

## ***Wisconsin governor signs proposal that ends collective bargaining for most public employees (Canadian Press)***

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MADISON, Wis. \_ Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker on Friday signed into law the controversial bill that eliminates most union rights for public employees, delivering an epic defeat to the U.S. labour movement which vowed to fight back.

The governor's signature on the bill quietly concluded a debate over collective bargaining that provoked three weeks of loud, relentless protests at the Wisconsin state capitol.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Walker said he had "no doubt" that support for the measure would grow over time once the public sees government becoming more efficient.

"What we're doing here, I think, is progressive. It's innovative. It's reform that leads the country, and we're showing there's a better way by sharing in that sacrifice with all of us in government," he said.

Walker, the 43-year-old son of a preacher who has swiftly become one of the most polarizing politicians in the country, signed the legislation in private Friday morning. At a ceremonial signing later in the day, he said the new law would be "good for the middle class for years to come."

The governor insisted the proposal was necessary to balance the state budget, and he never backed down, even after 14 Senate Democrats fled the state in an attempt to block a vote on the bill. The drama provoked an intense national debate over labour rights for public employees.

The bill's signing is a key victory for Republicans who have targeted unions in nationwide efforts to slash government spending. But labour leaders said they plan to use the setback to fire up their members nationwide and mount a major counterattack against Republicans at the ballot box in 2012.

The measure passed the state's Assembly on Thursday following more than three weeks of protests that drew tens of thousands of people to the Capitol in opposition. Pro-union supporters planned another mass rally at the Capitol on Saturday and are circulating petitions to recall from office eight of the Republican state senators who supported the bill.

Democratic Senate Minority Leader Mark Miller said the Republicans were not listening to the people.

“Republicans may have achieved a short-term policy goal, but their radical agenda, the war on working families, has been exposed, and the people of Wisconsin and across the country are united against it as never before,” Miller said in a statement.

If events in Wisconsin, once a leading state in the U.S. labour movement, do energize activists nationwide, it could be good news for President Barack Obama's 2012 re-election bid in crucial Midwestern swing states. Union backing will be critical to Obama's winning a second term. Organized labour has traditionally been a bastion of support for Democrats.

Walker belongs to the new, highly conservative wave of Republican governors who have attempted to impose restrictions on public employee unions.

Ohio and several other states are debating measures to curb union rights. In Iowa, the Republican-controlled House approved a bill Friday that overhauls the state's collective bargaining law and reduces workers' negotiating rights. However, the bill is not expected to pass the Senate, where Democrats hold the majority

Republicans, newly empowered after seizing control of the U.S. House of Representatives and many state governments in November elections, had promised backers they would institute deep spending cuts, hold the line on or cut taxes and shrink the size of government.

In Wisconsin, parts of the fight were sure to continue in the courts and in the battle over the broader state budget.

On Friday, the Democratic executive of Dane County, which includes the state capital Madison, asked a court to find passage of the law to be unconstitutional, arguing in part that it was adopted illegally without the required quorum. A judge denied an emergency request to block the measure and scheduled a longer hearing for Wednesday.

Walker said he was confident the law would withstand legal challenges.

The law does not take effect until the state issues an official notice that it has been enacted, and the notice is published in the Madison newspaper. Secretary of State Doug La Follette said he typically takes 10 business days to send the notice. Given the court action, he said he was not going to act any sooner than that.

Democrats said the battle with Walker helped them raise nearly \$1 million in a matter of days, and efforts to recall Republican state senators who sided with Walker were gaining momentum.

The combative Walker, who has sharply divided the state just 10 weeks into his term, remained defiant Friday, issuing a message of his own seeking donations from supporters.

“The voters of Wisconsin didn't elect me to pass the buck or run away from a tough fight,” said the governor, who asked for donations starting at \$100 and said he hoped to reach \$150,000 within a month.

The measure passed both chambers of the Republican-led state Legislature earlier this week. The Senate cleared the way for passage with a surprise move Wednesday that allowed lawmakers to approve the bill without any Democratic senators present. The state's Assembly followed suit Thursday.

In addition to ending collective bargaining, the law forces state workers to pay more for their pensions and health care benefits \_ changes that will save an estimated \$30 million to help pay down a budget shortfall projected to be \$137 million by July 1. The higher payments for state workers will take effect over the coming weeks.

But much more turmoil lies ahead.

Lawmakers have not even started to debate Walker's two-year budget, which calls for cutting schools and local governments by more than \$1 billion.

Interest in the budget is so high, the Republican leader of the state Senate said public hearings may be held at arenas in Milwaukee and Madison that each hold 18,000 people.

Walker repeatedly argued that ending collective bargaining would give local governments much-needed flexibility to confront the cuts in state aid that will be necessary to fix Wisconsin's deficit, which is expected to grow to \$3.6 billion deficit over two years.

Walker also said his plan would avoid the need for any furloughs or layoffs. He issued a notice last week warning that up to 1,500 workers could be laid off if the bill failed. But just before signing the measure Friday, Walker rescinded the notice.

The changes contained in Walker's law amount to an average 8 per cent pay cut for state workers.

The political drama surrounding the proposal was dominated by tens of thousands of protesters who repeatedly filled the Capitol for weeks, carrying signs, chanting slogan, shouting at lawmakers and often sleeping on the marble floors. Dozens of protesters returned to the Capitol on Friday, shouting “Recall Walker!”