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## Wisconsin Assembly Approves Union Bill

By KRIS MAHER And ILAN BRAT

MADISON, Wis.—The Republican-controlled Wisconsin Assembly passed a controversial bill to strip nearly all collective-bargaining rights from the state's public workers in one of the strongest blows to unions in years.

The state Assembly passed the bill 53-42 a day after Republican senators maneuvered around Democrats to pass the legislation in a session that Democrats said violated the state's open-meetings law. Gov. Scott Walker said he will sign the bill as quickly as possible.

"I applaud all members of the Assembly for showing up, debating the legislation and participating in democracy. Their action will save jobs, protect taxpayers, reform government, and help balance the budget. Moving forward we will continue to focus on ensuring Wisconsin has a business climate that allows the private sector to create 250,000 new jobs," said Gov. Walker.

Democratic Assembly Minority Leader Peter Barca said through a megaphone, "They have such little regard for the people of this state that they don't follow the rule," and he added, "We believe this law will not stand."



Wisconsin Republicans infuriated union members by stripping workers of collective-bargaining rights. The News Hub also covers growing unrest in Saudi Arabia and threats to the U.S. economic recovery.

The move comes as Senate Democrats prepared to return to the Capitol. The timing of their return remained uncertain, as several Democratic senators said they wanted to wait to see whether the state's Republican-controlled Assembly passed the bill.



Associated Press

Opponents of Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's budget repair bill demonstrated outside the senate parlor at the Wisconsin State Capitol Building as legislators inside voted to move forward on an amended version of the bill Wednesday.

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The state Assembly convened Thursday afternoon after being delayed by protests that prompted a temporary lockdown of the Capitol.

Just before a roll call began, Republican Rep. Dan Knodl said, "There's no question that the 5.5 million people of Wisconsin are in favor of seeing this bill go through."

Afterward, an Assembly member asked that the Rev. Jesse Jackson be allowed to offer a prayer. Mr. Jackson was led to the front of the room. All rose and many applauded.

Mr. Jackson asked that everyone join hands across the aisle, and Democrats and Republicans, reluctant at first, joined hands. Loud drumming and cheers could be heard from outside, nearly drowning out Mr. Jackson, who said, "Bless the government, bless the president, bless our land."

During the session, Mr. Barca asked for a motion to remove the Republican speaker of the Assembly from his post because "his judgment is so incredibly impaired." Another Democrat made the motion. After some discussion, the motion failed.

Mr. Barca said he believed the bill would be overturned because it violates the state's open-meetings law.

Earlier Thursday, Assembly Democrats released a letter to the Dane County District Attorney in Madison, alleging that passage of the bill violated the law, which requires 24-hours notice before meetings.

Republican Assembly Speaker Jeff Fitzgerald gave a strong defense of the bill on the Assembly floor, while addressing its opponents. "I know you feel passionate that this is going to ruin Wisconsin...that's simply not true."



Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

"The whole world is watching!" protesters shouted as they pressed up against the heavily guarded entrance to the Senate chamber.

The voters are "fed up with it (the fiscal deficits) and they're ready to throw all of us out," he continued.

Meanwhile, the 14 Senate Democrats who left for Illinois on Feb. 17 to boycott the bill prepared to return to Wisconsin.

"The plan is for the Democrats to be in Madison on Saturday," said Democratic Sen. Bob Jauch. "You can't do anything to block the bill."

Democratic Sen. Fred Risser had said the Democrats planned to see what action the

Assembly takes before deciding exactly when to come back.

"I don't plan to go back today," Mr. Risser said. A concern among Democrats is that if they return Thursday, Republican senators could reinsert appropriations items into the bill and pass that version. "If we went back today they could redo things," he said.

Earlier Thursday, the building was locked, police were securing entrances and workers were putting screws in window frames to keep windows shut.

Hundreds of people crowded around chanting and ringing bells as car horns blared. Protesters chanted, "Shame," and, "Who's house? Our house." A state Assembly member shouted over a megaphone, "At this point I'd at least like to be let into the building so I can go vote against this bill."

Inside the Capitol, dozens of people chanted in the middle of the rotunda, "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Scott Walker has got to go," and, "This is what democracy looks like."

On Wednesday, Republicans said they had waited long enough for Democrats to return to Madison. The Senate and Assembly passed a resolution to form a conference committee, which then met to amend the bill by taking out the appropriations. The bill that passed would take away the ability of unions to bargain over pensions and health care, and would limit pay raises to inflation.

Republican Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald said, "The people of Wisconsin elected us to come to Madison and do a job. Just because the Senate Democrats won't do theirs doesn't mean we won't do ours."

Gov. Walker said in a statement that he applauded passage of the bill to "take a step in the right direction to balance the budget and reform government."

The bizarre showdown began in February when the governor proposed his "budget-repair" bill. After the Democratic senators realized they couldn't stop its passage, they left the state for neighboring Illinois.

The bill seeks to address a projected \$3.6 billion shortfall by asking public employees to pick up more than \$300 million in their pension and health-care costs. The bill requires public-employee

union members to contribute 5.8% of their pay to pensions and to pay 12.6% of health-care premiums out of their wages, up from 6% on average—changes that union officials said they would agree to.

Two items taken out of the amended bill involve the sale of power plants and legislative oversight of Medicaid assistance, which many Republicans and Democrats opposed.

Already eight Republican and six Democratic senators have been targeted for recall, with volunteers across the state gathering signatures needed to hold recall elections.

Several national liberal groups that are helping to fund recall efforts against Republican senators said they raised a combined \$525,000 in the first 12 hours after the bill passed Wednesday night.

The Progressive Change Campaign Committee, based in Washington, D.C., and Democracy for America, based in Vermont, said they sought donations in an email alert to their national membership and raised \$200,000. Moveon.org said it raised more than \$325,000 overnight.

The groups said they have collected about \$1.5 million over the past week.

All three groups are supporting recall efforts targeting Republican senators from districts that voted to elect President Barack Obama in 2008, including senators Randy Hopper, Alberta Darling and Dan Kapanke.

Mr. Hopper called the recall effort against him "schoolyard bullying," and said, "I've always said it's more important to do our jobs than keep our jobs."

He blamed Democratic senators for not being willing to negotiate with Mr. Walker, saying, "I think the governor was willing to have some concessions, but the Senate Democrats said, 'That's not good enough.'"

—Douglas Belkin contributed to this article.

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