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Union battles in 3 states escalate

Democrats in Indiana's House flee to block anti-union legislation, and protesters rally in Ohio against a bill that would curb public employees' collective bargaining rights. In Wisconsin, Gov. Walker threatens to lay off workers if his proposal doesn't pass.

By Dan Hinkel and Richard Simon, Chicago Tribune and Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Madison, Wis., and Columbus, Ohio

Facing widening Republican attacks on organized labor, Democrats struck back Tuesday with legislative walkouts and boisterous rallies across the Midwest to defend one of their core constituencies.



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In Wisconsin, where the state Senate has been paralyzed because Democrats fled to block Gov. Scott Walker's attempt to strip collective bargaining rights from government workers, the governor warned he'd send 1,500 layoff notices unless his proposal passes.

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In Indiana, Democrats in the state House of Representatives vanished, depriving that body of the quorum needed to pass a private sector "right-to-work" law and legislation that would limit government unions' powers.

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And in Ohio, an estimated 5,500 protesters stood elbow to elbow in and around the Capitol chanting, "Kill the bill!" as a legislative committee took up a proposal that would curb government workers' collective bargaining rights, similar to a bill that has unleashed a backlash of protest in Wisconsin.

"Change is difficult," said Ohio state Sen. Shannon Jones, a Republican and the bill's author. "It doesn't matter how many people show up here."

Unions rallied from Michigan to Tennessee to Colorado to show support in what many see as an existential test for organized labor.

"It goes to the very core of the labor movement's ability to be viable," said Robert Bruno, director of the labor education program at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "You're talking about a national conflict between corporate America and its conservative allies and the New Deal coalition."

The often noisy battle — sometimes punctuated by shouting matches — played out in a swath of states whose voters in November decisively came down on the side of conservatives. Wisconsin, Indiana and Ohio all saw their statehouses switch to Republican control, and the GOP picked up governorships in Wisconsin and Ohio.

Chris Edwards, an economist at the Cato Institute who opposes public sector collective bargaining, said that Walker and other officials may have in mind such conservative heroes as President Reagan, whose firing of striking air traffic controllers helped realign relations between government and unions.

Democrats contend that the newly emboldened GOP is trying to eliminate one of the core supporters of their party — organized labor. "It turns politics upside-down," said Indiana State Sen. Vi Simpson, the leader of Democrats in that chamber.

Unions in all of the embattled states say they're willing to make concessions to help their governments balance their budgets, but contend that Republicans are engaged in a campaign to undermine organized labor. They got a boost Tuesday from a Gallup poll that found that 61% of Americans disapprove of stripping public workers of their ability to collectively bargain.

Not every Republican governor is taking the same path as Walker in Wisconsin. While praising Walker, Florida's new governor, Rick Scott, said in a radio interview that he believed public sector workers have a right to collectively bargain. New GOP governors in Michigan and Pennsylvania have also said they would not go after government unions' ability to negotiate wages and benefits.

The partisan tone started in Wisconsin, where Walker exempted police, firefighter and state trooper unions from his proposed cuts and elimination of collective bargaining. Those unions are more likely to back Republicans. The head of the state troopers union, however, said in a statement he regretted endorsing Walker last year.

Liberals have focused on contributions to Walker from the political action committee of Koch Industries Inc, the nation's second-largest privately held company, controlled by brothers who have long been active in conservative and libertarian politics. That entity gave \$43,000 to Walker's campaign, and one of the groups the brothers sponsor, Americans for Prosperity, has been organizing counter-protests in the state capital, Madison. The teachers union in Wisconsin backed Walker's Democratic opponent and spent \$1.6 million in the race.

On Tuesday, the Wisconsin Senate convened briefly to honor the Super Bowl champion Green Bay Packers. On the other side of the Capitol, as drums and chants from protesters outside echoed through the chamber, the Assembly took up Walker's "budget repair" bill.

Assembly Democrats spent much of the day seething at Republicans, who passed the bill Friday while Democrats were still in caucus, then acknowledged the action was improper and withdrew it.

His face flushed, Democratic Rep. Andy Jorgensen screamed, "This is not a game!"

Moments later, Republican Rep. Steve Kestell jabbed at Democrats, accusing them of "YouTube auditioning" with their furious speeches.

"Let's use inside voices," Kestell said.

Walker gave a televised address Tuesday night in which he urged Democrats to "do the job you were elected to do."

Mark Miller, the Senate minority leader, countered that Walker needed to make concessions: "Not everybody gets everything they want," he said. "That's what happens in a democracy."

In Indiana, where thousands of workers continued to rally at the Capitol, 37 House Democrats vanished overnight and refused to return Tuesday, bringing that body to a standstill. In a statement, the Democrats said they had mainly gone to Urbana, Ill. Republican Gov. Mitch Daniels, in hopes of luring Democrats back, asked Republicans to withdraw the right-to-work proposal, which would allow organized private employees to opt out of paying union dues.

In Ohio, the legislation known as SB5 has not yet made it to the floor of the Senate. A committee started discussion of the bill as thousands of workers continued to protest, despite the winter cold.

Among the protesters was Jeri Hendricks, 56, who came to the Capitol after teaching her math classes at a local high school. "I don't think we can save our economy on the backs of collective bargaining," she said. "I think it's just a Republican way to get rid of unions."

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