South Africa Protesters Target Three Big Banks

In one of a series of demonstrations against companies with continuing ties to South Africa, 14 antiapartheid protesters were arrested outside Citicorp headquarters in New York 10 days ago after obstructing bank entrances with wood and cardboard shanties.

Last week, a more subdued demonstration took place at the headquarters of J.P. Morgan & Co. before its annual meeting. About a dozen placard-carrying demonstrators outside, and others inside, asked Morgan to use its influence to bring about a change in South Africa's racial policies.

The Citicorp action, scheduled a day before the anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s death, was timed to coincide with demonstrations at Citicorp offices in Baltimore and Syracuse, as well as other companies with South Africa-related operations.

The coalition also picketed Citicorp subsidiaries in Chicago, Baltimore and Syracuse, as well as offices of Sovran Financial Corp., Shell Oil Co., Johnson & Johnson Co., and several university campuses.

According to Joshua Nessen, national student coordinator for the American Committee on Africa, demonstrators picketed Sovran's Washington, D.C., outlet to protest the firm's correspondent banking relationships with South African banks and the firm's poor record of lending to black communities.

A Sovran spokeswoman said, "We do not extend any credit to any South African entity, and it is our policy not to do so. We do not have money on deposit with any South African bank, nor does any South African bank have money on deposit with us."

She added, "We are proud of our history of and recognition for serving minority needs. We deny any suggestion that we discriminate in our lending practices."

The Citicorp protest, part of a continuing campaign against Citicorp's business ties to South Africa, began at noon on Friday and marked the second time this year that a group of antiapartheid protesters has been arrested at the site. In January, 21 members of a coalition of church and political activists were arrested after erecting a shanty in the bank's lobby.

The action at Citicorp headquarters on Park Avenue saw a group of protesters construct shanties in front of the building's main and side entrances. The protesters locked arms outside the doors, singing songs and handing out leaflets for an hour before they were arrested, Mr. Nessen said. Bank customers and employees were still able to enter and exit the building by walking around the shanties, he said.

Although Citicorp has a policy against lending any new money to the South African public sector, the firm maintains a physical presence in South Africa — the only U.S. banking company to still do so — with a subsidiary based in Johannesburg. Citicorp Ltd., and a branch in Durban.

The firm has a $700 million cross-border exposure there, which it has been drawing down, and 390 million Rand ($187 million) outstanding through its subsidiaries.

According to a Citicorp spokesman, Wilfred Koplewitz, the U.S. firm has lent no new money in that country, including South African banks and the private sector, since mid-1985.

Company officials have stated their opposition to South Africa's policy of racial separation and argue that the bank's presence there does more to help blacks than its withdrawal would because it provides leverage against the Pretoria government.

Mr. Nessen said the group plans to press the issue at Citicorp's annual shareholders meeting on April 21.

Mr. Koplewitz said, "We respect people's right to demonstrate lawfully. Unlawful demonstration is just that. If the situation appears to warrant action in the way of an unlawful demonstration, we'll deal with it. We expect to hold our annual meeting in an orderly and disciplined fashion."

— Philip T. Sudo
National Divestment Protest Days target U.S. corporations

By JOSHUA NESSEN

Protests against U.S. corporations involved in South Africa and against overt and institutionalized racism in this country were organized nationwide March 21 through April 6. The National Weeks of Anti-Apartheid Action were coordinated by the American Committee on Africa. The campaign began with protests to commemorate the March 21, 1960, Sharpeville Massacre, and were highlighted by April 3 and 4, National Divestment Protest Days.

In New York, Citibank, the only U.S. bank with branches still in South Africa, was a major target of protest action. Citibank’s World Headquarters in New York City was blocked on April 3 by a student and community coalition demanding the bank close its South Africa ties and end all lending to that country. Fourteen were arrested for blocking the entrance with a wooden shanty built by the Nicaragua Construction Brigade.

