



## Companies Fight Back Against Protesters With Financial Pressure

Sarah Alvarez, NPR

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For protestors and activists unhappy with a particular company or industry, driving up the cost of doing business is a tried and true way to apply pressure. Think about the grape boycott in the late '60s for farmworkers rights. Or more recently, [protests over worker wages at fast food restaurants](#).

But now some corporations are fighting back by putting financial pressure on activists.

Duncan Tarr is a 20-year-old junior at Michigan State University. He is also an activist.

One of the things he cares deeply about is a pipeline, called line 6B. It moves tar sands oil from Canada through Michigan and has an imperfect safety record.

Last summer, while the pipeline was being replaced, Tarr was part of a group determined to get some attention.

"We were picketing in front of where they parked all their construction vehicles, and then my co-defendant and I stopped a truck and we locked our necks to the truck with U-locks that you use like for a bicycle," he says.

Firefighters came and cut the locks. Both the protest and the detaching took about 90 minutes. Tarr and one other young man were arrested and charged with trespass — they expected that.

What they didn't expect was that the company, Precision Pipeline, would use Michigan's crime victim restitution laws to assess charges to make up for the value of equipment and workers idled during their protest.

Tarr now owes more than \$39,000. That's twice as much in restitution as he owes in student loans.

Bankruptcy won't get rid of a restitution order in Michigan. Precision Pipeline repeatedly declined to comment for this story.

Rashad Robinson heads up Color of Change, a civil rights group that successfully pressured the Mall of America to [drop a restitution claim](#) against a group of protesters that disrupted business with an action tied to the Black Lives Matter movement.

He says he's seen restitution used this way in California, Minnesota and Michigan.

"It's a tactic that we're seeing especially as corporations continue to gain more and more power in our democracy," Robinson says.

In some ways, what's going on between activists and their targets is a steady escalation on both sides.

Roger Pilon, vice president of legal affairs at the Cato Institute thinks it's only fair that protestors begin to bear some financial costs as well, particularly when they trespass to try to make a point.

"We've established rules for protest. If you violate them, you can't expect to get away scot-free," Pilon says. "After all, you can't impose the cost of your moral virtue on the backs of people who are just trying to run their own business."

Andy Hoffman teaches business at the University of Michigan. He says while some companies might feel backed into a corner by activists he wonders if demanding crime victim restitution will backfire.

"This tactic could embolden more people to hate this company even more and go after them even stronger," Hoffman says. "I think it's a risky strategy."

Duncan Tarr says it hasn't affected the anti-pipeline protestors he knows.

"The people that know about the restitution, that's something that they also see as a really horrible thing," he says, "and some people have gotten involved after learning about the restitution stuff."

While it's difficult to see how the use of financial tools will change the landscape of activism, it is certainly making an impact on individual protestors. For Tarr, the pipeline he was protesting against is up and running. Meanwhile, he's still owes money on his restitution bill.