

## The Washington Post

# Obama joins Wisconsin's budget battle, opposing Republican anti-union bill

By Brady Dennis and Peter Wallsten  
Washington Post Staff Writers  
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MADISON, WIS. - President Obama thrust himself and his political operation this week into Wisconsin's broiling budget battle, mobilizing opposition Thursday to a Republican bill that would curb public-worker benefits and planning similar protests in other state capitals.

Obama accused Scott Walker, the state's new Republican governor, of unleashing an "assault" on unions in pushing emergency legislation that would change future collective-bargaining agreements that affect most public employees, including teachers.

The president's political machine worked in close coordination Thursday with state and national union officials to get thousands of protesters to gather in Madison and to plan similar demonstrations in other state capitals.

Their efforts began to spread, as thousands of labor supporters turned out for a hearing in Columbus, Ohio, to protest a measure from Gov. John Kasich (R) that would cut collective-bargaining rights.

By the end of the day, Democratic Party officials were organizing additional demonstrations in Ohio and Indiana, where

an effort is underway to trim benefits for public workers. Some union activists predicted similar protests in Missouri, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Under Walker's plan, most public workers - excluding police, firefighters and state troopers - would have to pay half of their pension costs and at least 12 percent of their health-care costs. They would lose bargaining rights for anything other than pay. Walker, who took office last month, says the emergency measure would save \$300 million over the next two years to help close a \$3.6 billion budget gap.

"Some of what I've heard coming out of Wisconsin, where they're just making it harder for public employees to collectively bargain generally, seems like more of an assault on unions," Obama told a Milwaukee

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television reporter on Thursday, taking the unusual step of inviting a local TV station into the White House for a sit-down interview. "I think everybody's got to make some adjustments, but I think it's also important to recognize that public employees make enormous contributions to our states and our citizens."

The White House political operation, Organizing for America, got involved Monday, after Democratic National Committee Chairman Timothy M. Kaine, a former Virginia governor, spoke to union leaders in Madison, a party official said.

The group made phone calls, distributed messages via Twitter and Facebook, and sent e-mails to state and national lists to try to build crowds for rallies Wednesday and Thursday, a party official said.

National Republican leaders, who have praised efforts similar to Walker's, leapt to his defense.

House Speaker John A. Boehner (Ohio) issued a stern rebuke of the White House, calling on Obama to wave off his political operation and stop criticizing the governor.

"This is not the way you begin an 'adult conversation' in America about solutions to the fiscal challenges that are destroying jobs in our country," Boehner said in a statement,

alluding to the president's call for civility in budget talks. "Rather than shouting down those in office who speak honestly about the challenges we face, the president and his advisers should lead."

The battle in the states underscores the deep philosophical and political divisions between Obama and Republicans over how to control spending and who should bear the costs.

By aligning himself closely with unions, Obama is siding with a core segment of the Democratic Party base - but one that has chafed in recent weeks as the president has sought to rebuild his image among centrist voters by reaching out to business leaders.

Republicans see a chance to show that they're willing to make the tough choices to cut spending and to challenge the power of public-sector unions, which are the largest

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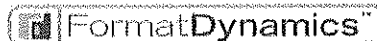
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element of the labor movement and regularly raise tens of millions of dollars for Democratic campaigns.

Governors in both parties are slashing once-untouchable programs, including education, health care for the poor and aid to local governments. Some states, such as Illinois, have passed major tax increases.

States face a collective budget deficit of \$175 billion through 2013. Many experts say state tax revenue will not fully recover until the nation returns to full employment, which is not likely for several years.

Beyond their short-term fiscal problems, many states face pension and retiree health-care costs that some analysts say are unsustainable. Some states already are curtailing retirement benefits for new employees, although many analysts say it will take much more to bring their long-term obligations in line.

