

Al Pina gives his all to better minorities' economic standing

By [Robert Trigaux](#), Times Business Columnist

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Al Pina, chairman of the Florida Minority Community Reinvestment Coalition, is preparing for a showdown with mighty Bank of America. In his crusade to get BofA to open up more banking opportunities for low- and moderate-income minorities, Pina is going on a hunger strike June 15.



[Photo by Phelan M. Ebenhack]

Al Pina is on steroids. Not that stuff baseball guys lap up, but the figurative steroids that re-energize and empower a rare Florida activist — one who was just about to call it quits last year and leave the state.

"I was going to take that midnight train out of Florida," admits Pina, 47, who as head of Tampa's Florida Minority Community Reinvestment Coalition learned his in-your-face activism from California's Cesar Chavez school of civil rights movements. "There was so much fear and loss of hope in Florida's poor communities. Why fight a battle when you can't make a difference?"

But things changed, "almost overnight," says Pina, when the Obama administration took office in January. It's not that the feds suddenly kowtow to Pina. But the new administration — especially federal bank regulators — actually *listens* to Pina now. The feds, he says, seem genuinely engaged.

Forget retirement. "I decided there was a fighting chance we can make a difference and shift socioeconomic policy," he says.

Albert Robert Pina III is back.

A refreshed Pina spells trouble for those businesses — especially Bank of America — that, to Pina, disrespect his coalition.

Pina turns up the heat this coming week. His FMCRC holds its annual summit on Clearwater Beach (well attended by federal regulators and bankers, he points out), and it unveils its boycott against B of A. Then, on June 15, Pina starts a hunger strike (he will take water only) against the Charlotte, N.C., banking giant, one of the biggest banking players in the state of Florida.

This is no idle threat. In 2005, Pina targeted SunTrust as insensitive to Florida's poor communities. And while SunTrust said at the time it was as engaged as any other bank in the state, it chose to avoid a public relations flap and publicly committed more funds to low- and moderate-income borrowers. That ended Pina's strike of '05.

The new hunger strike will start with a publicity tour that may include a visit to St. Petersburg's Midtown, a minority neighborhood. Pina wants to honor redevelopment efforts like the shopping center anchored by a Sweetbay supermarket.

The *Pina vs. B of A* clash may be more ornery. SunTrust's culture is Southern politeness. Bank of America is brash. And it does not like being pushed around — though it got its share when the Treasury Department strong-armed it to buy Merrill Lynch.

Still, Pina has leverage. Bank of America agreed long ago to be more accountable to activist groups in California. If B of A is willing to do so there, Pina asks, why not here?

Pina also successfully wooed most other major banks operating in Florida. That includes new arrival Wells Fargo, which bought Wachovia. At first, Pina criticized Wells, but then met with its top officials based in California. This week at FMCRC's summit, Wells Fargo Foundation president Tim Hanlon will be honored as "banker of the year."

It seems odd for Pina to credit California's history of activism as a role model for Florida when the West Coast state is effectively bankrupt. Pina acknowledges Florida lacks activist roots and blames elected officials for an ongoing lack of leadership.

Pina's message to business? *We are not your enemy*. His statewide group and others want to show how Florida's ignored minority neighborhoods can rebound and deserve attention.

Jobs, says Pina, are key. Not subsidized housing, which has been the conventional focus.

"We are trying to build new consumers and new banking customers," Pina argues. How, he asks, can business disagree with a goal like that?

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