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Thousands March on State Capitols as Union Fight Spreads

By SABRINA TAVERNISE and A. G. SULZBERGER

COLUMBUS, Ohio — First Wisconsin. Now Ohio and Indiana.

Battles with public employees' unions spread on Tuesday, with Republican-dominated Legislatures pressing bills that would weaken collective bargaining and thousands of pro-union protesters marching on Capitol buildings in Columbus and Indianapolis.

After a week of upheaval in Madison, Wis., where the thumping din of protesters has turned almost celebratory, the battle moved to Ohio, where the Legislature held hearings on a bill that would effectively end collective bargaining for state workers and drastically reduce it for local government employees like police officers and firefighters.

Several thousand pro-union protesters filled a main hall of the statehouse in Columbus and gathered in a large crowd outside, chanting "Kill the bill," waving signs and playing drums and bagpipes. There were no official estimates, but the numbers appeared to be smaller than those in Madison last week. One Democratic state legislator put the figure at 15,000; local papers reported crowds of about 5,000.

In Indiana, nearly all of the Democratic members of the state's House of Representatives stayed away from a legislative session on Tuesday in an effort to stymie a bill that they say would weaken collective

bargaining. By late Tuesday, they seemed to have succeeded in running down a clock on the bill, which was to expire at midnight. Representative Brian Bosma, the speaker of the Indiana House, said the bill would die when the deadline passed.

Fleeing was not an option for Ohio Democrats because the Republicans had enough members on their side for a quorum. Republicans have a 23-to-10 majority in the Ohio Senate, and the bill needs 17 votes to pass. It was not clear when it would be voted on.

The bills have amounted to the largest assault on collective bargaining in recent memory, labor experts said, striking at the heart of an American labor movement that is already atrophied.

“I think we are looking at the future of the labor movement being defined in rotundas in several states,” said Harley Shaiken, a professor at [University of California, Berkeley](#), specializing in labor issues. “This is a structural change with profound repercussions.”

The Ohio bill was introduced this month by a Republican senator, Shannon Jones, who said it was intended to give state and local governments more control over their finances in hard economic times. But opponents say the bill is about politics, calling it a direct attack on the unions, which have long been reliable Democratic supporters.

“They’re using a fiscal challenge as an excuse to consolidate political power,” said former Gov. [Ted Strickland](#), a Democrat, who was in the crowd of protesters in Columbus.

Rob Nichols, a spokesman for Gov. [John R. Kasich](#), a Republican, strongly denied that characterization.

“This is nothing more than an effort to reduce the cost of governance so we can start to create jobs,” he said by telephone. “This is an effort to save the state, no agendas.”

Ohio is facing an \$8 billion budget deficit, about 15 percent of its two-year budget, far less than states like California, Illinois and New Jersey, but still significant, and Mr. Kasich says drastic steps are

required to plug the gap.

“The state is at a point of no return,” said Chris Kershner, a Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce vice president, who testified last week before the Senate committee overseeing the bill. “Change must happen now if Ohio emerges solvent from the current fiscal situation.”

Some in the Columbus crowd compared themselves to protesters in Egypt: a growing movement of people who will not take it anymore. But labor experts and political analysts were skeptical.

Unionized workers represented just 6.9 percent of all workers in the private sector in 2010, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) down from about 36 percent in 1955. The number of unionized workers in the public sector has held steady at about 35 percent since the late '70s.

“Seven percent in the United States makes them a very rare breed,” said Richard Freeman, an economist at Harvard. “I don’t think there’s a high probability that this will be an explosive event where the average American says, ‘Wait, this is what’s left of the middle class — what are you doing?’ ”

In Wisconsin, Senate Democrats remained in hiding across the state line, depriving the chamber the quorum needed to take up the budget repair bill, which includes provisions they view as an attack on public sector unions.

Meanwhile, Gov. Scott Walker, who introduced the legislation, warned that if the bill was not passed, layoff notices could be sent to state workers as early as next week.

Seeking to increase pressure on Mr. Walker to compromise, the South Central Wisconsin Federation of Labor announced on Tuesday that it had endorsed a rare labor action — a general strike that would begin if he signed the bill that would curb collective bargaining rights.

The federation, which represents 45,000 unionized workers in the Madison area, said it was not a formal call for a general strike, but the first step toward preparing for an eventual strike. .

The Ohio bill, if passed, would do away with the legal protections passed in 1983 governing collective

bargaining for state workers, including prohibitions on hiring alternate workers during a strike. Bargaining power would be weakened for local workers, doing away with binding arbitration, an option favored by police officers and firefighters, who are not allowed to strike.

It would also slice into public-worker benefits by taking health insurance off the bargaining table and requiring government workers to pay at least 20 percent of the cost. It would strip automatic pay increases and mandatory sick days for teachers.

The bill could have political repercussions for Ohio Republicans, who draw some of their votes from union members. Jeremy Mendenhall, president of the Ohio Troopers Association, who is an active duty sergeant and a registered Republican, said he was angry with his party for pushing it.

“People won’t forget this in 2012,” he said.

But Republicans could also gain, said Gene Beaupre, a political science professor at Xavier University in Cincinnati. Taking a cost-cutting position against unions is part of the mantra for far-right groups like the [Tea Party](#), and not necessarily unpopular.

“There is a strong sentiment against pension benefits and all that has accrued over the years as a result of organized public labor,” Mr. Beaupre said.

For the working class in Ohio, government jobs are highly desirable, with the median salary about 20 percent more than in the private sector, according to 2009 data from the [Census Bureau](#). This is partly because employees tend to be more skilled: more than half of state and local workers have college degrees, far more than in the private sector. But among college graduates, public workers make less than those in the private sector.

Public employees say they have sacrificed. The Ohio Civil Service Employees Association said they had taken five pay cuts in nine years with a savings to the most recent budget of about \$250 million.

Monty Blanton, 50, who worked for 31 years as a food service worker and an electrician in a state

facility for mentally retarded people, made a gross salary of \$44,000 before retirement. His pension, he said, stands at \$19,500, barely enough to live on.

“We’re barely making a living wage,” he said. “I don’t think they understand how hard it is in southeastern Ohio.”

Sabrina Tavernise reported from Columbus, and A. G. Sulzberger from Madison, Wis. Reporting was contributed by Bob Driehaus from Cincinnati, Steven Greenhouse from Madison and Robert Gebeloff, Sarah Wheaton and Timothy Williams from New York.



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