

# PAINFUL LESSON

Teacher sickout heats up Wis. union battle that's a bellwether for nation

*By Ashley Kindergan* Thursday, February 17, 2011

There must be something going around.

More than 24,000 public school students in Madison, Wis., were forced to miss a day of class yesterday after 40 percent of the district's 2,600 teachers called out "sick."

It was in reality a job action that allowed the educators to join tens of thousands of people demonstrating for a second day at the Wisconsin Capitol. They were denouncing a bill that would strip public unions of their collective bargaining rights and force other concessions.

"From a parent who has three kids at home today, I'm not very happy about it," said Joanna Watson, a Madison resident, adding that her husband stayed home in the morning to watch their children. "But on the flip side, I'm totally in support of the teachers."

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker insisted yesterday that he had no choice but to address the state's \$137 million deficit in the current fiscal year, saying his proposal could save \$30 million. "We are at a point of crisis," Walker said.

Governors and state legislatures across the country are considering measures that would weaken public unions, but Wisconsin's proposal is the boldest by far, experts say. Wisconsin was the first state to give public employees the right to collective bargaining in 1959.

"What's being proposed in Wisconsin is truly a radical change from the past," said Paul Clark, head of the department of labor studies and employer relations at Penn State University. "If they can roll back these rights that workers have had for 50 years back in Wisconsin, you're going to see it happen in other states."

From Iowa to Tennessee, his prediction is starting to come true. The Ohio Legislature, for example, is considering a measure that would repeal collective bargaining for state employees and change it for local employees.

"I believe there's a national agenda here to punish unions," said Tim Burga, president of the Ohio AFL-CIO.

But others say public union workers should share in the hardships that private workers have experienced in the recent recession.

“They’ve just extracted so much in the salaries and benefits over the years, and politicians never really wanted to confront them,” said Tad DeHaven, an analyst at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute. “Now, we’ve had this long economic downturn, and people are becoming more cognizant of these unfunded liabilities for public employees.”

The situation caught the attention of President Obama, whose Democratic Party took in \$67 million from public unions — 92 percent of their total campaign contributions — during the 2008 presidential election cycle. Yesterday, he told a Milwaukee WTMJ-TV reporter that the Wisconsin proposal seems like “an assault on unions” and cautioned against vilifying public employees.

And U.S. Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan told a conference of teachers in Denver that he would call the Wisconsin governor today to express concerns regarding the bill.

Walker’s proposal would require many public workers to pay at least 12.6 percent of their health care costs and to devote about 5.8 percent of their salary to pension costs.

Currently, many Wisconsin public workers contribute “little or nothing” toward pensions, according to the governor's office. State employees on average pay 6 percent of health care costs.

The Wisconsin Legislature could vote on the bill as soon as today, officials told The Daily. Collective bargaining for anything but wages — including working conditions and benefits — would be eliminated. Residents would have to vote on wage increases higher than the rise in the consumer price index.

Unions would also have to vote every year to get recertified. Members would not have to pay dues, and state and local governments could not collect dues directly from employee paychecks.

Teachers were required to report to work yesterday, even after the district announced Tuesday night that schools would be closed for students.

Some teachers — the district could not provide an exact count — failed to show up for work yesterday even though they didn't call out sick. They will lose a day's pay, and the district is considering further punishment, said Ken Syke, spokesman for Wisconsin's school districts. It was unclear as of last night if the teachers would show up for work today.

Mary Bell, president of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, did not explicitly call on teachers to skip classes during a news conference outside the Wisconsin Capitol last night, but she did say that all state residents should “look into their hearts” and come to Madison on today and Friday.

Linda Kostelyna, who has two sons at Memorial High School in Madison, told the Wisconsin State Journal that she supports teachers' rights, but she didn't like them cutting class.

"I don't think the students should be put in the middle," Kostelyna said.

It was also unclear if the actions added up to an actual strike — but that determination could be made at a later date by the Wisconsin Employment Relations Commission.

Meanwhile, critics of the governor are rolling out a nickname on Twitter and Facebook that they hope paints him as an out-of-touch tyrant: "Mini-Mubarak."