

Wisconsin governor signs anti-working-class bill

By Andre Damon
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Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker signed his budget repair bill Friday, drastically reducing state workers' pay and outlawing their rights to strike and negotiate contracts.

The Wisconsin State Senate passed the bill 18-1 Wednesday evening in a surprise vote, sending thousands of people to the capitol to protest. By Thursday morning, the police managed to clear most of the capitol, and carried out the remaining protesters from the building, allowing the assembly to pass the bill 53-42.

Senate Republicans voted on the bill after stripping away the parts dealing with appropriations and debt refinancing, leaving the sections abridging collective bargaining and raising workers' contributions to pensions and health care.

The action prompted a wave of anger and revulsion from students and workers. "I am completely disgusted with every lawmaker in the capitol building," said Raol Heisler, 15, who was among 150 students who walked out from East high school in Madison to protest the move.

"The way this bill passed was unconstitutional; these guys are criminals," said Emily, a student at the University of Milwaukee who attended a downtown rally of high school students.

Democratic county officials filed a lawsuit alleging that the passage of the bill violated the state's constitution, and called for a restraining order to be put on the secretary of state to prevent him from publishing the law.

A judge in Dane County Court denied the restraining order, ruling that it was "not satisfied that irreparable harm will result" from the bill's passage.

The budget repair bill will force workers to contribute 5.8 percent of their paychecks to pay for their pensions

and 12 percent of their pay to cover the cost of health care.

Nearly 40,000 public sector workers are set to have their contracts expire on Sunday. They will be the first to have the new terms imposed on them, and will have to pay thousands of dollars in additional contributions to benefits within weeks.

The bill makes engaging in any kind of collective resistance grounds for summary firing. If the governor declares a state of emergency, he or she may appoint special managers to lay off employees who participate in strikes, stoppages, or slowdowns.

The bill requires that all public-sector unions recertify each year with the approval of 51 percent of those eligible to vote. It also calls for the early termination of existing collective bargaining agreements, with the first union elections starting next month. Dues to the union will henceforth be paid on a voluntary basis.

The number of workers seeking to retire has dramatically increased in recent days, as older workers sought to cash in on their "backdrop" benefit payments. While officials have stated categorically that the new bill will not affect the payout of benefits, the workers seeking to retire are acting on the justifiable suspicion that Walker's collective bargaining bill creates conditions for the implementation of sweeping cuts to retirement benefits.

"People are retiring left and right," said Ron, a corrections officer who attended the protest at the capitol. "There is a vacuum of knowledge going out the door in every department of this state as we speak."

Trade unions continued to call on their members to stay on their jobs Friday, and administrators, following the instructions of their unions, insisted that students who walked out provide notes from their parents, or

else face penalties.

Workers expressed exasperation that unions refused to call strikes in response to the bill's passage. Dennis Nowak, a Milwaukee public school teacher with eight years experience, said he was upset that the Wisconsin Education Association Council had already accepted all of Walker's demands.

"[WEAC President] Mary Bell has been a real snake," he said. "It's very upsetting. She is supposed to be supporting the rank and file, but she isn't." Bell prominently called for workers to return to work after the passage of the bill.

With the bill's passage, trade union heads and Democratic Party politicians sought to wind down the demonstrations at the capitol, which had been ongoing for four weeks. Democrats, including Jesse Jackson, who addressed a demonstration Thursday, said that workers should focus on the handful of recall campaigns being conducted by the Democratic Party against Republican Party candidates.

Workers were skeptical about the recall effort. "The recall is not a panacea," said Nowak. "The pendulum swings between the Democrats and Republicans, but they speak for the rich."

Hundreds of high school students walked out Friday in response to the bill before rallying a few blocks from the capitol. About 150 students walked out from East high school in Madison, and joined about 200 students from West high school, as well as others.

Finn Curry, a senior at Madison West high school, said both of his parents were state workers. "Financially my family will be hit hard, I will face debt going to school," he said. "The budget issue is caused by tax cuts to the wealthy; why should the problem be balanced on the back of state workers? The rich are getting richer and state workers are being made to pay because they are the easiest target."

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