Broward Teachers Union faces uncertain future

By Cara Fitzpatrick, Sun Sentinel

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The Broward Teachers Union is facing one of its greatest challenges, as it grapples with the criminal investigation of its long-time president, a rocky financial future and questions over whether it remains relevant.

After more than four hours Tuesday, the union's executive board announced that it would vote Dec. 7 on whether to remove President Pat Santeramo after accusations that he blew $3.8 million in union reserves, was overpaid $30,000 and used dues to reimburse top union leaders and their relatives for campaign donations.

The board also agreed to give control of the union's day-to-day operations to an administrator from its national affiliate, the American Federation of Teachers.

Union spokesman John Ristow said the "unprecedented action" was a message to union members that the organization remains committed to "representing their best interests."

Donna Shubert, a union steward, said before the meeting, "Teachers are just disheartened, they're so disgusted. It just seems that there's corruption at every level."

Teachers haven't received a raise in several years — they each got a $500 cash bonus this year — yet their workload and class sizes have gone up. And with the state's new merit pay law, their job security and pay will be tied, in part, to student performance.

Santeramo has resisted calls for his resignation despite an investigation by the Broward State Attorney's Office and a separate inquiry by the Florida Elections Commission.

Ristow said the "union's leaders are doing everything they can to move the organization forward."

Mark Pudlow, a spokesman for the union's state affiliate, the Florida Education Association, acknowledged that "those who would like to see unions go away will seize on this." But he said merit pay and budget cuts make it more important than ever to have a strong union advocating for teachers.

"This is an allegation that's [been] brought against one individual or a small group of individuals. That shouldn't be viewed as a representation of unions," he said. "It's important that teachers have a voice."
Some teachers say $600 in annual union dues just isn't worth it.

Thomas Desmidt, a 13-year teacher in Broward, said union leaders are "out of touch." Union officers often take an extended leave of absence from the classroom and command the six-figure salaries that they rail against district administrators for earning, he said.

"It's almost like the Marie Antoinette line, 'Let them eat cake,'" he said of union leaders' attitude.

Santeramo made $189,000 a year until July, when he took a 21 percent pay cut.

Gary Dorfman, a teacher at Forest Glen Middle School in Coral Springs, said he hasn't joined the union because he disagrees with its politics and its "strong-arm tactics."

"To me, they do more harm than good," he said.

Ristow said the group has lost about a half-dozen members since the news broke Monday. But he said they picked up a few new members, too.

He confirmed Monday the union used $3.8 million in reserve funds over the past six years on political campaigns, rallies, protests and "intense contract negotiations" with the school district. It also absorbed increases in dues passed on by its state and national affiliates.

That has left the union with only about $700,000 in cash, $728,000 in a "building reserve fund" and an office building and land in Tamarac, Ristow said.

Auditors also found that 26 people were involved in "apparent campaign violations," which involved reimbursing union leaders and their relatives for political donations. It violates both state and federal election law to reimburse people for campaign contributions.

In addition, Santeramo and two top union officials — Bernie Schultz and Ronney Virgillito — received overpayments ranging from $10,000 to $30,000 each, Ristow confirmed.

Former School Board member Dave Thomas, who recently resigned for family reasons, said he's had positive experiences with the union. But he fears the scandal will bring more unwanted attention to a county rocked with corruption.

"That's going to ring a loud bell in Tallahassee," he said.

Norman Ostrau, director of the Public Ethics Academy at Florida Atlantic University, said it can take a long time for an organization to recover from scandal.

"People don't want to admit there's a problem in the organization. It takes them forever to do something about it," he said.

Shubert said she's been giving a lot of thought to her union membership, but has decided to stick it out in the hope that union leaders will be replaced.
"I just hope there's a union after this," she said.