, May 3).

SCRIP collected the signatures of almost 3,000 students and staff and 80 faculty on their petition. They also gathered support from twenty campus groups, including the student council and United Stanford Employees. The trustees responded to student initiatives by voting merely to abstain on seven proxy issues calling for corporate withdrawal from South Africa.

On May 2, several hundred members of the Stanford community began a three-day vigil protesting the trustees' abstentions. Thirty-eight people fasted "as an expression of concern for the hungry people of South Africa and of commitment to stopping Stanford's involvement with apartheid."

At noon, May 3, SCRIP held a rally demanding that the Board of Trustees reconsider its position of the South Africa resolutions. The rally attracted 700 people, 450 of whom marched on Lyman's office, where they were met by Vice President for Public Affairs Robert Rosenzweig. While nibbling on an eskimo pie, he made clear that reconsideration of the proxy issues would be unlikely. Speaking of students' role in decision making, Rosenzweig commented: "Students have an enormous ability to establish the agenda of issues the institution will consider."

"But students have a much more restricted ability to make decisions on those issues due to the nature of the University." Finally, he reiterated President Lyman's statement that the University is *not* a democratic institution. For the people who had worked so hard to demonstrate consensus for their position, Rosenzweig's words were like daggers.

SCRIP member Mike J. asserted if the Trustees abstention "isn't a blatant, categorical, insensitive repudiation of that consensus, I don't know what is."

On May 4, climaxing a long debate about the best way to influence University decision-making, seventy students at a SCRIP meeting unanimously decided to plan a rally with the possibility of a sit-in if the Trustees refused to reconsider their decision. SCRIP then organized committees to develop publicity, ensure non-violence throughout the demonstration, and explore legal implications of sitting-in. Most importantly, people broke into small "affinity groups" to discuss their feelings about undertaking civil disobedience.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Though the events which followed have been widely reported, the press has failed to explore the personal decisions which led to the May 9 sit-in.

At 1:30, after occupying the Old Union, the protesters broke down into affinity groups of between five and fifteen people. Their purpose was to allow more personal discussion of the issues. "To come to a collective decision," Chris C. observed, "the group has to trust each individual to make his or her own decision."

No one was eager to get arrested. "I, for one," recalled Bill T., "went into that building swearing I wasn't going to get arrested." Affinity groups weighed personal, moral, and intellectual issues against the individual price each person would bear.

At 4:30, after a general debate, Chris G. came to the microphone to request thirty seconds of silence to be followed by a poll of all those who would remain if the Trustees did not meet SCRIP's demands. After that brief reflection, almost 300 hands went up.

In conversations with participants after the fact, it is clear many people had decided prior to Monday afternoon to undertake an act of non-violent civil disobedience if it came to that. Capturing the mood of those protesters, Kathy M. said "Stanford's proxy votes are immoral and SCRIP has done everything reasonably possibly to influence them."

After arguing throughout the afternoon not to stay, Bill T. chose to remain because he felt he had a strong responsibility to support the collective decision in which he had participated.

Support from minority communities was strong even though many faced losing financial aid or, in the case of foreign students, deportation. Chicana Angie B. expressed her appreciation for the sensitivity people exhibited throughout the process.

For many participants with less involvement in SCRIP, the community spirit and group support present at the sit-in were important factors in deciding to stay. However, these motivations were only important because people had a basic trust for the process they were involved in. After all, the chances of being suspended, losing scholarships, and jeopardizing graduate school admissions were great.

On an intellectual level, people debated the impact of our protest against Stanford's investment policies on many levels: Would it bring attention on the broader issues of apartheid in South Africa? Would it give students on other campuses strength and example to organize around the issue? Were SCRIP's demands reasonable? And would our act produce greater democracy within the University hierarchy?

Why did I find myself in a Milpitas jail on May 9? Partly because it was easy to feel moral about this issue. Partly because many friends were participating. Yet more importantly, I've been learning a lot about the need to support those I respect and I deeply respected the work SCRIP had done to build community support for their position.

SCRIP traveled a road which brought many people to their side. By their interest in reasoned dialogue, their avowed non-violence, and their willingness to trust new membership, SCRIP built broad-based support within the Stanford Community. In a way, the University's actions were SCRIP's most effective organizing tools. For by exposing its rigid hierarchical structure, the University directly contrasted its goals with the primary objective of those working for change in South Africa, majority rule.