

Apartheid protesters find home



Students marched up State Street on their way to the Capitol Wednesday.

Cardinal photo by Morry Gash

Students bed down in Capitol

By Robert Itzin
of the Cardinal Staff

It may have taken hours of haggling in the Governor's office, but a student movement took hold in Wisconsin Wednesday.

One compromise proposal followed another, but finally the 100 students who took Gov. Anthony Earl's office during a protest of apartheid in South Africa opted instead to join the 100 others who began occupying the Capitol Rotunda indefinitely.

The protesters who took the office made the decision to sit in at the Rotunda following a written statement by Earl which condemned apartheid and allowed students full access to the Rotunda as well as an office to coordinate protest activities. Earl's statement also said he would replace two State Investment Board members on May 1 with others more sympathetic to South African blacks.

State Rep. Marcia Coggs, D-Milwaukee, read Earl's statement after negotiating with

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Protesters occupy Capitol

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Capitol security on treatment of the protesters. Coggs is the author of AB 54 which would prohibit the state from holding investments in South Africa.

"We must remind the government in Pretoria and also the government in Washington that the state of Wisconsin was founded in liberty and will not be silenced nor be a party to the continuing tragedy in South Africa," Coggs read.

Following the report, Coggs stressed that Earl's support of the sit-in, and security's decision not to remove students, would give way to security action if students decided to remain in the governor's office.

"If you want to help the cause, we'd better leave," Coggs told the students. In politics you've got to know when to hold and fold."

When one protester suggested Earl would not stick to the deal if students moved out of the office, Coggs retorted, "If I tell you we're gonna have office space, we're gonna have office space."

Students began occupying the Rotunda and governor's office shortly after 1 p.m. Wednesday, following a march up State Street with a crowd estimated at about 1,200. Protesters chanted "freedom now," carrying signs and blocking traffic for about 15 minutes. Students christened the Capitol the "Nelson Mandela State Building," named after a South African black jailed since the 1960s for his involvement in the African National Congress.

Approximately 10 protesters broke into a state building rental meeting in the governor's office, where they attempted to perform a citizen's arrest of a Capitol police officer. After the meeting dispersed, other protesters poured into the office, where the compromising began.

Some protesters called the office a "bargaining chip," with Earl, but most agreed they would further their cause if they dug in together downstairs.

"It's no concession," said one student. "If we want to stay strong, we've got to stay united."

The mood in the Rotunda was jubilant, with protesters sprawled out in sleeping bags, grabbing food, dancing or studying. It appeared that they saw the takeover as a victory.

"What we have accomplished here is unbelievable," said University student Paul Gaynor. "They have given us the State Capitol, an office, unlimited entry and exits."

Gaynor, who was planning to spend the night at the Capitol, said he would "drop by" for other extended visits as long as the sit-in continued. "It's definitely a spark," he said. "The teach-in proved that there are a number of people concerned."

Robert Larson, a University chemical engineering student, planned on spending the night in the Rotunda with his chemistry books. He admitted he was one of the few engineering students who would likely join the takeover.

"It's tough missing an engineering class," Larson said. "My engineering friends would never think of coming here."

Brian Allen, one of the organizers of the protest, said that the music, speeches and sleep-ins may not be the only continuing draw to the sit-in.

"If we are still here on Monday, there is a good chance that Jesse Jackson will stop by here and speak," he said.

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