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Michigan Bills Limiting Union Power Pass in Legislature

By [MONICA DAVEY](#)

LANSING, Mich. — The Michigan Legislature approved sweeping legislation on Tuesday that vastly reduces the power of organized labor in a state that has been a symbol of union dominance and served as an incubator for union activity over decades of modern American labor history.

The two bills, approved by the House of Representatives over the shouts of thousands of angry union protesters who gathered on the lawn outside the Capitol building, will among other things, bar both public and private sector workers from being required to pay fees as a condition of their employment.

The bills have already been approved by the State Senate, and Gov. Rick Snyder has said he intends to sign the legislation as soon as this week. Procedural maneuvering could still briefly delay the bill through calls for reconsideration.

Lisa Posthumus, a House Republican, who said her family included union members, said the legislation gave workers the freedom to make their own choices. “Yes, we are witnessing history,” she said. “This is the day when Michigan freed its workers.”

Mark Meadows, a House Democrat, had a different take. “I was hoping that this day would never come,” he said. “In the last two years there’s been a chipping away at bargaining. But today, the corporations delivered the coup de grâce.”

From a distance, there would seem no more unlikely a success for such legislation than Michigan, where labor, hoping to demonstrate strength after a series of setbacks, asked voters last month to enshrine collective bargaining into the State Constitution.

But that ballot measure failed badly, and suddenly a reverse drive was under way that has brought the state to a moment startling in its symbolism. How the home of the [United Automobile Workers](#) finds itself on the cusp of becoming the 24th state to ban compulsory union fees — and only the second state to pass such legislation in a decade — is the latest chapter in a larger battle over the role of unions in the industrial heart of the nation.

As the debate over the bills intensified Tuesday, the authorities closed the Capitol after saying the building had reached its capacity of more than 2,000. That left thousands of noisy union members — many dressed in red — on the lawn outside, although the doors to the building were opened again later in the morning.

Streets around the Capitol were also closed to traffic and clusters of state police, some equipped with riot gear, kept posts throughout the building and along nearby streets.

At least two school districts around the state announced that they would close for the day, as word spread that teachers and other workers planned to protest in Lansing.

As Republicans in the state House moved uncommonly swiftly to pass the measures, union demonstrators outside — the sound of their drumbeats becoming progressively louder inside the chamber — chanted, “Kill the bill! Kill the bill!”

Once the [first bill](#) — related to public employees — was approved by a 58-to-51 vote, union supporters cried out from the gallery, “Recall! Recall! Recall!”

Republicans hold a 64-to-46 majority in the state House, and aside from a few dissenters, the vote was generally along party lines.

The [second bill](#), covering private sector unions, was passed by the House about an hour and a half later by a 58-to-52 vote.

Democrats around the nation, including President Obama, have denounced the measures in recent days.

“You know, these so-called right-to-work laws, they don’t have to do with economics,” said Mr. Obama, during a visit to a truck factory outside Detroit on Monday. “They have everything to do with politics. What they’re really talking about is giving you the right to work for less money.”

Before the first House vote Tuesday, Democrats had sought to slow down the proceedings by employing whatever tactics they could dream up. One was to offer an array of amendments with the idea of destabilizing the bill by a thousand cuts. Among the suggestions: Send the question to a public vote. Each amendment however, was quickly rejected.

“This is being forced down people’s throats,” said Jon M. Switalski, a Democrat. “It’s being done so in a very poor way — in lame duck with no committee meetings.”

Then, Democrats, one by one, recalled their family histories in labor unions and reminisced about what unions once meant to the country. But

primarily, they spoke about their objections to the speed at which the bills had made their way through the House and about the methods used by their Republican colleagues to win approval for the measures.

Joan Bauer, a Democrat, said she was saddened and sickened by what was happening.

“I cannot believe this legislations was rammed through in one day,” Ms. Bauer said.

But Rick Olson, a Republican, said the legislation was a matter of worker choice, not of harming unions. Mr. Olson described the move as “tough love” for unions.

The success of the legislation is a reflection of mounting tension between labor leaders and Michigan Republicans — who took control of the state two years ago — and the result of a change of position by Mr. Snyder, a political novice who had long avoided the issue because, he had said, it was too divisive.

It is also an effort being closely watched — and fueled, labor leaders say — by national conservative groups who see the outcome in Michigan as an emblem for similar measures in other states with far thinner union histories.

“Everybody has this image of Michigan as a labor state,” said Bill Ballenger, the editor of [Inside Michigan Politics](#). “But organized labor has been losing clout, and the Republicans saw an opportunity, and now the chickens are coming home to roost.”

Since the wave of Republican wins in 2010 in statehouses in the Midwest, campaigns to limit unions have boiled over in Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana and elsewhere. But in Michigan, where Republicans also won control, those efforts had seemed more muted, with some in the party, including Mr. Snyder, shying away from the broadest measures.

As it has throughout the country, membership in unions has fallen here in recent decades — about 17.5 percent of Michigan residents are members — and the statewide ballot proposal failed by 14 percentage points on Nov. 6, even as Mr. Obama won the state.

Outside the Capitol, the protests continued even after the voting was finished.

“This has been a union state for a long time,” said Jim Scarlett, 62, from Ann Arbor, who retired as a union telephone worker last month. “I think with this legislation the standard of living is going to drop, wages will drop, and health care may go away for workers.”

Mary M. Chapman contributed reporting in Lansing, and Steven Yaccino in Chicago.