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Angry Demonstrations in Wisconsin as Cuts Loom

By [MONICA DAVEY](#) and [STEVEN GREENHOUSE](#)

MADISON, Wis. — As four game wardens awkwardly stood guard, protesters, scores deep, crushed into a corridor leading to the governor’s office here on Wednesday, their screams echoing through the Capitol: “Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

Behind closed doors, Scott Walker, the Republican who has been governor for about six weeks, calmly described his intent to forge ahead with the plans that had set off the uprising: He wants to require public workers to pay more for their health insurance and pensions, effectively cutting the take-home pay of many by around 7 percent.

He also wants to weaken most public-sector unions by sharply curtailing their collective bargaining rights, limiting talks to the subject of basic wages.

Mr. Walker said he had no other options, since he is facing a deficit of \$137 million in the current state budget and the prospect of a \$3.6 billion hole in the coming two-year budget.

“For us, it’s simple,” said Mr. Walker, whose family home was surrounded by angry workers this week, prompting the police to close the street. “We’re broke.”

For months, state and local officials around the country have tackled their budget problems by finding trims here and there, apologetically resorting to layoffs, and searching for accounting moves to limp through one more year.

Events in Wisconsin this week, though, are a sign of something new: No more apologies, no half-measures. Given the dire straits of budgets around the country, other state leaders may take similarly drastic steps with state workers, pensions and unions.

“I’m sure we’re going to hear more from other states where Republican governors are trying to heap the entire burden of the financial crisis on public employees and public employees’ unions,” said William B. Gould IV, a labor law professor at [Stanford University](#) and a former chairman of the [National Labor Relations Board](#).

“I think it’s quite possible that if they’re successful in doing this, a lot of other Republican governors will emulate this,” Mr. Gould added.

Here, in a state with a long history of powerful unions, Mr. Walker’s plan was upending life in the capital city.

Madison schools were closed on Wednesday after many employees called in sick to help lobby. Thousands of teachers, state workers and students filled a square around the Capitol, chanting “kill the bill” and waving signs (some likening Mr. Walker to a dictator and demanding his recall).

And a hearing on the issue that had started at 10 a.m. Tuesday ran through the night and into Wednesday afternoon, as protesters with sleeping bags camped out near the Capitol’s rotunda and bleary-eyed lawmakers gulped coffee from paper cups.

Protesters shared stories of their families’ deep history in unions, people struggling to pay their mortgages, workers considering moving away, switching careers, retiring.

Kim Hoffman, a middle school music teacher, said she and her husband, also a teacher, would lose

\$1,200 a month under the plan — too deep a cut to manage.

“I love teaching, but I’d have to start looking for another job, period,” she said.

While union leaders here set up makeshift offices in the Capitol, distributing fliers and planning vigils and “teach-outs,” national officials from more than a dozen unions pledged millions of dollars, as well as phone banks and volunteers, to block such efforts in Wisconsin and elsewhere.

“We view the events in Wisconsin as one of the worst attacks on workers’ rights and their voices in the workplace that we’ve ever seen,” said Kim Anderson, director of government relations for the National Education Association in Washington, where 150 people were calling teachers and union supporters in Wisconsin, urging them to demonstrate or call lawmakers.

Kevin Gibbons, a leader of a union here representing teaching assistants at the [University of Wisconsin](#), said, “I think Governor Walker is using this financial crisis as an excuse to attack unions, and if Wisconsin goes, what will be next?”

Already, tensions were rising in other states, particularly in places where Republican victories in November have altered the political landscape.

Earlier this week, in Ohio, workers protested outside the Statehouse in Columbus to protest a bill that would limit collective bargaining for state employees there. In Indianapolis, teachers rallied against a bill that would limit contract bargaining for teachers’ unions. In Tennessee, a legislative committee was considering a similar bill.

For his part, Mr. Walker said he did not believe that most Wisconsin residents had a problem with his proposals. In a tour on Tuesday around the state — to private companies — Mr. Walker said he spoke with plenty of private employees who told of paying far more for their retirement plans and health care than state workers.

Mr. Walker would require state employees to contribute 5.8 percent of their pay to their pensions,

where most now pay far less, and require state employees to pay at least 12.6 percent of health care premiums (most pay about 6 percent now). The average salary for a Wisconsin state worker is \$48,348, according to a [recent report](#) by the liberal-leaning [Economic Policy Institute](#) in Washington.

Some national polls, too, have suggested that many people would back cuts to pensions and benefits of government workers.

“To the average citizen — to middle class, working class families — they’re paying a whole lot more right now,” Mr. Walker said. As recently as Wednesday morning, Mr. Walker spoke with Gov. [John Kasich](#) of Ohio — to “commiserate” a bit, he said.

“Obviously there is a lot of protest out there, but in the end, it’s the right thing to do,” Mr. Walker said, adding, “We didn’t get elected to worry about the politics.”

Lawmakers here were expected to vote on the issue by week’s end. Into the evening on Wednesday, there was talk that lawmakers might amend the plan, perhaps to restore some union bargaining rights.

But many predicted that the outlines of Mr. Walker’s proposal might survive votes in the Assembly and Senate, both of which are controlled by Republicans.

Still, some lawmakers here appeared rattled by the crowds cramming the building.

Scott Fitzgerald, the Republican leader in the State Senate, slipped out of the Capitol Wednesday morning with his sunglasses on, head down. Protesters had gone to his home earlier in the week, forcing his family (including his wife, a school guidance counselor) to go elsewhere for a bit.

Monica Davey reported from Madison, and Steven Greenhouse from New York.

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