Proposal for a Campaign on First National City and Chase Manhattan Banks in New York

Union Seminary Project

Late in 1965, two students from Union Theological Seminary spoke with us about their idea for a project urging people in the Morningside Heights area of Manhattan to take their accounts out of the branch of the First National City Bank at 111th St. and Broadway. Our staff discussed this with the student leaders on several occasions. We gave them our support, as well as many facts on the First National City tie-in with the South African economy.

The students did a magnificent organization job. This memorandum is being dictated a few days prior to the target date set for the mass withdrawal of accounts. The University community is pretty well organized, with student groups from Barnard, Columbia, Union and Jewish Theological Seminaries involved. As of this date, at least 600 persons have pledged themselves to withdraw their accounts on April 20th, including many school faculty members as well as students. In addition, the students brought their concern forcibly to the attention of the National Council of Churches, the Board of Directors of the Theological Seminaries, and various church mission boards. These institutions have millions of dollars in the First National City Bank: all are considering withdrawing their accounts. At the very least, letters of concern will go from them to First National City. The march on the bank, when accounts will be removed, is on April 20th. To accompany the withdrawals, hundreds of non-depositors have signed a sympathy pledge.

Students at Union have urged the American Committee on Africa to widen the campaign to cover the metropolitan New York area.

A city-wide campaign

The ACOA staff has met and discussed this project at some length. We feel that ACOA ought to take on the campaign as a major project, and broaden it to include the Chase Manhattan Bank. First National City and Chase Manhattan are the two American banks that have branches in South Africa, although within the last year, Chase Manhattan has been amalgamated into the Standard Bank. Prior to that time, Chase had three branches in South Africa with total liabilities to the public of $16.8 million. First National City's two South African branches had, in October, 1964, liabilities of $23 million. No other American banks are in quite the same position, although, of course, there is a consortium of ten banks involved in the $40 million revolving loan. The consortium includes Chase Manhattan and First National City Banks.

A campaign on the banks has great strategic merit. First, the action would be recognized as symbolic of protest against American involvement in the South African economy. Nothing reflects economic involvement more clearly than banks. Second, this protest will put people into action. Withdrawal of accounts is a simple and very clear act: if enough people do it in concert, it is bound to have an effect. Furthermore, that effect will not be lost upon corporations involved in South Africa, nor upon our government.

The campaign is aimed at getting as many New Yorkers as possible to withdraw their accounts from these two banks. A logical time for such a demonstration is December 9th, the Friday before Human Rights Day. The Defense and Aid Rally, scheduled for December 8th, would fit well into the whole strategy. Furthermore, the early December date would give us most of the summer to lay groundwork for the campaign, and two and a half months of fall to do the organizing.
How to organize

Both organizational and individual sponsorship for the campaign can be sought.

Essentially, neighborhood committees would have to be set up to do the basic work on their community's bank branches. The metropolitan area's universities lend themselves to this sort of organization. But also, committees might be organized in churches and trade unions. Educational background on the banks, and American, involvement in South Africa is of primary importance at the beginning. These facts will have to be part of our initial contact with all organizations and individuals we wish to involve. This will entail the preparation of a special literature selection, and a speakers bureau, to meet with the neighborhood groups.

Congressional candidates would be asked to take a position on the campaign during the period leading up to elections.

Enough money should be raised to put a full page ad in the New York Times by the first of December, indicating what support has been gained for the campaign.

A wider national campaign

The New York campaign would be the beginning of a series of such projects on the national level. The pattern of action would already be established. Where the campaign cannot be carried on against the banks, the pattern could be applied to other corporations. The issue of involvement in the South African economy should be raised at stockholders meetings. A pledge campaign would urge people to disengage from the corporations most deeply involved in South Africa, and to boycott one or two of the principle consumers items coming into the U.S. from South Africa. (Rock lobster tails are growing more and more popular now.)

Localized action of this sort can stimulate action in the government. A campaign against the sugar quota to South Africa and for political asylum for opponents of apartheid can be carried on more effectively in Congress if there has been some sign of grass roots concern. Not that the two levels of action are mutually exclusive; but both probably cannot be carried on with the same degree of intensity at the same time.