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CalSTRS Censors Youth Climate Testimony

Students and Teachers Demand Divestment of 2nd Largest US Pension Fund

WEST SACRAMENTO, CA – On July 11, dozens of public school teachers and students came from around California to testify before the Investment Committee of the California State Teachers Retirement System (CalSTRS). Their message was: begin immediate divestment from fossil fuels to address the climate crisis. CalSTRS members watching remotely via livestream only heard from half of the speakers, however, due to a recent CalSTRS policy prohibiting the recording or live streaming of anyone under the age of 18.

“This is the second time I have taken an entire day to travel to Sacramento to speak with the Board, and the second time they have refused to record my testimony,” said Rio, age 14, of Earth Guardians Bay Area Crew. “I am here to point out to the Board that it’s pointless to invest in our teachers’ future, if that future is in ruins.”

Vanessa Warheit, of Fossil Free California, urged the Board to rescind the no-recording-minors policy, which was implemented after dozens of youth and adults testified in favor of divestment at the May 8 CalSTRS investment committee meeting. “I can’t think of anyone who has more standing on this issue than the people who will be alive to see the results of the uncontrolled experiment being done on our planet by the fossil fuel industry,” she said. “My 14-year-old son has my permission to speak here today, and yet he’s not allowed to be on this screen. That is censorship. CalSTRS members who can’t be here today deserve to know what is happening in this room.”

Pro-divestment speakers, many wearing signs saying “Urgent,” “Divest,” “Please,” “How Dare You” and “Ask Me About Divestment” included members of Fossil Free California, Mothers Out Front, Oakland Education Association, Earth Guardians, Youth vs. Apocalypse, the California Federation of Teachers, as well as unaffiliated CalSTRS members. Protest art included an 8-foot phoenix puppet, and a giant collage that Earth Guardians presented as a gift to the Board, which included photos of all 12 CalSTRS Board members and the words “Please help end this madness.”

Avery Reed, the State President of the California Association of Student Councils, was the youngest speaker the Board allowed to be televised. Currently a 12th grade student at Credo High School in Rohnert Park, Reed described her trip to Sacramento as an obligation to her future. “Throughout the past year, the floods and fires have forced climate change to the forefront of our student advocacy,” she said. “Investing in fossil fuels directly jeopardizes our future, and our health. To see the pension of our teachers, our trusted advisors, invested in the very thing we are fighting against is horrible.”

Many CalSTRS members expressed concerns about the financial risks associated with continued investment in the fossil fuel industry. Julaine Rosner, a teacher from Mission College in Santa Clara and 25 year member of CalSTRS, said, “I’m very concerned with the fund’s long term viability. Investment in fossil fuels is incompatible with a healthy, sustainable future.”

“The energy sector was the worst performing sector in the whole economy last year,” said Jane Vosburg, a CalSTRS retiree and volunteer with Fossil Free California. “It is a dying industry that threatens our pension, and the planet. CalSTRS needs to divest now, before the carbon bubble bursts and the planet becomes uninhabitable.”

Oakland Unified School teacher Cory Jong urged the Board to divest, telling them, “You will lose the confidence of teachers, the longer you wait. I do not want to invest one penny of my money in the fossil fuels that are destroying the future of our planet.”

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Fossil Free California works to end financial support for climate-damaging fossil fuels and promote a just transition to a low-carbon economy.

CalSTRS, California's \$226 billion pension fund for public school teachers, is the second-largest pension fund in the United States, and the 11th largest globally. It currently has over \$226 billion in assets, with over \$6 billion (approximately 2.86% of its portfolio) invested in fossil fuels.

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