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Wisconsin Assembly Set to Approve Limits on Unions

By [MONICA DAVEY](#)

CHICAGO — A bill sharply curtailing collective bargaining rights for government workers in Wisconsin is due for a vote in the State Assembly on Thursday morning, where it is all but sure to pass. The State Senate approved similar legislation Wednesday with only Republican members casting votes; the chamber's Democratic minority, who fiercely oppose the measure, remain out of the state.

The main provisions of the legislation, which increases health care and pension costs for public sector employees in the state as well as limits their bargaining rights, were also part of a larger budget bill that was passed by the Assembly last month, so final passage of this separate bill is considered a foregone conclusion.

The legislation was separated from the budget measure on Wednesday to break a three-week stalemate created when the Democratic senators all went to Illinois to deny the chamber the 20-member quorum required to take up bills that appropriate funds.

The quorum requirement for other kinds of legislation is smaller, and the Republicans' 19 seats are enough for those measures. In the Assembly, the Republican majority is large enough to achieve a quorum for any kind of bill.

Once the bill was separated, the Republicans pushed the measure through the Senate in less than half an hour by a vote of 18-1, without any debate on the floor or a single Democrat in the room.

Democrats in the State Assembly complained bitterly, and protesters, who had spent many days at the Capitol, continued their chants and jeers.

Within hours of the Senate vote, union leaders from Wisconsin and across the nation condemned the action.

“Senate Republicans have exercised the nuclear option to ram through their bill attacking Wisconsin’s working families in the dark of night,” said Phil Neuenfeldt, president of the Wisconsin State [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#)

Mr. Neuenfeldt asserted that the Republicans had also violated Wisconsin’s open meetings laws.

“Tonight’s events have demonstrated they will do or say anything to pass their extreme agenda,” he said.

Gov. [Scott Walker](#), a Republican whose efforts to diminish collective bargaining rights have placed him firmly in the national spotlight though he has been in office less than three months, applauded the Senate’s move on Wednesday night, and said it brought the state a step closer to balancing its budget.

“The action today will help ensure Wisconsin has a business climate that allows the private sector to create 250,000 new jobs,” Mr. Walker said in a statement released minutes after the Senate action, which was not widely expected.

Democrats, meanwhile, condemned the move as an attack on working families, a violation of open-meetings requirements (because most of them were not aware that the vote was to be held until shortly before it happened), and a virtual firebomb in a state already polarized and consumed with recall efforts, large-scale protests and fury from public workers.

“In 30 minutes, 18 state senators undid 50 years of civil rights in Wisconsin,” said Mark Miller, the leader of the Senate Democrats who fled to Illinois on Feb. 17 to block just such a vote from occurring.

“Their disrespect for the people of Wisconsin and their rights is an outrage that will never be forgotten.”

But Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, a Republican, was unapologetic on Thursday, saying Democrats had behaved unprofessionally.

“Don’t let their complete absence fool you; the Senate Democrats forced that vote yesterday,” Mr. Fitzgerald said in a statement. “They forced it three weeks ago, when they abandoned their jobs and fled to Illinois for a long-term vacation.”

He added: “And today, they’re ‘shocked’ that a decision was made without them in the room. Yesterday’s actions shouldn’t surprise anyone, much less any parent in Wisconsin. We know that sometimes, throwing a fit doesn’t get you what you want.”

The 14 Democrats — many of whom watched a live stream of the vote on the Web from their undisclosed locations in Illinois — said they did not intend to return to Wisconsin on Thursday; some said that they suspected the Republicans might yet have additional voting maneuvers planned, and that they needed to assess all that had occurred.

“Tonight, 18 Senate Republicans conspired to take government away from the people,” Mr. Miller said. “Tomorrow we will join the people of Wisconsin in taking back their government.”

The Democrats complained angrily that the manner of the move directly contradicted what the Republicans had contended all along: that collective bargaining rights had to be cut not for philosophical reasons but merely for financial ones, to fix the state’s budget gap.

“To pass this the way they did — without 20 senators — is to say that it has no fiscal effect,” said Timothy Cullen, another of the Democratic senators. “It’s admitting that this is simply to destroy public unions.”

The bill makes significant changes to most public-sector union rules, limiting collective bargaining to

matters of wages and limiting raises to changes in the [Consumer Price Index](#) unless the public approves higher raises in a referendum. It requires most unions to hold votes annually to determine whether most workers still wish to be members. And it ends the state's collection of union dues from paychecks.

Wisconsin's battle has been the leading edge of a wider fight over public workers and collective bargaining across the country. Similar, if somewhat less dramatic, fights have played out in statehouses in places like Ohio, Michigan, Iowa and Indiana, and more are expected.

In Wisconsin, Republicans and Democrats had been at an impasse over Mr. Walker's bill for weeks. As the Democrats camped out in Illinois, there had been negotiations, angry news conferences, breakdowns in negotiations, and talk of more negotiations. Senate Republicans had voted to fine each of the missing Democrats \$100 a day. The Senate Democrats had talked almost every day, sometimes disagreeing over whether it was time to give up and go home or to keep demanding that the Republicans lessen the cuts to collective bargaining rights.

As the impasse dragged on, senators from both parties found themselves the focus of recall efforts — efforts that all involved now said were certain to grow still more intense. Late Wednesday, hundreds of demonstrators crammed into the Capitol as news of the vote trickled out. And Mike Tate, the leader of the state's [Democratic Party](#), pledged to put “total focus” on “recalling the eligible Republican senators who voted for this heinous bill,” adding, “and we also begin counting the days remaining before Scott Walker is himself eligible for recall.”

Even as recently as Sunday evening, a possible deal seemed in sight. In private e-mail exchanges with the Democrats, Mr. Walker's representatives appeared willing to agree to some limited changes.

But by Wednesday afternoon, after talks had clearly broken apart, Republican senators met privately for hours, and eventually called a conference committee meeting of the leaders in the Senate and Assembly for 6 p.m. Peter Barca, a Democratic leader in the Assembly, protested vehemently as Mr. Fitzgerald, the Senate Republicans' leader, called the meeting to order, announced that a new bill —

without specific mentions of appropriations — was being considered, and called for a vote.

“This is a violation of open meetings laws!” Mr. Barca cried out repeatedly, demanding to hear a summary of the bill and what had changed. Mr. Fitzgerald swiftly moved to the Senate chamber, calling his Republicans to order, and called for another vote in a matter of minutes.

“Enough is enough,” Mr. Fitzgerald said, in a statement he issued minutes later. “The people of Wisconsin elected us to do a job. They elected us to stand up to the broken status quo, stop the constant expansion of government, balance the budget, create jobs and improve the economy. The longer the Democrats keep up this childish stunt, the longer the majority can’t act on our agenda.”

Steven Greenhouse contributed reporting from New York.



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