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UC Berkeley Student Senate Passes Divestment Bill in Response to Israeli Occupation

For the first time in the University of California history, the UC Berkeley Student Senate has approved a bill to divest from two US companies in response to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and to Israel's siege and bombardment of the Gaza Strip. The Senate bill directs both the UC Regents and the Student Government to divest from General Electric and United Technologies. General Electric manufactures Apache helicopter engines; United Technologies manufactures Sikorsky helicopters and F-16 aircraft engines. In addition, the bill creates a task force to look into furthering a socially responsible investment policy for the UC system.

Student Senator Rahul Patel supported the bill, declaring that "in the 1980s the Student Government was a central actor in demanding that the university divest from South African apartheid. 25 years later, it is a key figure in shaping a nationwide movement against occupation and war crimes around the world. Student Government can be a space to mobilize and make decisions that have a significant impact on the international community. We must utilize these spaces to engage each other about issues of justice worldwide."

The Senate deliberation, which started Wednesday night, concluded at 3 am Thursday morning, March 18. The meeting was flooded with students, educators, and community members, which prompted the relocation of the Senate session from the Senate Chambers to a larger room. The attendees took turns making impassioned arguments for and against the bill. The diverse list of guest speakers included 76 names, ranging in age from college freshmen to Vietnam veterans. After amendments, the final bill passed on a 16-4 vote.

In addition to Israeli military action, the student initiative was motivated by an 2005 call on behalf of 171 Palestinian civil society organizations calling on "people of conscience all over the world to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel ... until it fully complies with the precepts of international law."

According to Emiliano Huet-Vaughn, co-author of the bill, "this vote is an historic step in holding all state and corporate actors accountable for their violations of basic human rights. The broad cross section of the community that came out to demand our university invest ethically belies the notion that the American people will tolerate the profiting from occupation or other human rights abuses." Student Senator Emily Carlton, co-sponsor of the bill, agreed, adding "this action will only be historic if it is repeated throughout the country and the world; I hope that student governments all over America will see in this a sign that the time to divest from war is now."

In 2009, Hampshire College in Amherst, MA, became the first US educational institution to divest from companies directly involved in the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Hampshire College action was advocated by the group Students for Justice in Palestine, and ultimately adopted by the Board of Trustees. Today, through its Student Senate bill, UC Berkeley becomes the first large, public US institution to endorse a similar measure.

UC Berkeley Students for Justice in Palestine has been working on a divestment campaign from entities that profit from the occupation of Palestine since 2000. UC Berkeley Law Students for Justice in Palestine, founded in 2007, played a central role in researching the legal issues and the international laws pertaining to Israeli human rights violations.

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