

St. Petersburg Times Article on SunTrust. Largest newspaper in Florida

He'll push, but will SunTrust budge?



TRIGAUX

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By ROBERT TRIGAUX, Times Business Columnist

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Hunger strikes are nothing new to Florida.

A Cuban exile recently went on a monthlong hunger strike in South Florida to protest his detention as a suspected spy.

Last year, 50 immigration detainees refused meals at the Port Manatee jail to protest poor food quality. And college students from the University of Florida to Michigan's Grand Valley State University stopped eating (briefly) to condemn Taco Bell's treatment of its Florida tomato growers.

But a hunger strike against a bank?

Thursday was Day 12 without food for Tampa's Al Pina and his campaign against Atlanta's SunTrust Banks. Pina, activist head of a Tampa-based group called the Florida Minority Community Reinvestment Coalition, hopes to pressure SunTrust to commit a specific and generous sum of money to Florida's poor communities and neighborhoods.

The two giant banks in Florida, Bank of America and Wachovia, already have committed funds in enough detail to make Pina happy. Why not SunTrust?

"SunTrust is so, for lack of a better word, insensitive," said Pina, who once described himself as a "community reinvestment mercenary."

SunTrust may claim it commits plenty of funds to Florida's needy communities, Pina said, but he wants specifics and proof.

Florida has never been known as a state with a history of helping the little guys.

Activist and community groups that try to empower minorities and lower-income communities are only now making modest inroads and winning a few political victories, including the state's first minimum wage.

Florida used to have its own banking industry, but ill-conceived state laws once aimed at preserving financial institutions actually restricted their ability to grow. The result? Bigger banks based in North Carolina, Georgia and elsewhere picked off every reasonably sized bank in Florida. That's why Bank of America, Wachovia and SunTrust -

just three banks all with headquarters outside Florida - control 50 percent of Florida's banking market.

That combination of weak activism and aggressive out-of-state banks means Florida has long lacked the savvy and clout to demand the same levels of community investment from its banking industry that other states assume is their natural right.

And it means banks are unaccustomed to bullying in Florida.

SunTrust, No. 3 in the Florida banking market, clearly is not amused by Pina's colorful tactics. But the conservative bank wants to avoid a public relations flare-up with a protester refusing food. The bank's message? SunTrust has given plenty in Florida and will still do so.

"I do not see what we have done, what we are doing or anticipate doing in Florida is fundamentally different from our major competitors," SunTrust spokesman Barry Koling said.

Nor is the bank happy with Thursday's e-mail from Pina's group to the media that seems to tie a photo of SunTrust chief Phil Humann with this quote: "If Al Pina dies, he dies." No one at the bank said that.

Left unsaid in this growing standoff: Who is Al Pina, does he really represent Florida communities, and why is he taking such a high-stakes gamble to extract a financial commitment from one bank?

"People who live in our communities know the gap between the rich and poor is widening," Pina said.

"They are starting to understand this in Florida."

Pina is drinking water but otherwise not taking any food or liquids. He said he feels weak but in good spirits, though he was heading for a hospital checkup later in the day just to monitor his health.

"My pants now fit well" after losing 17 pounds, Pina joked. "I guess I was eating too much before."

Pina, 42, never planned to become a consumer activist.

After a stint in the Air Force and earning a degree from Arizona State University, Pina worked for such corporate giants as Philip Morris and Pepsico. But he switched gears after seeing the decline of his old neighborhood in Phoenix.

After getting involved in community groups in Washington, he moved to Los Angeles for the East L.A. Community Union. It was a member of a larger and well-organized

California umbrella group called the Greenlining Institute, where Pina honed his activist skills, style and expectations.

As a Republican, Pina ran for congressional office in Arizona but dropped out to follow his pregnant wife to Tampa in 2001. The couple lost the baby just after Pina's brother was murdered in Arizona.

Pina said those losses steeled him in his newfound role as a Florida advocate for community reinvestment.

Now Pina has chosen to play a serious game of chicken. Will SunTrust blink and make some accommodation to avoid some potentially messy public relations in the coming weeks? Or will Pina stand down from his hunger strike before he risks serious injury?

It never should have come to such brinksmanship. Pina should know better. SunTrust should be more forthcoming.

Whatever happens, the days of Florida meekly taking what is handed out by huge banks may be coming to an end. A little push back can be a good thing.

Robert Trigaux can be reached at trigaux@sptimes.com or 727 893-8405.

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