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Standoffs, Protests and a Prank Call

By **KATE ZERNIKE** and **SUSAN SAULNY**

MADISON, Wis. — An increasingly heated national debate about the rights of union workers was stuck in a standoff on Thursday as Democratic lawmakers here and in Indiana stayed away from their Capitols to frustrate Republican efforts to vote on legislation that would undercut collective bargaining and the ability to organize.

Brian Bosma, the Republican majority leader of the Indiana House, opened the chamber's session on Thursday, but as has been true all week, a roll call vote showed that 37 of the 40 Democrats were absent, preventing a quorum for any state business.

Democrats in Wisconsin and Indiana have fled their home states to avoid voting on Republican-sponsored legislation that would strip unions of much of their authority.

"Thank you for being here," Mr. Bosma said to the mostly Republican members present in Indiana. Just outside the door, protesters could be heard chanting loudly, "This is our House!"

Mr. Bosma said he had spoken to B. Patrick Bauer, the minority leader, twice that morning. Mr. Bauer had given no indication, Mr. Bosma said, that he or the other Democratic lawmakers would be returning from their self-imposed exile in Urbana, Ill.

One of three Democrats present in Indianapolis on Thursday morning, Scott Pelath, who represents Michigan City, said he was listening to the protesters and was inspired by them.

"I know a lot of our members are going to have a hard time letting them down," he said.

While Republicans insisted that the bills were required to balance state budgets, Democrats and thousands of protesters who circled and chanted outside the Capitols in Indiana and Wisconsin insisted that the legislation was an all-out attack on the middle class.

In Wisconsin, the State Assembly began final debate on Thursday on the governor's budget legislation, which would severely limit collective bargaining for state unions. Republican leaders said they expected a vote late Thursday.

But even if the Assembly passes the bill, it will still be stalled because the Senate cannot vote on it without a quorum of 20 members. There are only 19 Republicans in the Senate, and their

Democratic counterparts remained camped out in Illinois to prevent a vote. Wisconsin troopers do not have jurisdiction to order them back home.

Senate Republicans once again issued a “call to the house” on Thursday morning, sending troopers in the hope of finding at least some of the Senate Democrats at home. But they found none, extending the crisis.

“The Senate Democrats need to come to work and do their jobs,” said Scott Fitzgerald, the Senate’s Republican majority leader. “Ask any employer, anywhere in this state if they’d be this patient if one of their employees refused to show up for a week.”

Unions began running new advertisements against the legislation. And protesters who have been camped out at the Capitol marched around the building, chanting “Kill the bill.” Union supporters planned rallies in at least 17 cities, and new union print advertisements joined statewide television and radio ads opposing the legislation.

In Ohio, where thousands of protesters last week had argued against a bill that would ban collective bargaining for state workers, Senate leaders agreed to change the legislation, to allow state workers the chance to negotiate wages. But the measure would now bar public employees from striking.

As the fights in Wisconsin, Ohio and Indiana have garnered national attention, more fights were expected soon. In Oklahoma, the House is considering legislation that would ban collective bargaining with municipal unions. In Tennessee, Republican lawmakers have introduced legislation to prevent collective bargaining between teachers’ unions and local school boards.

In Wisconsin, Democratic lawmakers said the state’s Republican governor, [Scott Walker](#), was out purely to break the unions, noting that the unions had already agreed to the concessions on wages and benefits to balance the budget.

Their suspicions were increased after the publicizing of comments Mr. Walker made during what turned out to be a prank phone call from a blogger posing as a well-known conservative donor. In the call, the governor discussed tactics to trick Democrats back to the Capitol, and compared his efforts to President [Ronald Reagan](#)’s firing of the air traffic controllers in 1981. “This is our moment, this is our time to change history,” Mr. Walker said.

The caller was Ian Murphy, the editor of the New York-based Web site Buffalo Beast, posing as [David Koch](#), who with his brother Charles leads Koch Industries, which finances libertarian causes like the [Cato Institute](#) and Americans for Prosperity and which helped mobilize a [Tea Party](#) demonstration in support of the governor on Saturday.

Mr. Walker told him that his office had considered inviting the Democrats back on the premise of

having an informal conversation, at which point the Republicans could declare that they had quorum.

In a news conference later, Mr. Walker said he did not want to get “distracted” by a phone call. But he said the legislation, which would take away unions’ power to bargain on anything besides wages, was necessary to allow the state’s municipalities the ability to deal with tough financial times.

The legislation, he said, would save local governments \$1.44 billion, which would more than offset the cuts to local governments in the budget he expected to release Tuesday.

The Democratic members of the Indiana House of Representatives — like their counterparts in Wisconsin, a minority — left Indianapolis quietly Tuesday night to deny Republicans quorum, hoping to kill legislation that included a bill that would allow workers in private sector unions the right to opt out of their dues or fees.

Gov. [Mitch Daniels](#), a Republican, accused the absent Democrats of showing “complete contempt for the democratic process,” adding, “You don’t walk off the job, take your public paycheck with you and attempt to bring the whole process to a halt.”

But thousands of protesters in hard hats and work boots clogged the halls of the Statehouse, chanting and cheering in support of the Democrats, most of whom remained camped at a discount hotel in Urbana, Ill., about a two-hour drive across the state line from Indianapolis.

In a call to reporters who had gathered in his office, Mr. Bauer, the House minority speaker, said from Urbana that the union legislation had been but one of many “wrongful bills” that would “rip the heart out of the middle class.”

Asked when the Democrats might return to Indiana, Mr. Bauer said: “What reason would you go if you’re faced with war words? I’m willing to go there, but I want to know that they’ll talk.”

The Capitols were transformed by the protests.

In Wisconsin, where the demonstrations stretched into their second week, protesters had set up sleeping bags and mattresses, as well as a children’s play area and a first aid station. At an information desk, they could find earplugs for children and a place to charge their mobile devices.

The chanting and drumming of protesters provided a heavy bass soundtrack as the governor spoke to reporters inside his ornate conference room. The noise was quieted only slightly by the arrival of free pizzas sent by a local entrepreneur in support of the demonstrators.

Protesters took the empty boxes and made signs — “Why can’t we be friends with benefits?” and, in a nod to this college town’s mascot, “Walker is a weasel, not a badger.”

In the Statehouse in Indianapolis, the sound of the protests was similarly overwhelming.

“The Democrats were tremendous to walk out, and they’ve got my vote,” said Rick Royer, 51, a heavy equipment operator. “I can put my daughter through college all because of the union. I’m going to support what got us here.”

Late Tuesday, the Democratic lawmakers sent Mr. Bosma, the Republican majority leader, a list of concerns about 11 bills. They said in a statement from Urbana that they would stay put unless they got assurances that the bills would not be called at all this session.

Mr. Bosma said he would not concede to a list of demands. “Instead,” he said, “we expect the Democrats to return to do the work they were elected to do.”

And in Wisconsin, Republicans in the Senate had scheduled a debate for Thursday on a bill that would require voters to show identification at the polls. The bill has been of concern to Democrats, and Republicans were hoping it might lure even just one of them back to the Senate floor.

Kate Zernike reported from Madison and Susan Saulny from Indianapolis. Reporting was contributed by Steven Greenhouse and A. G. Sulzberger from Madison and Sabrina Tavernise from Columbus, Ohio.