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Thousands rally at Wisconsin Capitol to protest anti-union bill

Teachers, prison guards and students denounce Gov. Scott Walker's proposal to all but eliminate the bargaining process for most public employees. The measure is moving swiftly through the GOP-led Legislature.

Associated Press

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MADISON, Wis. — Thousands of teachers, prison guards and students descended on the Wisconsin Capitol on Wednesday to try to preserve the union rights of public employees in the state that was the first to grant collective bargaining to government workers more than half a century ago.

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The new Republican governor, Scott Walker, is seeking passage of the nation's most aggressive anti-union proposal — a plan that would all but eliminate the bargaining process for most public employees.

The sweeping measure was moving swiftly through the GOP-led Legislature and would mark a dramatic shift for Wisconsin, which passed a comprehensive collective bargaining law in 1959 and was the birthplace of the national union representing non-federal public employees.

The statehouse filled with as many as 10,000 demonstrators, and many Madison teachers joined the protest, calling in sick in such numbers that the district had to cancel classes.

Walker said he had the votes to pass the measure, which he said was needed to help balance a projected \$3.6-billion budget shortfall and avoid widespread layoffs. The Legislature could begin voting on it as early as Thursday.

Walker said he appreciated the concerns of protesters, but that taxpayers "need to be heard as well.... We're at a point of crisis."

In addition to eliminating collective bargaining rights, the legislation would make public workers pay half the costs of their pensions and at least 12.6% of their healthcare coverage — increases that Walker calls "modest" compared with those in the private sector. The changes

are projected to save the state \$30 million by June 30 and \$300 million over the next two years.

Unions could still represent workers, but could not seek pay increases above those pegged to the Consumer Price Index unless approved by a public referendum. Unions also could not force employees to pay dues and would have to hold annual votes to stay organized.

In exchange, public employees were promised no furloughs or layoffs. Walker has threatened to order layoffs of up to 6,000 state workers if the measure does not pass.

More than 13,000 protesters gathered at the Capitol on Tuesday and thousands more came Wednesday.

"I'm fighting for my home and my career," said Virginia Welle, a 30-year-old teacher. She stands to lose \$5,000 a year in higher pension and healthcare contributions.

Union representatives were attempting to sway key moderates to forge a compromise, but Democrats said the bill would be tough to stop.