

Wisconsin governor threatens to cut 12,000 jobs

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Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker threatened to eliminate up to 12,000 jobs of state and local government workers if the state legislature does not quickly approve a budget repair bill that all but abolishes collective bargaining for public employees.

At a press conference Thursday evening, he shed crocodile tears over the prospect of mass job cuts. "I'd do almost anything to avoid laying people off," he claimed. "We need to avoid those layoffs for the good of those workers."

The threat seemed aimed at pressing his political advantage after Democrats in the state assembly caved in after a two-day filibuster and agreed to permit a vote on the budget repair bill.

Walker flatly rebuffed suggestions of any change in the legislation, which was expected to pass the lower house later that day, but has been blocked in the State Senate for lack of a quorum, in the absence of the 14 members of the Democratic minority.

Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald instructed state troopers Thursday morning to begin searching for the Democratic senators, after they again failed to attend the session. All 14 are reported to be in Illinois, outside the jurisdiction of the state police.

At his press conference, Governor Walker appeared to be seeking to mobilize local government support for his attack on public employees, emphasizing that local governments would be able to cut \$1.44 billion over two years from employee compensation under the terms of the bill, entirely offsetting the bill's reduction in state aid.

He was responding to the news conference the previous day at the state capitol at which 200 mayors, school board presidents and other officials voiced their opposition to the elimination of local collective bargaining. The group represented 20 cities, 41 towns

and 22 counties, encompassing the majority of the state's population.

Walker hailed the decision of Democrats in the lower house to halt their effort to filibuster the bill by introducing hundreds of amendments and demanding extensive debate on each one. An agreement early Thursday morning between Democrats and Republicans in the state assembly limited the number of amendments to 38, with each one given 10 minutes debate, effectively ensuring a final vote on the legislation sometime Thursday night.

A group of assembly Democrats met with Walker's director of administration Thursday to discuss a proposed alternative that would incorporate the \$300 million in cuts for state employees, but not the provisions eliminating most collective bargaining rights. This was another pretense of consultation which does nothing to change the bill, but it confirms the support of the Democrats for cuts.

Officials of the state legislature also moved to curb the occupation of the state capitol, which went into its eleventh day on Thursday. The Joint Committee on Legislative Organization voted Wednesday to bar access to hearing rooms and legislative offices after normal business hours, starting Saturday.

Protesters would still be permitted in the rotunda and public hallways, but they would no longer be allowed to sleep over in committee rooms and the offices of Democratic state legislators. The obvious next step will be to close the public spaces during off-hours as well, which would entail physically removing demonstrators.

Opinion polls continue to show intense popular opposition to the anti-worker legislation, despite the nonstop media propaganda campaign portraying the

cuts as an inevitable response to the state's budget crisis, and the support of both Democrats and Republicans for cutting state worker pay and benefits.

The campuses of the University of Wisconsin remain a focal point of the opposition.

Faculty at UW-La Crosse voted 249-37 Thursday to unionize, the third campus to do so. The vote amounted to direct defiance of the governor, whose budget repair bill effectively prohibits any new unionization efforts among state employees.

There remains an unbridgeable gulf between the militant opposition of rank-and-file workers, both public and private, and the increasingly obvious capitulation by the unions.

Union officials claimed to be expanding the protest campaign against the Walker bill, announcing that demonstrations Thursday would be "the largest in Wisconsin's history."

Wisconsin AFL-CIO president Phil Neuenfeldt declared, "We're expecting tens of thousands of workers in their home districts to be talking to their state senators and representatives about supporting workers rights. There are events in all parts of the state."

Despite the grandiose talk, the day's events seemed to be directed at dispersing the crowds of workers surrounding the state capitol and turning them to traditional lobbying of their local state representatives. The turnout at the events reported on Thursday afternoon was sparse, including only 200 people at a lunchtime march in Milwaukee, the state's largest city.



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