The huge debt burdens coupled with the impending cutoff of federal stimulus aid later this year have spurred talk of a federal bailout. The White House has dismissed such speculation, saying states have the wherewithal to raise taxes, cut programs and renegotiate employee contracts to balance their books.

In Wisconsin, state Democratic senators

staged a protest of their own Thursday, refusing to show up at the Capitol for an 11 a.m. quorum call - delaying a vote that would have almost certainly seen the spending cuts pass.

It was unclear where the missing legislators had gone, and several news outlets were reporting that they had left the state.

"I don't know exactly where they are, but as I understand it, they're somewhere in Illinois," said Mike Browne, spokesman for Mark Miller, the state Senate's Democratic leader.

Senate Minority Leader Mark Miller told CNN that they were "in a secure location outside the Capitol."

Republicans hold a 19 to 14 edge in the Senate. They need 20 senators present for a quorum, which is why one of the Democrats


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has to show up before they can hold the vote.

Democratic legislators in Texas employed a similar tactic in 2003 to try to stop a controversial redistricting plan that gave Republicans more seats in Congress. It passed a couple of months later.

The organized protest at the state Capitol drew an estimated 25,000 people, and long after the quorum call, thousands remained on the grounds, from children in strollers to old ladies in wheelchairs.

Inside the Capitol, the scene late Thursday night was part rock concert, part World Cup match, part high school pep rally and part massive slumber party.

The smell of sweat and pizza drifted through the building's marbled halls. A drum circle formed inside the massive rotunda, and scores of university students danced jubilantly to the rhythm. There were clanging cowbells and twanging guitars, trumpets and vuvuzelas.

Outside, another throng had gathered to cheer and chant before the television cameras, and to break constantly into the crowd's favorite anthem: "Kill the bill! Kill the bill!" And everywhere were signs, each with its own dose of disdain for Walker's budget bill: "Scotty, Scotty, flush your bill down the potty." "Walker's Plantation, open

for business." "You will never break our union."

Many of the protesters, including Laurie Bauer, 51, had been on hand since Tuesday, with no plans to leave until the issue is resolved.

"It's one thing about the money. We'd be willing to negotiate the money," said Bauer, a library media specialist at Parker High School in Janesville. But "he's trying to take away our human rights. . . . I don't want my kids living in a state like that."

Loren Mikkelson, 37, held the same position: Budget cuts are negotiable, but collective - bargaining rights are not.

"We can meet in the middle. We're willing to give. . . . He's acting like we've never given anything. We've given," said Mikkelson, a a

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irfield maintenance worker who said he has endured furloughs and pay cuts in his county job. "We just want a voice."

The state-level battles and Obama's decision to step into the fray illustrate how the budget choices state leaders are facing probably will have direct implications for the president's political standing.

Wisconsin and Ohio are likely battlegrounds for Obama's re-election effort. Mobilizing Organizing for America around the budget fights could help kick-start a political machinery that has been largely stagnant since the 2008 campaign and reignite union activists who have expressed some disappointment with Obama.

But by leaping in to defend public workers, the president risks alienating swing voters in those states and nationwide who are sympathetic to GOP governors perceived as taking on special interests to cut spending.

Obama, in his comments to the Wisconsin TV reporter, tried to walk a fine line - noting that he, too, has taken on the unions.

"We had to impose a freeze on pay increases on federal workers for the next two years as part of my overall budget freeze," he said. "I think those kinds of adjustments are the right thing to do."

Walker, meanwhile, called his proposals "modest" and appeared to be trying to show distance between public employees and workers employed by private companies, who he said expressed support for his policies during visits he made to manufacturing plants this week.

"Many of the companies I went by, like so many others across the state, don't have pensions, and the 401(k)s they have over the last year or two, they've had to suspend the employer contribution," Walker told Milwaukee radio station WTMJ. "So, not a lot of sympathy from these guys in private-sector manufacturing companies who I think reflect a lot of the workers in the state who say what we're asking for is pretty modest."

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