

TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT PBA wins right to bargain for cops

Political clout influences election

By Bill Cotterell

DEMOCRAT POLITICAL EDITOR

With a big boost from Republican legislative leaders, the Florida Police Benevolent Association trounced a rival cop union Wednesday to win back bargaining rights for nearly 3,000 state law-enforcement officers.

The Public Employee Relations Commission certified results of a showdown election called by the PBA—showing 1,122 state officers wanting to bring back the union they spurned six years ago, while 588 voted to stay with the International Union of Police Associations. Another 90 officers voted for no union representation.

"It was probably a combination of things," David Murrell, executive director of the state PBA, said of the victory. "We've been doing a lot better in the Legislature than they have and we had a good message."

The PBA also had the tacit support of Republican legislative leaders. Senate President-designate Ken Pruitt, R-Port St. Lucie, wrote a letter of support praising PBA's Capitol clout just before the union filed petition cards March 1, signed by police officers in about a dozen agencies to force a representation election.



Senator Ken Pruitt meets with State Troopers. (PBA Photo)

Murrell said his union's promise to split off a separate bargaining unit for the Florida Highway Patrol also helped the PBA win. IUPA had warned that negotiating separately for the popular state troopers—about 1,600 strong—would weaken the bargaining position of all law-enforcement officers.

"We can't comment on the results of the election until we've had a chance to analyze the situation," said IUPA spokesman Rick Roberts.

Eddie Johnson, elections supervisor for PERC, said IUPA has 15 days to file a challenge to the results. If there is no protest, he said, the commission will certify PBA as bargaining agent for the 2,939 officers who were eligible to vote in the election.

The balloting was done by mail and drew a 62.6 percent participation.

"Our political power is pretty good these days," Murrell said. "That's what makes the world go round."

IUPA rented billboards along major interstate highways late in the legislative session, warning tourists that Florida police officers are among the lowest paid in the nation. The union also sought a \$38 million package of raises and longevity increases to erase the "salary compression" that resulted in new officers earning nearly as much as veterans.

Salary compression occurs when the state has to raise starting salaries, to compete with county sheriff or city police departments, and the beginning pay catches up—or nearly does—with the salaries of officers who have received only the relatively small raises all state employees have had in recent years. Kathy Merritt, a Fish and Wildlife officer who is state president of IUPA, said during the session that 10-year officers like herself commonly make about \$33,000 a year—barely more than the Fish and Wildlife Commission has to pay to attract recruits.

The PBA sought about \$12 million in salary boosts this year, working maximum benefit from its long-standing connections to Gov. Jeb Bush and GOP legislative leaders. The PBA has numerous state, county and city-level political-action committees that endorse legislative candidates and contribute to their campaigns.

The \$71 million state budget provides a 3 percent pay raise for state employees, effective Oct. 1. But the PBA claimed bragging rights to longevity bonuses of 2 percent after five years and 3 percent after 10 years for correctional officers and probation officers, along with longevity pay bumps for Florida Department of Law Enforcement special agents—who got \$3,000 after three years service, \$5,000 after six years, \$4,000 after 10 years and \$3,000 after 16 years.

State Capitol Police, represented by IUPA, got \$500 pay bumps for each year of service, up to \$5,000 plus a 2 percent performance bonus.

PBA still represents the FDLE agents, prison officers and probation agents. About six years ago, IUPA took away the FHP and officers in agencies like the Departments of Juvenile Justice, Transportation, Environmental Protection and Business and Professional Regulation.

The PBA got enough petition signatures to force a rematch in 2003, but IUPA held off the challenge. This time, Murrell said the legislative trophies and promise of an FHP bargaining unit helped his union win.

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The Daytona Beach News-Journal

Sheriff asks governor to investigate state attorney

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In a 15-page letter released Wednesday, the sheriff asks the governor's office to investigate Tanner for prosecutorial misconduct, including "shopping" around for a special prosecutor to look into his daughter's arrest and treatment at the Flagler County Jail.

Tanner also may have used his office to help his daughter, Lisa Tanner, 30, with a suit against the sheriff, the sheriff said.

The letter is the latest volley in the controversy that erupted after Lisa Tanner was arrested for disorderly intoxication and resisting arrest without violence, and placed in a restraint chair at the jail in March 2005. Since May, seven jail guards have been arrested on charges of abusing inmates and the former jail director has been charged with illegally recording conversations.

Fleming's letter is the second sent to Gov. Jeb Bush this week asking the governor to intervene in Tanner's investigation of the use of force by deputies assigned to the jail.

On Monday, the Coastal Florida Police Benevolent Association sent a letter asking for Bush to replace Tanner in the investigation with officials from State Attorney General Charlie Crist's office and launch a separate probe of the state attorney.

Alia Faraj, a spokeswoman for Bush, said the governor's office was reviewing the letters from Fleming and the union.

Tanner spokeswoman Linda Pruitt declined to comment on Fleming's accusations.

Fleming and union officials are upset by a series of investigations that have resulted in seven jail guards and former jail director Dan Nagy being charged with wrongdoing.

The Miami Herald

Gov Bush may force Winton to step down

06/20/2006 © Miami Herald

Miami City Commissioner Johnny Winton has been charged with two felonies and a misdemeanor in connection with his well-publicized fracas with police at Miami International Airport last month, a development that makes it likely Winton will have to relinquish his post—at least temporarily.

Gov. Jeb Bush, who makes the final determination on suspending elected officials, normally suspends any officeholder charged with a felony.

Bush's office said on Monday that the governor was still reviewing court documents, but the question circulating in City Hall was not if Winton would be suspended, but when.

Winton himself said the governor "absolutely" should remove him for the sake of consistency. Winton said he did not want to create a situation where someone could accuse him of getting preferential treatment.

"The last thing I would want to see is that issue become the next story," Winton said, while acknowledging his May 15 arrest "really was an embarrassment for me and a lot of others."

Winton has entered a not-guilty plea to the charges—two felony counts of battery on a police officer and a misdemeanor count of disorderly intoxication. The felony counts each carry a maximum prison sentence of five years, while the maximum jail time for the misdemeanor is 60 days.

Police say an intoxicated Winton got into a physical altercation with police at MIA after his flight was canceled, banging his head against a wall at one point and chipping one officer's tooth while kicking another officer in the groin.

That second officer is still working light duty because of the injury Winton inflicted on him, according to Dade County Police Benevolent Association President John Rivera.

"We agree that he should be suspended," Rivera said. "You can't go around hitting police officers. It's just that simple."

Palm Beach County prosecutors—handling the case because Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernández Rundle recused herself due to a long-standing friendship with Winton—filed the charging papers Friday.

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