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Wisconsin Leads Way as Workers Fight State Cuts

By MICHAEL COOPER and KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

The unrest in Wisconsin this week over Gov. Scott Walker's plan to cut the bargaining rights and benefits of public workers is spreading to other states.

Already, protests erupted in Ohio this week, where another newly elected Republican governor, [John Kasich](#), has been seeking to take away collective bargaining rights from unions.

In Tennessee, a law that would abolish collective bargaining rights for teachers passed a State Senate committee this week despite teachers' objections. Indiana is weighing proposals to weaken unions. Union members in Pennsylvania, who are not necessarily facing an attack on their bargaining rights, said Friday that they planned to wear red next week to show solidarity with the workers in Wisconsin.

In many states, Republicans who came to power in the November elections, often by defeating union-backed Democrats, are taking aim not only at union wages, but at union power as they face budget gaps in the years ahead.

The images from Wisconsin — with its protests, shutdown of some public services and missing Democratic senators, who fled the state to block a vote — evoked the Middle East more than the Midwest.

The parallels raise the inevitable question: Is Wisconsin the Tunisia of collective bargaining rights?

Governor Walker, in an interview, said he hoped that by “pushing the envelope” and setting an aggressive example, Wisconsin might inspire more states to curb the power of unions. “In that regard, I hope I’m inspiration just as much as others are an inspiration to me,” he said.

FreedomWorks, a Washington group that helped cultivate the [Tea Party movement](#), said it was trying to use its lists of activists to turn out supporters for a variety of bills aimed at cutting the power of unions — not just in Wisconsin, but in Tennessee, Indiana and Ohio as well.

And officials seeking to curtail labor’s power in other states said that by focusing attention on public-sector unions, the tense standoff in Wisconsin could give them momentum.

“We think that what’s going on in Wisconsin actually helps us here in Ohio,” said Rob Nichols, a spokesman for Governor Kasich, who is supporting a bill that would limit collective bargaining rights.

But Wisconsin is also proving to be a catalyst for Democrats and labor leaders, as they take heart from the way thousands of workers have rallied to the cause.

With the falling popularity of unions in recent years, some union leaders see the attempt to take away bargaining powers as an effort that could shift the question from whether public-sector workers are overpaid to whether they should have the right to negotiate contracts at all.

To that end, unions and Democrats are preparing their own post-Wisconsin campaigns in a number of states against what [President Obama](#) called “an assault on unions” in a television interview this week.

As Gerald W. McEntee, the president of the [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees](#), the main union of state employees, put it: “Workers’ rights — including the fundamental right to organize and bargain for better pay, benefits and working conditions — are under attack in states from Maine to Ohio, from Wisconsin to Florida.”

Governor Walker's plan would limit collective bargaining for most state and local government employees to wages, barring them from negotiating on issues like benefits and work conditions. It would also require workers to contribute more to their pension and health care plans, cap wage increases based on the [Consumer Price Index](#) and limit contracts to one year. And it would take on the power of unions by requiring them to take annual votes to maintain certification, and by permitting workers to stop paying union dues. Police and fire unions, which have some of the most expensive benefits but who supported Mr. Walker's campaign for governor, are exempted.

"If they succeed in Wisconsin, the birthplace of A.F.S.C.M.E., they will be emboldened to attack workers' rights in every state," Mr. McEntee said. "Instead of trying to work with public employees at the bargaining table, they've decided to throw away the table."

On paper, Wisconsin might seem an unlikely candidate for an assault on unions. Like many other states, it has grappled with large spending gaps during the economic downturn, but its projected deficits for the next two years are nowhere near the worst in the country — more like in the middle of the pack.

Its 7.5 percent unemployment rate is below the national average. Its pension fund is considered one of the healthiest in the nation, and it is not suffering from the huge shortfalls that other states are facing.

Those facts have groups on both sides thinking if it can happen there, it can anywhere.

In Columbus, Ohio, Tea Party organizers said they had 300 to 500 people turn out on Thursday for a counterdemonstration against several thousand union members.

"We weren't well-versed in everything about the bill and why they're doing what they're doing except that we're broke as a state," said Adriana Inman, an organizer with the Fairfield Tea Party in Southwest Ohio, who attended the rally. She said that her group had many union members.

Some union members who are trying to preserve their rights have been cheered by what they have seen in Wisconsin.

Joe Rugola, executive director of the Ohio Association of Public School Employees and an international vice president of A.F.S.C.M.E., said that 4,000 protesters gathered at the Columbus Statehouse on Thursday to preserve union rights. “Yesterday at the Statehouse, everyone was talking about the images they had seen in Wisconsin, and it gave them great heart and made folks determined to equal that effort.”

Tennessee, a right-to-work state, where workers cannot be required to join a union, is likely to become a staging ground for a collective bargaining battle.

State Senator Jack Johnson, a Republican who sponsored a measure to curtail collective bargaining rights for teachers, said he expected the bill to become law. “Collective bargaining between teachers and the school boards has been an absolute dismal failure,” he said.

In Indiana, Gov. [Mitch Daniels](#), a Republican who is considered a possible presidential candidate in 2012, issued an executive order on his first day as governor in 2005 that ended collective bargaining for state employees. Now he is supporting a measure to limit negotiations by teachers to wages and benefits. Some state lawmakers have called for steps that would go further, but Mr. Daniels has said that he does not think their legislation should be passed this year because it has not been publicly vetted.

Not all new Republican governors plan to take aim at collective bargaining rights.

In Pennsylvania, which faces a \$4 billion deficit, a spokesman for Gov. Tom Corbett, the state’s new Republican governor, said the governor wanted to shrink the government while being mindful of a 40-year-old law giving state employees the right to organize.

“We’ll begin negotiations with the public-sector unions and anticipate we’ll conduct those in good faith,” said Kevin Harley, a spokesman for Governor Corbett.

Michael Luo and Kate Zernike contributed reporting from New York, and Monica Davey from

Wisconsin.



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