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# Democrats Missing, Wisconsin Vote on Cuts Is Delayed

By **MONICA DAVEY**

MADISON, Wis. — The fury among thousands of workers, students and union supporters rose to a boil on Thursday, as state lawmakers prepared to vote on landmark legislation that would slash collective bargaining rights for public workers. Protesters blocked a door to the Senate chambers. They sat down, body against body, filling a corridor. They chanted “Freedom, democracy, unions!” in the stately gallery as the senators convened.

Then the surprising drama in Madison this week added a new twist: the Democrats disappeared.

That left Republicans, who control the Capitol and had expected to push through the bill, in limbo. Although Republicans control the State Senate by 19 to 14, 20 senators — and thus, at least a single Democrat — must be in the room to call a vote on such fiscal matters.

“It’s disgraceful that people who are paid to be here have decided to skip town,” Senator Michael Ellis, the Senate president, said shortly after the roll was called. Said another Republican leader, Senator Scott Fitzgerald, “This is the ultimate shutdown.”

And so, as the Republicans fumed and waited, and the protesters (who were buoyed by the vanishing act) went right on protesting, a desperate search was begun for 14 missing senators — one more topsy-turvy chapter in a saga that has, in a single week, turned Wisconsin into a national battleground over public workers, unions and budget crises.

Democrats, along with the thousands of workers and protesters, oppose the bill, which would weaken unions by limiting collective bargaining for state employees and many local employees, including teachers, to base wages, and would require workers to pay more for pensions and health care. Without enough votes to stop the bill’s passage, Democratic senators apparently concluded that leaving the building would stop the vote from taking place.

“The plan is to try and slow this down because it’s an extreme piece of legislation that’s tearing this state apart,” Senator Jon Erpenbach, one of the missing Democrats, told The Associated Press by telephone. (He refused, of course, to say where he was.)

By noon, the sergeant-at-arms, Ted Blazel, was climbing past the crowds in the Capitol, searching for senators through the mazelike hallways, in offices, under desks — a task he has rarely been called to carry out.

“Nothing yet,” Mr. Blazel said at one point, his forehead glistening with sweat.

By dusk, Senate Republican leaders had decided to adjourn, at least temporarily, as supposed sightings of Democrats — and rumors of supposed sightings of Democrats — were alleged by seemingly everyone. Among the claims: They had been seen leaving on a bus altogether. They were in Iowa. Or Illinois. Or both.

“They’re in Rockford!” Mr. Fitzgerald called out excitedly at one point, as he rushed between chambers. Some of the Democrats conducted interviews from what they described as “secure locations,” and others posted messages on social networking sites.

Over three days, protesters’ backpacks, sleeping bags, water bottles and homemade signs have come to jam the marble halls of this Capitol, and on Thursday evening the rallies against the bill grew. People screamed: “Shut it down! Shut it down!” Drums pounded. Students, some barefoot, danced. Extra law enforcement workers now pepper the building, trying to guide officials through the thick, chanting crowds.

Many among the protesters said that they had no plans to leave, and that they would wait, as long as it took, to end the proposal, which was introduced only a week ago by Scott Walker, the new Republican governor here. Regarding the claims by Mr. Walker that the changes were forced by gaping budget deficits, some protesters here question his figures and his motives.

National leaders, including [President Obama](#), have weighed in with criticism.

“That’s not the real fight,” said Dennis Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association, who flew here on Thursday morning. “It’s a politically motivated attack. It’s not about the money. What he wants to do is destroy the voice of educators and public employees.”

For his part, Mr. Walker, who appeared before reporters from his office even as chants from beyond security barriers echoed into the room, had no apologies and said he had no intention of changing the bill. And he chastised the Democratic senators for leaving.

“We’re certainly looking at all legal options out there, but I have faith that after they do their stunt for a day or two — it’s more about theatrics than anything else — that they’ll come back and realize again they’re elected to do the job,” Mr. Walker said. “Show up, debate the bill, offer amendments, have a healthy debate, but you don’t have that debate if you hang out down in Rockford or Dubuque.”

By 5 p.m., Senate Republicans said they were adjourning for the night. They had no immediate plans for sending law enforcement officers after the missing senators (it was unclear whether the Wisconsin State Patrol could pursue them across state borders anyway, one senator said). But they said they planned to be back on Friday, ready to vote. They hoped, they said, that the Democrats would choose to come, too.

And if they do not? No one here seemed to know. As the senators went home, the protesters,

some of them bearing pillows, did not.

*Monica Davey reported from Madison, Wis., and Steven Greenhouse from New York.*