

Court Quashes Seattle Ballot Initiative on Israel Divestment

By Rebecca Spence

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Los Angeles — Activists pushing for investors to pull their money out of Israel were dealt a significant blow in recent days when a Washington state judge struck down a proposed ballot initiative that could have made Seattle the first major American city to adopt a divestment policy.

On September 10, Washington Superior Court Judge Steven Gonzalez ruled that the proposed ballot initiative — for which nearly 18,000 signatures had been collected — was invalid. The initiative, known as I-97, sought to divest city pension funds from corporations that assist in the American military presence in Iraq, or that “provide direct material support for activities of the Israeli government within the occupied and besieged territories of West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and Golan Heights” or have “a presence... in Israeli settlements” in these areas.

The Seattle court decision is the latest victory for Jewish activists fighting to beat back Israel divestment measures. In recent years, battles over divestment have raged in the mainline Protestant churches, and Jewish groups have successfully blocked divestment resolutions in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Methodist Church. Seattle Jewish activists hailed the court ruling as an important step in stemming the tide of divestment activists.

“This is absolutely a victory,” said Rob Jacobs, northwest regional director for StandWithUs, a pro-Israel group that has fought divestment. “One of our major concerns was that if this divestment from Israel initiative passed in Seattle, it would have a snowball effect.”

In late March, a coalition of Seattle Jewish groups banded together to defeat I-97, after Seattle Divest From War and Occupation — a local citizens group with some 25 volunteers — began circulating a petition to put the initiative on the ballot. As part of its efforts, StandWithUs, which is active on college campuses, and the Washington Israel Business Coalition filed a lawsuit against the city of Seattle. The lawsuit argued that the city council lacked the authority under state law or municipal ordinance to influence the investment decisions of the Seattle Employees Retirement Board.

The judge’s ruling in favor of those arguments riled the ballot initiative’s proponents.

“It’s a pretty sad day for grassroots democracy in Seattle,” said Judith Kolokoff, a spokeswoman for Seattle Divest From War and Occupation. “It really narrows responsibility for what we hope in a democracy would be a broader voice.”

Kolokoff said that the coalition is considering an appeal.

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