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Democrats flee Wisconsin Senate to slow anti-union bill

Democratic lawmakers in Wisconsin have left the capitol to try to slow a bill aimed at curtailing public employees' collective bargaining rights.

Wisconsin teachers, prison guards and others crowded into the capitol to protest against the Republican bill.

They described it as an attack on workers' livelihoods.

Republicans in Washington DC and state capitals have moved to cut government spending this year, including on public worker pay, in a bid to curb deficits.

The legislation had been expected to pass the Republican-led Wisconsin state legislature on Thursday.

But Wisconsin Senate rules require 20 senators to be present for a quorum; Republicans hold 19 seats and the Democrats 14. Senate Democrats did not show up for the session, and aides told reporters they did not know where the legislators had gone.

The Democratic senators said they would not return before Saturday.



With teachers protesting, dozens of Wisconsin schools were closed.

Democratic Senator Jon Erpenbach said Democrats had left to slow down the bill in the hope of forcing Republican Governor Scott Walker and Republican legislators to negotiate.

"What we're trying to do is get the governor to sit down and at least try to talk with people who have some issues with what he's trying to do," said Mr Erpenbach told a Wisconsin radio station over the telephone from Chicago.

"This isn't about the money. This is all about the collective bargaining rights that the governor wants to take away from the unions."

Mr Walker, meanwhile, called on the Democrats to return.

"The state senators who are hiding out down in Illinois should show up for work, have their say, have their vote, add their amendments," he told CBS news on Friday, "but in the end, we've got a \$3.6bn (£2.23bn) budget deficit we've got to balance."

'They're listening'

President Barack Obama, meanwhile, stepped into the issue, describing the bill as "an assault on unions" during an interview with a Milwaukee, Wisconsin television station.

The union workers and their supporters cheered the move.

"The fact that the Democrats have walked out, it shows they're listening to us," Neil Graupner, a 19-year-old technical college student told the Associated Press late on Thursday.

In Madison, the capital city of the mid-western state, the legislature on Thursday had been set to pass a bill pushed by the governor that has been described by commentators as the most aggressive anti-union law in the nation.

The bill would eliminate most public workers' right to collective bargaining, except for matters of salary, and dramatically increase the amount they must contribute to their pensions and health insurance coverage.

With teachers - and some students - massing in Madison to protest, dozens of schools were shut across the state.

'Point of crisis'

Republicans, who were handed election victories in November in Wisconsin, say they have a mandate to cut government spending.

They say that despite the protests, voters approve of the cuts, which they say are needed to balance the state budget and avoid job losses.

"We're at a point of crisis," Mr Walker said.

The state faces a \$3.6bn (£2.23bn) budget deficit in the coming two-year period. The public employee bill is expected to save \$300m in that period:

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Wisconsin budget cuts: Madison rally attracts thousands

Nearly 70,000 protesters have taken part in rival protests in the US state of Wisconsin over planned budget cuts.

On the **fifth day of such protests**, opponents of the Republican state Governor, Scott Walker, outnumbered supporters of the bill.

The bill introduced in the Wisconsin congress would cut sharply the wages and benefits of public sector workers, and curtail collective bargaining.

Saturday's rallies were peaceful despite angry chants on both sides.

Union supporters in the state capital Madison outnumbered the pro-Walker rally, organised by the conservative groups Tea Party Patriots and Americans for Prosperity, the Associated Press news agency reports.

Among the Walker supporters was "Joe the Plumber", real name Samuel Joseph Wurzelbacher, who figured in the 2008 Republican presidential campaign.

“What happens here is going to be very important to what happens in a lot of other states”

(Jim Schneider, Protester against the bill)

His message was: "Unions don't deserve anything, you don't deserve anything, you work for it yourself!"

Anti-Walker protester Jim Schneider, 69, waved a sign with "Hosni Mubarak?" written next to a picture of the governor, who has refused to negotiate with the unions.

"The Egyptians have been a great example to us," the retired teacher said. "What happens here is going to be very important to what happens in a lot of other states, just like the thing that happened in Egypt had an effect on a lot of other countries in the Middle East."

Wisconsin faces a \$3.6bn (£2.23bn) budget deficit in the coming two-year period and the public employee bill is expected to save \$300m in that period.

Governor Walker insists he has the backing of the state's voters, arguing that the bill is necessary to avoid painful job cuts.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-12508071>

SLIDE SHOW CAPTIONS



In Wisconsin, teachers, prison guards, firefighters, students and others have been protesting against the Republican-led government's plan to curtail public employees' right to collective bargaining and have them pay more for healthcare and pensions.



The protesters crowded inside the state capitol building to oppose the legislation, which they described as an attack on their livelihood and an attack on the unions.



One tried to storm the state assembly chamber...



...but was arrested by a police officer.



The dispute attracted attention from national political figures. Richard Trumka, head of the AFL-CIO, one of America's largest labour unions, said the anti-union bill was an attack on the middle class



Democratic senators opposed to the legislation have left town, denying the state senate a quorum for a vote on the issue in the hope of forcing the governor and Republican legislators to negotiate.



Democrat Jon Erpenbach is staying at a hotel in Chicago, about three hours away. There he said: "We all didn't want to do this. I didn't want to do this." Back in Wisconsin, the Senate Democratic minority leader avoided state troopers sent to his home.



The protesters cheered the Democrats' move, here unveiling a banner urging "Run Democrats, run".



Republican Governor Scott Walker urged them to return: "The state senators who are hiding out down in Illinois should show up for work, have their say, have their vote, add their amendments, but in the end, we've got a \$3.6bn (£2.23bn) budget deficit."



Democrats in the state Assembly, the lower house of the legislature, wore orange shirts in support of the protesters. But Republicans hold a 60-38 majority in the chamber, with one independent.