Hamilton College students rallied outside a Citibank branch in Syracuse, April 3 and a similar action occurred in Brooklyn the same day.

MARCHING AGAINST RACISM

A March Against Racist Violence at Columbia University April 4 drew 500 students and community supporters. They demanded the immediate arrest and prosecution of white students responsible for a recent attack on eight Black students. The protestors also demanded an end to the university’s low third world student enrollment and its refusal to divest all of its stocks linked to South Africa.

In Albany on March 21, State University of New York (SUNY) students commemorated the Sharpeville Massacre by entering the campus dressed in Black. They also showed the film “Witness to Apartheid.” Eighty students held a sit-in at the SUNY president’s office demanding that the administration deal with campus racism, the miniscule number of Black faculty and the lack of full status for Afro-American studies courses.

The Sharpeville Massacre was remembered in New York City, with a rally of 700 outside the United Nations emphasizing the links between U.S. support of apartheid and racist police brutality here.

In Washington, D.C., students from Georgetown, George Mason, George Washington and American universities picketed 20 branches of Sovran Bank for its ties to South Africa’s Standard Bank and its refusal to lend to third world communities in this country.

In Baltimore, Md., students built a shanty in front of the main Citibank office. Students from Johns Hopkins, Morgan State University and Towson State College then brought the shanty to the University of Maryland campus, where students were reconstructing shanties to increase pressure for full divestment.

In Chicago, the Anti-Apartheid Solidarity Committee, along with 72 high school and college students, targeted Citibank on April 4.

In Michigan, 250 students from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor marched from the campus to a neighboring Black community protecting apartheid and domestic racism April 4. Students also built a second shanty on campus and pressed for full divestment.

In North Carolina, 400 students participated in an April 3 rally for system-wide divestment at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The mobilization was coordinated by Black student groups from three area schools and addressed the recent drop in Black student enrollment and recruitment.

In Florida, U.S. policy in Central America and Southern Africa was condemned at a Miami demonstration March 22. Students against Apartheid and Racism at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton rallied April 7. Both actions were a build-up to the April 25 mobilization in Washington, D.C.

In Pennsylvania, 300 Penn State students marched through the administration buildings demanding full divestment and the university president’s resignation from the board of Carnegie Mellon Bank. Students have been organizing a boycott of the bank for its South Africa ties and have convinced many local businesses and the United Electrical Workers to close their accounts there.

In Ohio, Black South African poet Dennis Brutus and James A. Russell of the United Mine Workers addressed a town meeting in Cleveland. They spoke against U.S. support for UNITA in Angola and the Nicaraguan conflict.

In Indiana, a Black student conference was held at Wabash College on April 4 that included a demonstration against South Africa related investments.

In Texas, Austin students commemorated the Sharpeville anniversary and on April 6 held a rally in solidarity with youth and students in Southern Africa. The protest also addressed domestic racism and the refusal of the University of Texas to fully divest.

In California, several hundred people attended a rally at St. Vincent’s Catholic Church in Los Angeles on April 4 calling for an end to U.S. support for apartheid in Southern Africa and aid to the contras. A student rally in Sacramento April 6 emphasized the need for an ethnic studies requirement in the state university system and announced that April 11 will be Free South Africa Day at UCLA.

In Oregon, Martin Luther King’s assassination was commemorated with a march against apartheid and racism organized by students from Reed College, Portland State and local high schools.

BOYCOTT SOUTH AFRICA

During the weeks of action the American Committee on Africa and the Nicaragua Network co-sponsored a “Boycott South Africa, Not Nicaragua” tour that involved over 25 campuses and featured Kevin Phleger and Mayra Rodriguez of the African National Congress and Roberto Fernandez of the Nicaraguan Medical Students Association.

The Shell Boycott Campaign, meanwhile, coordinated protests in Atlanta, Chicago, Columbus, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and at the company’s headquarters in Houston. Shell has been targeted for its heavy involvement in the apartheid state.