

The Washington Post

Republican Wisconsin senators bypass Democrats in vote on collective bargaining

By Michael A. Fletcher
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Thursday, March 10, 2011; 2:04 AM

Senate Republicans abruptly passed Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker's plan to sharply curtail collective-bargaining rights for public employees Wednesday night, using a legislative maneuver to approve the measure without 14 Democratic senators who fled the state in an effort to block it.

After stripping the bill of fiscal measures that require a 20-member quorum for action, the Republican-controlled Wisconsin Senate passed the collective-bargaining measure. Analysts say the legislation would cripple most of the state's public employee unions.

On Thursday, the slimmed-down bill is expected to go to the GOP-run state Assembly, which has already passed another version of it.

The standoff in Wisconsin has gone on for three weeks, thrusting public employee unions into a deep crisis. States are grappling with record budget deficits, which some governors have tried to close by trimming what they call the generous benefits public employees receive.

The measure to curtail union power has been followed similarly in other states, including Indiana and Ohio.

The legislative maneuver used to pass the bill in Wisconsin was met with outrage by Democrats and their allies, who vowed that the governor and his fellow Republicans in the state Senate would pay with their jobs.

"The vote does nothing to create jobs, does nothing to strengthen our state, and shows finally and utterly that this was never about anything but raw political power," said Mike Tate, chairman of the Wisconsin Democratic Party. "We now put our total focus on recalling the eligible Republicans who voted for this bill. And we also begin counting the days remaining before Scott Walker is himself eligible for recall."

Walker appeared undaunted as he applauded the Senate's action. In a statement, he said the state could not afford to be paralyzed any longer by a controversy that had caused

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Democratic senators to flee for Illinois and brought tens of thousands of protesters to the Capitol in Madison.

"Senate Democrats have had three weeks to debate this bill and were offered repeated opportunities to come home, which they refused," Walker said. "In order to move the state forward, I applaud the legislature's action today to stand up to the status quo and take a step in the right direction to balance the budget and reform government."

The bill would eliminate most collective-bargaining rights for public employees across Wisconsin. It also would prevent unions from collecting dues with payroll deductions and would not allow unions to require members to pay dues. Collective bargaining is negotiation between an employer and a group of employees to determine the conditions of employment.

Walker's measure would require state workers to pay more for their health-care coverage and pensions - something they had agreed to do.

Although Wisconsin's budget problems are modest compared with those of other states, Walker called the bill necessary to ensure the state's fiscal health.

Not only would the measure help him close a \$137 million gap in the current budget,

Walker has said, but it would also help local governments deal with the deep cuts in state aid contained in his biennial budget proposal without raising taxes.

He said that approach would help improve the state's business climate and create jobs.

Without unilateral power to divert more of state workers' wages to pay for health-care and pension benefits, Walker has said, state and local governments would have to lay off as many as 12,000 employees over the next two years. Last week, he notified unions that he would lay off as many as 1,500 state workers if his budget bill was not passed.

Union leaders say the legislation's impact would be devastating for their organizations. But they also are calculating that Walker has gone too far. Activists have begun recall campaigns against eight Republican state

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senators, efforts they hope will culminate next year in a recall effort directed at Walker.

GOP activists are targeting some Democrats for recall. But polls show that although most people support reining in public employee benefits, they oppose removing unions' collective-bargaining rights.

"By stripping out the fiscal items and leaving only the elimination of collective bargaining, the governor has exposed himself as a fraud," said state Sen. Robert Jauch, one of the Democrats who left the state. Jauch said he will return Thursday to stand with protesters. "Tonight he has guaranteed that the people of the state of Wisconsin are going to stay engaged until this government changes."

National Democratic activists are hoping that the battle in Wisconsin energizes their supporters and creates energy that carries into the 2012 presidential contest.

"This has the potential of being a spark that builds a fire on the progressive side going into the presidential campaign," said Robert Borosage, co-chairman of the Campaign for America's Future, a liberal activist group.

The governor's approach appears not to be playing well with Wisconsin voters, who elected him with 52 percent of the vote last fall.

A Rasmussen poll last week found that 57 percent of likely voters in the state disapprove of the job Walker is doing, while 43 percent approve.

The plan to pass the budget measure went into motion Wednesday when Sen. Scott Fitzgerald, leader of the state Senate's 19 Republicans, called a conference committee of leaders from both houses with just two hours' notice.

As some onlookers shouted "Shame, shame," the committee passed the streamlined bill over the protests of state House Minority Leader Peter Barca (D). "This is clearly a violation of the open-meetings law," he said of the meeting.

Barca said state law requires 24 hours' notice for public meetings, unless there is "good cause" not to provide it. But Republicans

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ignored his complaint, passing the measure out of the conference committee over his objections.

Speaking to reporters afterward, Barca called the maneuver "a continuation of a pattern of naked abuse of power" by Wisconsin Republicans. "They trample on democracy," he added.

Barca said he will refer the maneuver to the attorney general and will meet with fellow Democrats to seek other ways to stop the action. "This will not stand - that is one thing I will predict," he said.

After Wednesday night's vote, hundreds of protesters were assembled at the Capitol, witnesses said.

"I think you will see signatures being gathered on recall petitions at four times the rate they were yesterday," Jauch said. "This is just outrageous behavior."

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