Helping to Make G. M. Responsible

Recently the anti-war movement and various consumer and environmental action groups have begun to concentrate on a new target: corporations which profit from defense contracts, produce defective consumer goods, or contribute to the pollution of the environment.

The focus of their activities has been the annual stockholders meeting: their weapon, the proxy vote. Refounded Churches, colleges and individuals who hold shares are asked to prod their proxy votes in an effort to force discussion of the company's policies — and hopefully, change them — at the annual meeting. The approach has no guarantee of success and is hardly very radical (though one of its big promoters is "radical" agitator and community organizer Saul Alinsky.)

It calls for working within the system and, in no way, represents a real challenge to the great concentration of corporate power which, in Andrew Kopkind's words, "is at the heart of America's undemocracy."

Judging, though, from General Motor's response to the Campaign to Make General Motors Responsible, one would think that the proxy fighters were out to nationalize the auto industry. "Campaign GM" is a group, sponsored by Ralph Nader, which is currently collecting proxy votes for two proposals that will be considered at G.M.'s May 22 annual meeting. (The company initially tried to exclude the measures from the official proxy statement it sends to all shareholders; the Securities and Exchange Commission ruled that this was illegal.)

One of the proposals would create a public committee — with access to the corporation's records — to investigate and report on G.M.'s past and present efforts to produce cars with minimum pollution and maximum safety. The other would add three representatives of the public to the company's board of directors. (The new members proposed by "Campaign GM" are former presidential consumer-affairs advisor Betty Furness, distinguished biophysicist Rene Dubos, and Washington minister, Rev. Claxton Phillips.)

The purpose of both proposals is to expose General Motors to greater public scrutiny and insist that it take into account the many social consequences of its decisions. In this effort, "Campaign GM" supporters have been active on a number of campuses in an attempt to win university support. American colleges hold at least 2.2 million shares of G.M. stock; Middlebury owns 7,003. The college community here, if it is truly committed to environmental action, should back the campaign and urge the trustees to vote Middlebury's proxies in favor of the reform proposals. "Urga" is unfortunately all we can do, because Middlebury is a corporation who and the trustees are the corporation. Hopefully, the board will not adopt the position taken several years ago by Harvard President Nathan Pusey, who bluntly told his students: "We don't use our money for social purposes."