

Activists scold Penelas for role in policing trade protests

By Mark Hollis
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LAKE BUENA VISTA · Robert Wagner, 73, a Central Florida retiree and self-described "union man," lost his temper Saturday at the state Democratic Party convention when he saw sign-waving supporters of Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas' U.S. Senate campaign.

"You can take that sign and shove it because [Penelas] turned Miami into a dictatorship," said Wagner of Ocala, a former Ford Motor Co. engineer. "Every place you looked, you saw a police officer in riot gear."

Organized labor and many senior citizens are holding Penelas responsible for what they say was abusive police treatment of protesters at last month's Free Trade Area of the Americas conference in Miami. Union members oppose a free-trade agreement out of concerns it would endanger workers and consumers by moving jobs to other countries, and would loosen worker safety and environmental regulations.

"When it comes to our members making a decision about who to support in the Senate race, the roughshod treatment we saw in Miami under Mayor Penelas' control is going to be the issue that's more important than anything else," said Cindy Hall, president of the Florida AFL-CIO, which has more than 500,000 active and retired members.

Police used tear gas, pepper spray and rubber bullets to subdue protesters. Some clashes occurred, but most demonstrators were peaceful and Penelas declared the summit a success.

Stands by police

Penelas says he is open to investigating any allegations of misconduct by Miami-Dade police officers. And he says he intends to rally the support of labor by explaining that he respects the rights of workers and others to protest. He also says that he manages police officers, who are also unionized.

"I stand by the fine men and women who were out there getting spit at, people throwing rocks at them, paint at them, bags full of manure," Penelas said of the police. "I stand by those folks."

But the lingering anger among his labor critics is a major early setback for Penelas. Talk has swirled at the convention that he may get heckled while onstage today when he and other Senate candidates speak to delegates.

In hopes of quelling any disruptions, he met privately Saturday with several labor organizers who are a major force among the thousands of influential Democrats at the convention.

Despite Penelas' efforts to reach out this weekend, leaders of several labor groups, including the

AFL-CIO, the Service Employees International Union and AFSCME, as well as senior advocates in the Alliance for Retired Americans, said in separate interviews here that they still fault Penelas for siding with police over rank-and-file union members.

"He didn't exactly enhance his standing with the most important Democrats," said Doug Martin, an AFSCME spokesman.

All three Democrats aiming to take retiring U.S. Sen. Bob Graham's job will need the help of union members, a proven and powerful get-out-the-vote component of statewide Democratic campaigns in Florida.

However, interviews with union activists gathered here indicate that the state's labor movement is not yet ready to endorse any particular candidate.

Union favor

Former state Education Commissioner Betty Castor, considered the front-runner in several recent newspaper polls, enjoys strong support among teacher union members.

And U.S. Rep. Peter Deutch, who leads the Democrats in money raised for the race, can tout a near-perfect voting record on AFL-CIO and other labor issues in Congress. By having offended labor, Penelas appears in the weakest position for getting the coveted endorsements of Florida unions.

Political analysts say union-run phone banks, direct-mail operations and other efforts will be needed for a Democratic victory. Their help became even more critical with the news that Republican Mel Martinez is ready to run for the Senate seat. The U.S. secretary of Housing and Urban Development, the highest-ranking Hispanic in the federal government, appears to have the backing of President Bush's political machinery.

Other Republicans running are: Florida House Speaker Johnnie Byrd of Plant City; state Sen. Daniel Webster of Orlando; and former U.S. Rep. Bill McCollum of Orlando. Still considering the race is U.S. Rep. Katherine Harris, the Sarasota Republican and Florida's former secretary of state.

Just how long the labor groups will blame Penelas for the police handling of the Miami protests is unclear.

"It's not something that our people will easily forget, but I'm not sure how much it will attach to [Penelas] in the long run," said John Ratliff, political director for a South Florida chapter of the Service Employees International Union. "The very least is, he's got a lot of making up to do."

Mark Hollis can be reached at mhollis@sun-sentinel.com or 850-224-6214