

Katz sues CWA to block 'overthrow' of local board

by Josh Margolin/The Star-Ledger

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Embattled state-worker leader Carla Katz went to federal court last night in an effort to stop the Communications Workers of America from taking over the local chapter she has led for nearly a decade.

Katz, president of CWA Local 1034, and most of the chapter's executive board filed suit in U.S. District Court, saying they wanted to prevent the national union "from overthrowing the democratically elected leaders of the local and from seizing control of the local from its members based upon erroneous, distorted and vindictive allegations."

On Monday, CWA's national headquarters announced it was taking over operations of the local and removing Katz and her board on charges including misappropriation of union money and retaliation against union members who oppose her. Katz and her allies face a union hearing on July 22.

Once a close ally of CWA's top officials, Katz split with its leadership last year amid controversy stemming from her former romance with Gov. Jon Corzine. In May, Katz sued the union and a list of its leaders, claiming they retaliated against her for opposing the state-worker contract negotiated last year.

Before that lawsuit being filed, Katz was the subject of an internal union probe prompted by three dissident members of Local 1034, the largest state-worker union in New Jersey and the largest CWA local with 12,000 members.

The internal investigation resulted in charges including mispending members' dues on her own campaign for national union vice president and on legal fees to block the public release of e-mails she exchanged with Corzine.

Katz and her allies are seeking restoration of their authority, removal of the national union's control over the local's finances and offices, legal fees and unspecified money damages. A hearing in federal court is expected to be scheduled early next week.

CWA spokesman Bob Master, who is named in the lawsuit, said: "We are confident that when the court reviews the facts in this case, it will concur with the determination of the CWA executive board that (the takeover) was absolutely necessary to safeguard the dues and democratic rights of the members of Local 1034."

In the suit, Katz contends that CWA's national president, Larry Cohen, first threatened to seize control of the local last year, after Katz led the opposition to the new state-worker pact.

Katz accuses the union's leadership of stacking the deck against her by locking her out of her offices so she will be unable to mount a strong defense, and by setting up a board of review led by an official who supports the takeover and is a defendant in Katz's prior lawsuit.

Katz also said the charges against her are "false and baseless." She said the local's books are kept no differently than other CWA locals and that she managed the union's political donations appropriately.

She said there was nothing wrong with her sending a large contingent of Local 1034 members to union conventions where they helped her campaign, and she accused the election winner, vice president Chris

Shelton, of running the same kind of campaign.

Paul Fishman, Katz's lawyer, said last night the lawsuit "reflects that neither Carla nor the other members of the executive board are going to put up with the national union using bogus allegations of financial and other improprieties as a pretext to wrest control of this local away from them."