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Wisconsin vote galvanizes GOP, unions

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MADISON, Wis. -- Stoking Republican efforts to check union power across the country, Wisconsin's state Assembly sent Gov. Scott Walker a bill he has sought to limit many government workers' collective bargaining rights in another emotional day at the Capitol.

The vote is expected to intensify bitter fights in state capitals around the country, emboldening other budget-cutting Republican governors to press ahead with anti-union legislation.

But it also is likely to galvanize unions and their Democratic allies. Since Republican senators in Wisconsin approved the bill Wednesday night, the state's Democratic Party said it has taken in more than \$300,000 in contributions.

Opponents of the bill packed the balconies in the Assembly and began jeering as soon as representatives started voting, making it almost impossible to hear the result. Boos and chants of "shame!" broke out as the bill passed, 53-42 with one abstention, culminating weeks of heated debate that brought tens of thousands of protesters to the Capitol and prompted Democratic senators to leave the state to try to prevent its passage.

Protester Thomas Bird, a University of Wisconsin graduate student, said Republicans would pay a price for their actions. "The next time they face election, they are done!" he yelled after the vote.

"This was our only option to move forward and avoid layoffs," said Rep. Scott Suder, the Assembly majority leader. "While some don't like the outcome and are going to continue to protest, this is the right thing to do to make sure that Wisconsin's fiscal house is in order."

As the bill advanced in Wisconsin, more than 7,000 people gathered outside the statehouse in Indiana to protest legislation to reduce teachers' bargaining power there. Union-opposed bills have advanced in Ohio and Idaho and are under consideration in Kansas, Tennessee and other states, though polls show most Americans oppose efforts to limit bargaining rights.

"We're now up to 22 states," said Robert Bruno, professor of labor and employment relations at University of Illinois. "It's almost an epidemic."

Opponents of the Wisconsin legislation are taking their fight to the courts, contending that Republicans violated the state's open meetings act in getting the measure through the Senate on Wednesday, which Republicans dispute. Opponents also have launched recall campaigns against the bill's supporters.

Richard Hurd, a Cornell University professor of labor and industrial relations, said Republicans in other states contemplating similar measures will likely watch recall campaigns closely.

"It may energize the right, and it may give them the confidence to be more aggressive, but those in the Republican Party who are a little more cautious may want to wait and see how it plays out," he said.

In Washington, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said the Wisconsin legislation was mobilizing unions.

"Thank you, Scott Walker," Trumka said at the National Press Club. "We should have invited him here today to receive the Mobilizer of the Year Award!"

Others predicted the opposite effect. Chris Edwards, an economist at the libertarian Cato Institute, said Wisconsin will "kick start a movement toward public sector union reform."

The Wisconsin measure had been stalled since Feb. 17, when all 14 Democratic senators left the state to prevent a quorum. On Wednesday, Republicans removed financial provisions from the bill, so fewer senators were necessary. It was unclear when all Democratic senators would return.

Peter Eykholt, 13, went to the Capitol to support his mother, a school counselor and union member: "I'll probably get marked absent from school for this."

"I'm learning so much about the government that I never knew," said Chelsea Clark Edmiston, 14.

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO: Democrats in the Wisconsin Assembly hold up their microphones while demonstrators chant "shame!" during Thursday's vote.

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